For the Sake of Better Things

by Sengachi

Summary

Of all the ninja villages in the elemental nations, Konoha treats its ninja the best. Community and respect form the basis of Konoha's culture. The privileged few who form the military backbone of Fire Country are afforded rights and treatment unmatched anywhere else. They are given training, resources, and support that most other ninja can only dream of. Konoha is, without a doubt, the best place to be born into the elemental nations.

Unless you are born to the Hyuuga branch family.

Premise: The main character is a person from our world familiar with Naruto lore reincarnated as Neji's identical twin. The butterfly effect is in full force.

Focus: Interpersonal and familial relationships, with a heavy emphasis on the power of loving relationships to help one survive abusive situations, mental illness, and physical trauma. Most of the story is about character's connections to one another and how those relate to surviving life as part of the branch family.
Content Warnings: The story delves deeply into abusive traumas and crippling injuries. Individual chapters have relevant warnings. Graphic sexual violence will *not* be a part of this story though, and is only referenced abstractly.
Let There Be Light

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 1: Let There Be Light

I died and there was darkness.

Out of the darkness came light.

Streams and ribbons of glittering light wove around me, holding me. They formed intricate gossamer webs, weaving patterns I could stare at forever. I could even see it inside myself, tiny streams of light knotted into a flickering ball of fire dwarfed by the rivers of brilliance around me. Time meant little wrapped in the light. I was at peace, floating in that wonderful place.

And I didn’t float alone. Cocooned with me in the light was another fluttering ball of fire. Where the ribbons around me had beauty in their strength, the enormous surges of light flowing along their lengths, the little ball was beautiful for its fragility. It was such a delicate thing, made of strands barely the width of a spider’s thread. So I wrapped myself gently around it and held it close. It was just barely warm in a world without heat, a little candle against my breast, and that made it precious to me.

Marking time was all but impossible. I faded in and out of awareness and I could never say how much time passed while I was dormant. I spent my waking hours staring at the beauty around me and cradling my little flame and for a while time would be marked by the pulsing of its light. My little flame grew a little bit with each pulse, spinning itself more threads, thickening those it already had. It was still fragile, so fragile, but there was wonder in its growth. My own threads grew as well and I hoped that my little flame drew heat from me just as I was warmed by it. We drifted that way for a long time.

Then the light flared. It pulsed so brightly that it hurt. The gentle, caring light became frightening. It grasped and pulled and squeezed. My own fire flickered faster in response and my little flame did the same. I was scared. And then it took my flame. The grasping light took my flame and dragged it away and I was alone. I was alone.

For too long I was left with the searing light, huddled in on myself, afraid to leave and afraid of staying and being alone forever. By the time the light took me as well, shoving me where it wanted me to go, I didn’t know whether to be afraid or hopeful. I just wanted my little flame back.

Then there was distance. I left the cocoon of ribbons behind and was met by an unbearable sense of distance. Before everything had been close and comfortable. I had been able to reach out and press against any of the ribbons of light that I could see. In this new place there was still light but it was so far away. Endless plains of gently undulating light, beating knots of fire, and … oh. Oh my.

This new place had stars. I was lifted towards the stars, two brilliant orbs settled next to one another in one of those beating knots of fire. They were wonderful. Even more than the place of light, these shone. I loved them.

I was settled near the stars and lying there next to me was my little flame. My flame! I started to cry. My flame! As I lay there wailing with joy one of those another beating knots of fire drew
closer and I could see an even brighter pair of stars shining out of it. All the fear and terror I’d felt while being taken from the place of light left me. There was beauty here and I had my little flame. Everything would be okay.

I reached out to grasp my little flame and one of the beating knots of fire moved me closer so I could hold it. The surge of gratitude I felt stunned me and I wept harder. Everything would be alright. I had my little flame and everything would be alright. I slowly stopped crying as a wave of tiredness washed through me. I was okay with that though. I wasn’t alone, I had my little flame, I could go to sleep.

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I woke still curled up around my little flame, nestled between those two knots of fire and their brilliant stars. And I was hungry. That shocked me. In the place of light I had never been hungry. For that matter I hadn’t breathed either, which was something I was definitely doing now. It was discomforting to deal with such innocuous things after that timeless peace among the ribbons of light.

A trace of nervousness shot through me as I realized I didn’t know how to sate my hunger. The threads of fire I was made of were weak and not very responsive. Even if I could have moved, I didn’t know what qualified as food here! So I did what I could. I squirmed, I mewled, and generally just wiggled helplessly.

Fortunately that worked. One of the knots of fire next to me roused, their stars flaring brighter as they moved. Gently they reached out and lifted me, cradling me against them. They placed me just in front of a node of fiery ribbons tangled up inside them and pulled me closer, pressing me up against the knotted ribbons. A little confused but hopeful it would help, I mouthed the knot. That was enough. A gush of warm liquid filled my mouth and the pangs of hunger eased a shade. And my world came crashing down.

The cocoon of ribboned lights hadn’t been an afterlife. I wasn’t dead. I was nursing. My thoughts spun in circles and pinwheeled wildly. That cocoon had been a womb. My mother’s womb. My mother who was now nursing me. I was a nursing newborn. None of which explained why everything around me was made of shining light. I’m a baby.

I hope that excuses what I did next. I cried. I wailed. I woke up the other knot of fire. I woke up my little flame (my twin!) who also started crying. I think I vomited a little on my mom. It was awful. Over the wailing of me and my twin my parents carried out a garbled conversation I couldn’t understand. It ended with my mom lifting my little flame up to another knot of ribbons inside her (her breast) where they promptly ceased crying and starting sucking down liquid fire. I struggled away from my mother’s breast and reached out to my little flame. She must have understood my intentions because she shifted me close enough to touch my little flame.

I grasped at my twin. It would be alright. I wasn’t alone. I would be alright. I tried to reassure myself of that, tried to believe that everything would be alright. My wailing eased and I eventually managed to stop crying entirely. It wasn’t really okay, I was still confused and a little terrified. But I wasn’t alone, my little flame was here.
We had a routine now, my little flame and I. First thing in the morning Mom would gently shake us awake and we would yawn and stretch in the confines of our crib while she got dressed.

It had taken a long time for me to see clothes, the thin sheets of cloth barely held any light at all and I still had to focus to make them out. Before I could see the clothes Mom getting dressed had looked nonsensical and I hadn’t been able to understand what she was doing, my best guess had been that she was performing some morning religious ritual. Being able to actually see what she was doing now was nice, even if I still had no idea what was going on with my sight.

After Mom got dressed, in perfect silence so as not to wake Dad, she would pick us up and take us down to the kitchen. She’d put on a pot of coffee and settle in to breastfeed us. The smell of coffee would wake Dad up and he’d come downstairs. My flame and I would wave our pudgy little hands at him and he’d wave back.

I was very proud of our morning wave, it had taken so long to teach my little flame to do that.

Dad would start to make breakfast and Mom would smile at him. The streams of light that made up her face would twist into a curve and her whole being would brighten a little. It was beautiful how much she loved him. Dad would drink coffee while he cooked and his fire would flare a little, turning him into something resembling a waking human being.

Dad typically finished making breakfast around the time my flame and I were done breastfeeding. Mom would hand us over to him and start eating. Then Dad would stick us in this double-high-chair thing and start brushing Mom’s waist-long hair, which looked like a faintly glowing river in his hands. He always got this gentle smile on his face while he was brushing her hair, it was obvious that he loved her as much as she loved him. While Dad was combing Mom’s hair I would point at things around the house and he would name them. I’d quickly realized that I didn’t understand the language Mom and Dad spoke and I was determined to learn.

After understanding would come speech, a prospect I dreaded. I could barely open and close my mouth, let alone exert enough control over my tongue and lips to make coherent sounds. I’d get it though. I was not going to let my “actually a baby” brother beat me to speech, that would be downright shameful.

Once Mom was done eating she’d put my flame and I in these amazingly cozy slings on her chest. She’d kiss Dad goodbye as he settled in for his own breakfast and then we were off. Mom must have been some kind of professional runner because she always ran to work so fast our surroundings blurred. How she managed to do that and avoid bouncing me and my flame around I have no idea. But her morning runs were smooth as silk and I often found myself lulled back to sleep while she ran.

At work she’d settle in at her desk, my flame and I still swaddled on her chest, and start doing paperwork of some kind. She never ignored us while doing her work though. She’d point at her coworkers and talk, telling us stories about them I assume. And she’d give us these big, flat rubber toys I could just barely fit the end of in my mouth. Oh my gods those helped with teething. They were the best. She’d rub our heads and murmur to us endlessly while she filled out forms and
wrote papers. When we got hungry she’d feed us, she changed our diapers when needed, and when we got sleepy we’d doze off against her chest.

Life as a baby was good.

Later in the day Mom would take us back home, again running so fast that our surroundings blurred. When we got home Mom would stick us in a penned-in area of the kitchen with a bunch of big stuffy dolls and some more of those wonderful rubber toys. Then she’d make start making dinner while waiting for Dad to come home. At this point my brother tended to get tired and grumpy. I was really good at calming him down though. He always scrunched his face just so when he was building up a good cry, but I could just plop my hand on his cheek and he’d stop. He’d stare straight at me when I did that, the tiny little developing stars in his face shining with wonder.

Mom always laughed when she saw me doing that. She’d pat my head and say something in a tone of voice which made me think she was thankful and a little proud of me. As silly as it sounds, it was something that made me really happy.

Dad always arrived home exactly when Mom finished with dinner, no matter what she made and no matter how long it took to make. It was like he was psychic. The two of them would eat dinner and then Dad would play with us. He’d lift us up into the air and make silly noises and play out elaborate scenes with the big stuffy dolls. It was a surprising amount of fun, letting myself get caught up in the flow of his games. My little flame’s tiredness would vanish and he’d burble his appreciation while I clapped my little pudgy hands at Dad’s antics.

Shortly after we were returned to the crib, where my flame and I would cuddle together and go to sleep. We’d wake a few times in the night to be fed and then start the routine all over in the morning.

Life as a baby was really good.

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(6 months)

I learned my name during one of our play sessions with Dad. Dad was urging us on in a race to see who could squirm across the floor faster and something clicked. He was calling us by our names! I was Yuki and my little flame, my brother, was Neji. I burbled with joy, a rare vocal expression which made Dad laugh and call Mom over. I had a name! Haha! I had a name!

Neji then won our race while I was distracted and had the gall to gurgle about his victory. So of course I had to crawl over and lay on top of him to prove my dominance as the better twin. I was still psyched about having a name and burbling about it, which gave me some trouble while climbing atop Neji, but I managed. Neji and I must have made a pretty funny picture like that, two burbling babies lying in a heap, because Mom and Dad started laughing until they keeled over. Which only prompted Neji to giggle more and since Neji giggling is the most adorable thing I know of I couldn’t stop giggling either.

Eventually Neji wanted his brother Yuki off and he started getting pushy about it, which brought
an end to the gigglefest. I complied and he wandered off to grab one of those rubber toys to show Dad. I didn’t follow him. I sat and watched.

I looked at Neji. Really looked. He wasn’t just my little flame was he? He wasn’t just the warmth that had kept me company before I was born. My little flame had a name. Neji. It made him more real somehow, more a person and less a thing. Neji was more than he had been, his fire was stronger and more solid than it had ever been in the womb. His eyes were turning from dull embers into spots of light and one day they’d be stars like Mom and Dad’s.

Neji was going to grow up. We were going to grow up. And we’d do it together.

I wasn’t sure what to think about that.

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(7 months)

“N’i!” I exclaimed, pointing at Neji.

Dad paused, brush mid-stroke in Mom’s hair.

“N’i!” I cried again. I clasped my hands to my chest. “‘ki!”

Mom stared at me like she’d just seen a ghost. Dad’s jaw actually dropped.

I spread my arms wide and clasped them to my chest again. “‘ki!” I pointed at Neji. “N’i!” The ‘y’ and ‘j’ sounds were still giving my tongue trouble, but from Mom and Dad’s expressions it didn’t matter. They got what I was going for.

Mom leapt up like she’d been stung, Dad’s brush catching in her hair. She yelped something to Dad who immediately pulled me out of the high-chair and clasped me to his chest. He laughed and started cooing to me in a voice that just dripped pride. Mom leaned over me and rubbed my head, smiling like the sun. I burbled with joy. I’d done it! I’d said something comprehensible!

Neji decided that was enough paying attention to Yuki and made his displeasure known. “Ba!” he shouted. “Ba! Ba ba ba!”

Mom swooped over and lifted Neji out of the high-chair. She started cooing to Neji, doing her best to settle my envious little twin.

I smiled at him and exclaimed, “N’i!”. Dad laughed again and jostled me up and down. I glowed with pride. I felt a little bad that Neji couldn’t join in on the fun, but he’d talk on his own eventually. Also I wasn’t sure I could willingly delay learning to communicate with other humans again. Gods what I would do for a proper conversation.

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A week later I was hoisting myself up by the edge of our playpen, learning how to walk. I cried out, “Move! Move!” to get Dad to hold my hand and help me along. I was so happy to be learning how to walk.

I tried to pick Neji up and get him to walk too, but he didn’t really understand what I was trying to do. My attempts just ended with me falling flat on my back in front of an unimpressed Neji.

I don’t think Mom and Dad were worried, exactly, that Neji didn’t start trying to walk until a month after I did. Neji had always been more of a baby than me. I was the one who comforted him after all, not the other way around. Me being a month ahead of Neji wasn’t a serious cause for concern.

Talking though, Neji didn’t say his first word until almost four months later. Which is still really early, Neji was obviously a bright kid. But four months. By the time Neji said his first word “egg” I could mimic any word with two syllables and was well on my way to learning what they all meant. That definitely made Mom and Dad uneasy.

It wasn’t until I was much older that I realized they hadn’t been worried for Neji. They had been worried for me.

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Chapter End Notes

Canon Terms:

While I try to make this fic as accessible as possible to people who are unfamiliar or only passingly familiar with Naruto, it’s just not always possible to avoid leaning on the original manga sometimes. (This is a fanfiction, after all). To help with that here are a list of characters and terms introduced in this chapter that one can look up on the Naruto Wiki. Hopefully this will help clear up any confusion.

-Neji Hyuuga*

*Hyuuga is alternatively spelled as Hyūga on the wiki

Side Note:

I’ll be keeping these lists at the bottom of each chapter to avoid spoilers, but readers with limited knowledge of the Naruto universe might want to skip down before reading each chapter so they can familiarize themselves with the terms they’ll see as they read the chapter.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 2: A New World

(13 months)

Our aunt was having a baby. Which came as bit of a surprise because I didn’t even know we had an aunt. At least I’m pretty sure that’s what Mom and Dad were talking about as they brought me and Neji to the hospital, my grasp of their language was still rudimentary at best.

I quickly forgot about our soon-to-be cousin though. The hospital was fascinating. My sight had improved by leaps and bounds since I’d last been here and I could see so much more than I had the last time. Just behind the gently shimmering planes of light which made up the walls and floors were flowing, complex ribbons of light folded in on themselves, locked in place. But that wasn’t all. Those patterns twisted the air around them. They pulled light from the air, squeezing it and stretching it and … eating it? Some of the brighter twists of ribbons pulled light into them and it never came out. They never got brighter and the light never stopped flowing into them. It was like they were doing something with the light, but I couldn’t imagine what.

Mom and Dad settled down with us in a waiting room and I immediately squirmed free of Mom’s grip. I flopped down on the ground and placed my hand just above the nearest tangle of ribbons. It didn’t pull at the fire under my skin. Why not? Why pull at the light in the air but not the light in me? I placed my face on the floor and glared at it. It would tell me what it was. It would.

“Yuki, what are you doing?” Mom sighed. I’d learned what that phrase meant fairly early on, she used it all the time when Neji was doing something silly. I guess having my face pressed against the floor counted as silly enough for her to use it on me. Mom leaned down to pick me up and I squawked. No! This was interesting! I would not be pulled away from my ribbon tangle! My indignant cries were less than effective.

“Love,” Dad said, “It’s alright, he’s --- looking at the ---.”

What? What was I looking at? Damnit I still didn’t know enough words!

“Oh,” Mom replied, setting me back down, “Why are there --- in the ---?”

This was so frustrating. What were they talking about? I wanted to know!

Dad shrugged, “--- I think. They’re everywhere in here.”

I was going to learn more words if it killed me.

Mom smiled, “--- I wish I could see what you do, it must be beautiful”.

Huh. That was interesting. Dad could see the ribbons and Mom couldn’t. I had thought seeing everything as streamers of light was just how people saw in this world.
Dad then segued into some line about how beautiful Mom was, which made light flood her cheeks. The way he could get her to blush was adorable. Also a little dorky, given that I’d heard him use that exact line so many times I had learned the word “beautiful” from it.

Mom set Neji down beside me and sat down next to Dad to chat. They weren’t talking about the ribbons in the floor anymore, so I stopped listening. Instead I grabbed Neji and waddled us over to watch a particularly tangled knot do its work. Neji oohed and aahed along with me as it twisted and pulled at the light in the air.

I waved a hand through one of the denser spots of light and frowned when nothing happened. Beside me Neji laughed and started waving his hands through the same spot of light.

What did it mean that Neji, Dad, and I could see this, but not Mom?

An hour later I was no closer to figuring out anything. The light in the air didn’t react to anything I did. None of my poking and prodding at the floor had allowed me to touch the tangles of light beyond. Poking Dad and pointing had only led to an explanation filled with words I didn’t understand and had no context for. Trying to lick the knots of light through the floor had failed abysmally, all that had gotten me was being pinned to my Mom’s lap for a few minutes. By the time an orderly came to get my parents I was a surly, grumpy baby.

I stewed in my ignorance as Mom picked me and Neji up and whisked us away from the waiting room. I’d figure this out eventually, but eventually was not today and I wanted to know now.

The orderly brought my parents to a closed door and knocked, “Hyuuga-sama, your brother is here.”

There was a pause before the door opened. A man with eyes as brilliant as Dad’s stood in the doorway. “Hizashi,” he said, “come in.” I couldn’t tell what the man was thinking, his face remained perfectly still as he stepped aside and let us through.

Then I saw my cousin and I couldn’t care less what he was thinking. I didn’t care that I’d spent a useless hour being frustrated by glimmers of light. My cousin was such a tiny thing, as frail and fragile as Neji had been when we were born. They could certainly cry though. They wailed at the top of their lungs as their exhausted mother stroked their back, trying to calm them down. The poor little thing. I stretched my arms out toward them and squeaked at Mom, “Closer, closer!”

Mom pulled a chair over so she could sit us next to our aunt and cousin while Dad and the man (his brother?) walked out into the hallway. Mom smiled at the tired woman and asked, “How are you doing?”

That earned a chuckle. “How did you feel?”

Mom laughed back. “Yeah.” She put an arm on the woman’s shoulder. Both of them winced as the newborn let out a particularly loud wail.

I winced too. Poor little thing. I reached out, stretching in Mom’s arms. It took some doing but I managed to wriggle close enough to place a hand on the little baby’s cheek just like I always did with Neji.

pat pat

They stopped crying like a switch had been flipped. Their eyes opened and they stared at me like I made up the entire world.
Their mother laughed, “How did he do that?”

Mom smiled, “I don’t know. But he does the exact same thing with Neji.”

Haha. Baby calming powers saved the day yet again. If I’d had enough motor control to pump my fist I would have.

Mom asked the woman, “So Yuki-”.

Huh. I was named after this woman. That was a thing.

“-what’s their name? Are they a boy or a girl?”

Yuki said warmly, “Her name is Hinata, my little flower.”

Oh.

Yuki continued, calling out, “Hiashi, come look! Keiko’s baby got Hinata to stop crying!” She turned back to Mom, “So that’s your Yuki then? How do you tell them apart?”

Oh.

The man, Hiashi, Hiashi fucking Hyuuga, walked back in with his hand on Dad’s back. He smiled when he saw Hinata peacefully curled up on his wife’s chest.

No. No way. He and my dad looked nothing alike. But Neji’s fire didn’t look anything like mine and my aunt made it sound like we looked the same to Mom. I couldn’t rule out that my dad was Hiashi Hyuuga’s identical twin.

Which would make my brother Neji Hyuuga, son of Hizashi Hyuuga, who was Hiashi Hyuuga’s identical twin, who was the father of Hinata Hyuuga.

Oh fuck.

Hinata started to cry again.

Fuck.

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This wasn’t the first time my world had come crashing down down. I could handle this.

Well. I had learned what the light was today. That was a silver lining, right?

Fuck, that wasn’t even worth a chuckle. Dad was going to die. I knew that Dad was going to die because I’d read it in a book. A book with ninja and gods and chakra.

Which was apparently the light I saw. My eyes no longer registered electromagnetic waves in the visible spectrum, they registered chakra, because I was a fucking Hyuuga.

I wasn’t sure I could handle this.
I breathed deep and focused on Neji curled up next to me in our crib. I’d handled being reborn, I’d handled being a baby.

I’d handled it because I’d had Neji.

Was Neji real?

Did it matter if he was?

How would I have reacted in my last life if I’d learned that the future of the world was written out in some story? Would it have made me less real? Would I have come to see the people around me as somehow not human?

I nestled closer to Neji. He was warm. He was soft. I loved him.

If Neji wasn’t real then I needed a better definition of reality.

Yeah. That felt good. That was a thought I could hold onto. I smiled into Neji’s fuzzy little poof of baby hair. Neji was real to me and that was all that mattered. I closed my eyes.

I snapped my eyes open a moment later. Dad was still going to die. There was still reason to panic. Fuck. Fuck, how much did I remember? How had Dad died? Would my existence change anything? What could I do about it?

Too many questions. Narrow it down.

How had Dad died?

Somebody important from Kumo, one of the other ninja villages, had tried to kidnap Hinata. Hiashi had killed them and Kumo had demanded his corpse in retaliation. The Hyuuga clan sent Hizashi’s identical corpse (Dad!) instead, because Hiashi was the clan heir and Hizashi was basically a slave (for some reason, did they ever say why?).

Okay, what did that tell me? It told me that Kumo somehow knew that Hiashi killed their ninja, Hiashi specifically.

How could they know that? If the kidnapper had made it out of the Hyuuga compound, the murder could have occurred in a public place or maybe in sight of Kumo reinforcements. Or maybe the kidnapper wasn’t alone and their comrades had gotten away.

So I didn’t have necessarily have to prevent Kumo from kidnapping Hinata to save Dad. I just had to make sure that no kidnappers survived to leave the compound. As a toddler.

I also had no idea when the kidnappers were coming. I thought that the kidnappers had been in Konoha for some big treaty thing, but there was no guarantee that I’d hear about that. Toddlers are not typically kept well-informed about political going-ons. All I knew for certain was that it would happen when Hinata was little and Neji was old enough to remember his father.

Gods that was a painful thought. My little flame being just old enough to remember Dad dying.

Could I warn the Hyuuga? No. Not a chance. No one would listen to a toddler talking about how political allies they should be too young to know about were going to betray Konoha. Their first thought would be that someone was manipulating me to some end. When a toddler starts talking about things they shouldn’t know about no one considers if the toddler might have foreknowledge of events, instead they wonder what adult has been whispering in the kid’s ear.
I needed to think over this again. What had to go right for the Kumo ninja for them to do this?

The Kumo ninja had to make it over the Hyuuga compound walls. They had to find Hinata. They had to take Hinata back over the walls. After that there were plenty of things which could go wrong for them, but that didn’t matter to me. I had to make sure there was no chance of Hiashi being seen killing that one important Kumo ninja and for me to be sure of that the Kumo ninja couldn’t make it back over the walls.

Or I could make sure Hiashi wasn’t in any position to chase after them. Do the same with Dad for good measure. But that would open up the possibility of Hinata being successfully kidnapped. Given that Kumo wanted her for her bloodline … I didn’t think I could make a plan which involved letting that happen to anyone, let alone my tiny little cousin.

Could I stop the kidnappers from getting into the Hyuuga compound? Definitely not. If guards with three-hundred sixty degree x-ray vision couldn’t stop them, I didn’t stand a chance.

Instead of trying to stop the kidnappers directly, could I stop them indirectly? Could I stop them from finding Hinata? Well that brought up a whole other question. How did they find Hinata? If I was a ninja trying to kidnap a specific baby from a clan of hundreds of people with x-ray vision, how would I find that baby?

That was obvious, I’d find the baby beforehand. Only a moron would spend any more time than they had to fumbling around in a clan compound filled with hundreds of “we can see through fucking walls” ninja. So the ninja probably entered the compound already knowing where Hinata slept at night.

And if Hinata were not there? What would I do, if I were the kidnapping ninja? Book it. Scrap the mission and leave. Maybe if I was feeling lucky, check the immediate surroundings. But if that didn’t turn anything up, I’d get gone. Searching the entire Hyuuga compound building by building would be a sure way to get caught.

They might try again later but from what I remembered the Kumo ninja were taking advantage of the treaty signing for their kidnapping attempt. Any subsequent attempts wouldn’t have that advantage. I’d just have to hope foiling this one attempt would be enough.

Which left the questions of how I would learn when the Kumo ninja were coming to town and how to get Hinata out of her room that night. Actually, I didn’t know how long the Kumo ninja would be in town. I’d have to plan for getting her out of her room multiple nights in a row.

That … was doable. That felt like a plan. I didn’t have all the details yet but I didn’t need to. I had at least a couple years before Neji would be old enough to remember Dad, before Kumo would come. That was plenty of time to figure out exactly how I was going to do this.

I untensed, loosening a grip on Neji I hadn't realised I'd been holding. I had a plan. Mostly. I had most of a plan. I was going to save Dad’s life, was the point.

That was one crisis I didn’t need to panic over. As for my more existential crisis, whether any of this was actually real …

I couldn’t stand the thought of Dad dying. I couldn’t stand the thought of Neji growing up without his father. I couldn’t stand the thought of Mom living without the man who cooked her breakfast, who brushed her hair in the morning, who made her blush with those stupid, corny compliments. I cared for them too much to let that happen. Which solved my existential crisis, in a way.
I wasn’t going to let anything happen to them. So whether this was ‘real’ or not was a moot point. I was going to protect my new family.

That was all that mattered.

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-Hizashi Hyuuga*
-Hiashi Hyuuga*
-Hinata Hyuuga*
-Hyuuga* Clan
-Konoha (long form: Konohagakure)
-Kumo (long form: Kumogakure)
-Hyuuga* Affair

*Hyuuga is alternatively spelled as Hyūga on the wiki

Side Note:

Neji and Hinata’s mothers never have a role or are named in the series. I had to make Keiko and (Aunt) Yuki from scratch. As such they won’t show up in any wiki search, so there’s no point in trying.
Aunt Yuki had been having trouble with Hinata, who cried incessantly. To hear her tell it, Hinata literally had not spent a single waking hour silent since they’d gotten home from the hospital. So Aunt Yuki came to her sister-in-law Keiko, our mom, for advice.

They talked at the dinner table, Aunt Yuki rocking a wailing Hinata in her arms and Mom trying to reassure the desperate new mother. I don’t think it helped much. Their situations were just too different. Mom’s experience raising kids involved me, who made an adult effort to hassle Mom as little as possible, Neji, whom I helped calm down, and Dad, who shouldered a solid half of the burden.

Mom’s comparatively rosy situation with us did not translate well to what Aunt Yuki was dealing with. Aunt Yuki hadn’t been able to get more than three hours of sleep in a row since Hinata had been born. And while she didn’t say so outright, it did not sound like Hiashi had been helping much. Mom’s assurances that “you’ll love it when she takes her first step” and “eventually she’ll be able to entertain herself” did nothing to stop Hinata’s screaming, and Aunt Yuki looked like she was about to break down crying herself.

Good gods I didn’t know how she’d even lasted this long. Hinata had only been in the house a quarter of an hour and already I had my hands full stopping Neji from joining her cacophony. Hinata had a heck of a pair of lungs! Hells, any longer and I might join in.

Something needed to be done. I toddled over to the edge of our playpen and shouted at Mom, “Up! Up! Up, up, up!”

Mom gave Aunt Yuki a thin smile and said “Just a moment.” I think she was relieved to move away from Hinata and towards me. “What is it sweetie?”

“Aunt Yuki a thin smile and said “Just a moment.” I think she was relieved to move away from Hinata and towards me. “What is it sweetie?”

“Up!” I lifted my arms high in the air above me.

“Alright.” She grabbed and lifted me high into the air before settling me on her hip “Up we go!”

I giggled because honestly, that was always fun. But I had a mission to accomplish. I pointed at the table Aunt Yuki was sitting at and shouted “Top! Top! Table!”

Mom tilted her head and asked “You want to go on top of the table?”

“Yes!”

She shrugged with the arm that wasn’t holding me. “Okay.” She walked back over and placed me on top of the table. She didn’t sit down though, she stood watching me like a hawk with her arms
drifting out to either side. I had a better track record than Neji when it came to respecting heights, but that that didn’t mean she wouldn’t be careful.

Yeesh, at this range Hinata’s scream drilled straight through my ears and into my skull. It was with a cringe that I crawled closer to its source. “Hinata,” I said.

Hinata continued wailing into her mother’s breast.


She finally turned and looked at me. Didn’t stop screaming for a moment though.

I put on the best smile I could and reached out to her chubby little cheeks.

pat

pat pat

She stopped crying. Mother of gods she stopped crying. Her mouth contracted into a little ‘o’ of surprise and she stared at me. Stared quietly which was what mattered.

“How?” I rested my hand on her face.

Hinata flopped her head over and did her best to nom on my fingers. I held my smile and let her. Probably not the most hygienic thing for her, but dear gods anything to stop her from crying again.

Now it was Aunt Yuki who looked like she might cry. “Hinata?” she asked, in a voice which sounded like she was waiting for the other shoe to drop. “Hinata, sweetie, do you want some milk?” She bared a breast and gently tilted Hinata towards it. “Are you hungry?”

Hinata quietly let go of my fingers and calmly nursed.

My aunt actually did start crying at that. She whispered to Mom “She’s nursing. She’s actually nursing.” She didn’t sound like she believed it. “It takes me forever to get her to stop crying and nurse. The doctors say she’s not gaining weight like she should and - oh.” She leaned over and kissed my on top of my head, a big wet kiss. “Thank you.”

Mom laughed quietly. “I don’t know how he does it.”

I didn’t either, but I wasn’t about to look that gift horse in the mouth. Magic baby calming powers did not need to be explained, so long as they worked.

At this point Neji decided that I’d been gone too long and he wanted me back. “Yu-ki! Yu-ki!” Ah, my powers were needed elsewhere. I raised my arms to signal Mom that I should be brought back to the playpen.

After that our routine changed. Aunt Yuki brought Hinata over to the house as often as possible, often staying for dinner. Hiashi never came over with her, but Dad always asked after him. It became a regular ritual, every time we finished a dinner Dad would tell Aunt Yuki that his brother was welcome at the next one.

Most important though, were the times when Hinata wouldn’t sleep. Hinata was a colicky baby, often crying through the night and on into the morning. When nothing Auntie did could get Hinata to sleep, she’d bring her over to our house and let her sleep with me and Neji. Neji was typically pretty grumpy about being woken up, but he curled up against Hinata and fell back asleep quickly
enough. And Hinata, sandwiched between the two of us, would fall asleep with the cutest smile on her face.

Without even having to try, my plan was coming together. If I could keep this a thing, keep Hinata coming over to our place on the nights she couldn’t sleep, then I had a way to get her out of her room when I needed to. Maybe I’d tell her a scary story or hide something frightening in her closet, it didn’t really matter what. So long as I could disturb Hinata’s sleep for the few nights when the Kumo ninja were in town, that’s all I’d need. I’d feel bad for scaring her, sure, but it was better than the alternative. Much better.

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(16 months)

Neji dropped his rubber kunai and reached up to Dad’s face. “What?” he demanded. He smacked his palm on Dad’s forehead. “What?”

I stilled, pausing my construction of a block tower. Oh.

A shadow passed over Dad’s face. “Oh, this?” he said. He was making an effort to be flippant but I could hear strain in his voice. “It’s … something special. One moment Neji.” He turned to me. “Yuki, come over here.”

I pretended to not hear him, shifting one of my blocks minutely to preserve the tower’s symmetry.

“Yuki,” his voice was gentle.

I looked up at him. I didn’t want to hear this. I knew what was coming. Did- did I have to listen to him say it?

“Come on over Yuki.”

I put my blocks down and stood up. Walking had gotten easier over the past few months and I barely wobbled as I walked over to Dad. I even sat down smoothly, an action which took far more coordination than I would have once thought. I took a breath once I was seated. I had a plan for saving Dad’s life. I didn’t have a plan for this.

Dad leaned in close to me. “Look here,” he brought a finger up to his forehead “look closely. There’s something on Daddy’s forehead. Can you see it?”

If I’d focused I probably could have seen Dad’s seal much sooner. I hadn’t tried. I didn’t want to see it.

Dad tapped his forehead. “See?”

I looked. And I saw. It was beautiful just like every other seal I’d seen. Even more so, if I was being honest with myself. A thousand miraculously fine filaments wove through his scalp before curving and flowing deeper into his skull where my sight couldn’t follow them. I had never seen chakra woven so thinly before. It was made so well that it barely disturbed the chakra in the air around it. It didn’t create any turbulent eddies or alter the natural flow of chakra. There was only the faintest draw to indicate that it wasn’t inert.
I wanted it to be ugly. I wanted malicious, pulsing tendrils of darkness burrowing into his mind. I wanted a tangible corruption to ooze from it and betray its nature. I wanted Neji, my little flame, to recoil from it in horror. He should be able to see it for what it was.

Evil.

Instead Neji slapped Dad’s forehead again, trapping Dad’s finger under his pudgy little hand. “What?”

Dad smiled and shifted to sit in a proper seiza. Neji grinned widely, seiza always meant storytime. I shifted closer to Neji.

Dad took a breath before speaking, “This is a seal. It’s a special seal. It shows how I serve the clan as part of the branch family.”

*It makes you serve the clan*, I thought bitterly.

Dad continued, “Because of this seal we, everyone in the Hyuuga clan, can trust one another with our lives. You’ll- you’ll have one too one day.” Dad did his best to smile, “It’ll be just like mine.”

Neji looked at Dad and said, “Pretty.”

My heart ached. That would change. Eventually Neji would recognize the seal for what it was. One day his sight would be strong enough that he could see through the chakra in his own skull. He would see his slavemark branded right there on his forehead every waking moment of every day.

So would I.

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(2 years)

“Mom”. I tapped her arm.

She turned from her conversation with Aunt Yuki. “What is it sweetie?”

“I want to learn how to read.”

Mom didn’t miss a beat. “Alright sweetie. Give me a moment and I’ll go grab a book for you. Stay with Auntie while I do, okay?”

“Kay Mom.”

She ruffled my hair and stepped out of the room. I smiled after her.

Aunt Yuki looked faintly stunned. “You want to read?”

“Mmhmm.”

She looked over at where Neji was trying to teach Hinata how to catch a ball. I could tell she was
trying to find a way to voice her skepticism without being condescending. “Is there a reason you
don’t want to play with Neji and Hinata?”

Yes, I thought. Because as adorable as Hinata was and as much as I loved Neji, tossing balls and
building with blocks did eventually grow old. I was getting bored and I wanted something more
substantial than rubber kunai, something I could actually think about. The sooner I learned to read
the local language, the sooner I could start reading things with substance to them. I didn’t think
telling Aunt Yuki that would help though, so I just shrugged.

Aunt Yuki looked like she was still searching for something to say when Mom came back.

Mom came back and placed a book, a brush, and an inkwell filled with bright silvery ink on the
dining room table. She patted one of the seats, “Come on up, Yuki.”

I clambered onto the chair, sitting on my knees so I could have a good view of the table. I
recognized the book instantly, “The Little Birds of Rice”. It was Neji’s favorite bedtime story and I
must have heard Mom and Dad read it least a couple hundred times.

Mom opened the book to the first page and said, “Alright, so before I start teaching you how to
read, I need to do something real quick.” She dipped the brush in the bright silvery ink and started
tracing it over the page. “Your daddy says that your eyes won’t be able to tell what’s paper with
words on it and what’s blank paper yet. So I’m going to use this special ink you can see and trace
over all the words, that way you’ll be able to see them.”

She was right, the pages were one big plane of faint chakra to me. I leaned closer to the book. I
thought I might be able to see different textures of chakra on the page, forming amorphous blobs
which could have been pictures. I definitely couldn’t see any words though. But the bright ink
Mom was using, that I could definitely see. It shine clear as day to my eyes.

“What kind of ink is that Mom?”

Mom blew the ink dry on the first page and turned to the next page to continue. She talked as she
worked “It’s blood ink, Yuki. Blood has chakra in it, so ink mixed with blood carries chakra.
Normal ink has its own chakra but it’s faint, so you ,” she rubbed my head and I leaned into her
hand, “can’t see it yet. The chakra in this is really strong though, so seeing it shouldn’t be a
problem for you.”

I nodded along. “What’s blood ink used for, why does it need chakra?”

Aunt Yuki gave me a considering look after that comment. She frowned at me for a moment before

I grinned at that. Haha! I’d exceeded Auntie’s expectations for a three year old!

Mom grinned too, but for a different reason. “Yuki, your nephew can understand you.” Mom took
in Auntie’s stunned expression for a moment before continuing, “Hizashi and I used to use Konoha
Sign to talk without the little ones understanding. But then this little one,” she rubbed my head again,
“started knowing things he shouldn’t. He must have picked it up from watching us sign to
one another.”

Aunt Yuki just shook her head. “I-” she cut herself off. “Hinata! Don’t put that ball in your mouth.”

Hinata sheepishly eyed her mom’s back before pulling the ball away from her mouth and tossing it
back to Neji.
Aunt Yuki shook her head. “That’s a good girl.” She paused. “What was I saying again? Ah, right. Have you considered when you’re going to enroll him in the Academy?”

Mom’s hand stilled, dripping silvery ink on the page she was working on. She resumed tracing as she spoke “I … we, ah, Hizashi and I, think we’re going to enroll them at six. We don’t want Neji to feel like he’s being left out.”

Aunt Yuki looked like she wanted to say something to that, but Mom shut her down with a look.

Personally, I agreed with Mom. I didn’t want to go to the Academy without Neji. But we were getting off track. “Mom,” I asked again, “what’s blood ink for?”

“Well you know what sealing is, right Yuki?”

Oh fuck yes I knew what sealing was.

Mom continued, “To write seals you need to impress your intent, what you want the seal to do, into what you’re writing. Blood ink can hold that intent because it carries chakra. So blood ink is often used to make seals. Every good ninja has some, so they can make explosive tags and storage scrolls.”

I eyed the inkwell, which now deserved a glowing halo and a celestial choir accompaniment. “Mom, can you teach me how to make seals?”

Mom finished tracing the last page of “The Little Birds of Rice” and laughed, “No sweetheart. First you need to learn how to read and write. Maybe when you’re older.” She shifted the book around so that it faced me and flipped back to the first page. “You know this story Yuki. This is the story of the swans Chiyo and Chika. Do you remember how the story starts?”

I recited from memory, “Chiyo and Chika were the swiftest birds in the whole Land of Rice-”

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(2 years)

Learning how to read came with an unexpected opportunity. Most of the children’s stories Mom and Dad got for me had Konoha ninja as their main characters. Which meant inevitably some of those stories mentioned foreign ninja.

So I did everything I could to play up a fascination with those books. If I got a new story with foreign ninja in it, that was my favorite book in the whole world for a week. Every foreign ninja got stories made up about them, which I did my best to get Neji to act out with me. (Of course they always ended up being defeated by valiant Konoha ninja, there was no need to flirt with sedition).

It payed off. Mom and Dad regaled me with stories of the Third Shinobi War, which apparently had been in full swing when I was born and was just now drawing to a close. Mom’s stories of her work as a data analyst gave me a pretty good picture of the war as a whole and I was confident that through her I’d know when Kumo pulled out of the fighting. Best of all, Dad was a gate guard and he told me all about Suna and Kiri’s representatives when they arrived to sue for peace.
Things were falling into place. I’d know when Kumo’s representative was in town to sign the treaty and I could get Hinata out of her room when I needed to. Dad was going to live.

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(3 years)

I curled my upper lip into a sneer. I’d written a perfectly serviceable sentence down the right side of my paper. My words were as neat as could be expected from a three year old’s hand, I was pretty sure I got the grammar right, and I hadn’t even splashed any ink on the page. And it was wrong.

The paper was unbalanced. There was too much empty space on the left side. I couldn’t write the next sentence on the right side of the page. That would make it so much worse. Then there would be even more words dragging at the right side.

I closed my eyes and unfocused my Byakugan as much as I could. It didn’t work. It didn’t matter that I couldn’t see that bright silvery ink slicing into the right side of the page, weighing it down, pulling into itself. I could feel it in my head. No matter how I shook my head I knew exactly where it was and it wouldn’t go away. It. Wouldn’t. Go. Away.

Fucking hells.

Alright, how wide was the paper? How wide was my sentence? I used my fingers to estimate the lengths. The paper was seven sentences wide. I flipped a couple pages in the kid’s book I was trying to copy until I found the seventh sentence.

I dipped my brush back in the blood ink and carefully, carefully set about writing the seventh sentence on the left side of the page. It wouldn’t do to make it wider or thinner than the first sentence, that would ruin the whole thing. The gnawing feeling of imbalance eased as I wrote.

I finished and took a deep breath. Better. That was …. better.

The paper now contained two sentences, one for each side. The left sentence was a bit longer but that wasn’t so bad. Not nearly as bad as that empty, featureless space imbalancing the page.

I took another deep breath.

What a wonderful delight, to learn that OCD could follow me through lives. Just wonderful.

Well I wasn’t going to let it stop me from copying the book. I’d just have to alternate sentences, second, sixth, third, fifth, fourth. Right, left, right, left, middle. That way I could stay as balanced as possible throughout the process. It’d work out.

The last sentence, sentence number four, was off-center. The paper didn’t come together to meet in the middle, the central sentence was shifted slightly to the right. Fucking hells. And to make it worse, my sentences weren’t quite vertical. I could see it once I finished the page, my sentences all sloping more and more to the right as they approached the center.
I clawed my fingers over my shoulders, first crossing the right arm in front and then the left. Fuck. I needed to do that with the right arm in front again, I couldn’t just end with the left.

I took another deep breath. No. No I would not do that. If I did that I’d never stop.

Fuck.

I wished for a brief moment that Dad was as irresponsible as those Uchiha idiots and willing to teach me fire jutsu at an foolishly young age. The paper should be burned. I’d have to do it over, make sure I got it right the next time. Destroy the first paper, then I could maybe go first sentence, seventh, fourth, make sure the center was in line.

Hmmm, if I didn’t have access to fire, water would probably do just as well. I’d lay the offending page in the bathtub and let it turn to a pulpy mess which didn’t have anything to do with bilateral symmetry. That’d work.

Eugh. Learning to write had been bad enough the first time with horizontal lines, and vertical symmetry wasn’t nearly as important to me as horizontal symmetry. I could deal (mostly) with an empty space at the bottom of a page. But learning to write vertically, with how it fucked up the much more important horizontal symmetry? This was going to be hell.

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(3 years)

I bit Mom once.

She had insisted I learn write my sentences in order. She didn’t listen when I told her why I couldn’t do that. Instead she took my lovely pieces of paper and started writing on them, only one sentence each, on the right side. Then she made me do it too, saying it would get me used to it, that it would help me.

In fairness to her, it helped a tiny bit. It was also horrible and made me want to claw my eyes out.

The catharsis I got from that bite was worth every minute of the time out I received.

Not quite worth the betrayed look on Mom’s face though. I felt a little guilty about that. Definitely not worth the scared look on Dad’s face when Mom’s scream brought him flashing into the room with his hands leaking chakra and his eyes so bright I could barely see his face. That felt like a punch to the gut.

So after that I didn’t bite Mom again. I found plenty of ways to express my displeasure with being forced to write asymmetrically. But I only bit her the once.

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Chapter End Notes
Canon Terms:

While I try to make this fic as accessible as possible to people who are unfamiliar or only passingly familiar with Naruto, it's just not always possible to avoid leaning on the original manga sometimes. (This is a fanfiction, after all). To help with that here are a list of characters and terms introduced in this chapter that one can look up on the Naruto Wiki. Hopefully this will help clear up any confusion.

-Kunai
-Third Shinobi World War
-Seal (search for Fūinjutsu)
-Hyūga Main Family's Juinjutsu (search term for the seal on Hizashi’s forehead)
-Suna (long form: Sunagakure)
-Kiri (long form: Kirigakure)
-Byakugan
-Explosive Tag
-Storage Scrolls (found under Scrolls)
-Uchiha Clan

Side Note: Yuki isn't a self-insert, as is common in reincarnation stories like this one. But he did inherent two traits from me. My OCD and my magic baby-calming skills from when I was little. And no joke about the magic baby-calming. According to my mom I could calm my little sister down just by placing my hand on her cheek. The previous chapter's scene with Yuki calming newborn Hinata is actually copied straight from my life.
Lessons

Chapter Notes

This chapter comes with trigger warnings. Specifics are listed in the end notes. Those with military or other warzone experiences in particular should take a look before reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 4: Lessons

(3 ½ years)

Hiashi Hyuuga was scum.

I don’t know what insane notion led to him believe that two year olds have the coordination to handle weapons, but the idiot had Hinata learning proper kunai handling right next to Neji and I. Which was foolish but admittedly not quite enough to make him scum. The Hyuuga clan wasn’t so crazy as to allow kids our age to handle live blades. The kunai were blunted and coated with a sticky red goop on the edges, so the kids who messed up got stained red clothes and a sharp admonition from the teacher instead of bleeding cuts.

Except for Hinata.

Hinata flubbed sheathing her blunted kunai and left a splotch of red on her robe. The teacher, a sealed branch family member with dimpled cheeks, smiled softly at Hinata and gave her a gentle warning to be more careful next time. Which was markedly different from how he snapped at the other students but not surprising, given that Hinata was the youngest child there by a wide margin.

When Aunt Yuki had convinced Mom to have me, and Neji by extension, learn the basics early, Mom had worried that Neji would struggle with the course because he was a year younger than the typical starting age. (Such worries did not extend to me, not since Dad had caught me teaching myself how to pick locks). Little Hinata was only in the class because Hiashi was an envious ass who couldn’t stand to see his brother’s kids doing anything before his and because no Hyuuga tells the clan heir no.

So it made sense that our instructor, so quick to correct the other students, gave Hinata some extra breathing room. Snapping at sweet baby Hinata wouldn’t have done anything about the fact that she was just too young to learn this yet.

Apparently no one told that to Hiashi.

“Be careful?” Hiashi exploded from where he’d been watching the class. “No. This is unacceptable.” He wrenched the training kunai from Hinata’s hand and clenched it in his fist. “You will be leader of this clan one day. Do you understand what that means?”
No, of course she doesn’t, she’s a fucking two year old. If the bastard couldn’t see through the back of his skull I would have flipped him the bird.

Hiashi continued his tirade, “You can’t be a ninja if you can’t hold a kunai.” He thrust the kunai back into Hinata’s trembling fingers. “Do it again and this time do it right.”

The instructor reached with a hesitant hand. “Ah, sir-”

Hiashi interrupted, “Treat her as you would any other student.”

The teacher deflated. “Yes sir.”

Hiashi resumed his position watching the class and said, “You may continue.”

That was why Hiashi was scum.

The teacher resumed demonstrating how to properly sheath a kunai, emphasizing that one should learn how to do so slowly and then work on speed. He very pointedly did not look at Hiashi or Hinata when he said this.

I leaned toward Hinata and whispered to her, subvocalizing so Hiashi couldn’t read my lips, “Are you okay Hinata?”

Hinata sniffled and visibly stopped herself from wiping her eyes. “I-I-” she stuttered. The training kunai shook. She hiccuped.

I wished I had a real kunai so I could geld my uncle. “It’s okay. I’ll help.” I grabbed Neji by the sleeve and spoke loudly, “Hey, Neji! I’m having some trouble figuring out how to do this, can you show me?” I sheathed my kunai as clumsily as I could without having the teacher yell at me. “I can’t do it.”

Neji beamed. He was teaching me something! He could do something better than brother! His thoughts showed on his face like they were displayed with flashing neon lights. It was very cute. “Yeah! Grab your kunai like this Yuki and-”

I slid around Neji ostensibly in the interest of getting a better view and ‘incidentally’ gave Hinata a clear view of what Neji was demonstrating. I also made sure that my imitations of Neji’s technique were clearly visible to Hinata. No such thing as too many good role models after all.

Hinata slid her blade slowly into the sheath, exactly as the teacher had instructed us. She smiled hesitantly. “I did it,” she whispered. She practiced the motion again, as slowly as possible. “I did it.”

A few slow repetitions later and Hinata looked like she might be getting the hang of it. But all the other children had at least tried doing the exercise at speed and Hiashi was looking markedly dissatisfied with her progress. He breathed in through his nose sharply and opened his mouth.

I beat him to the punch. “I’m still not sure I got it Hinata. I’m really close, but I’m doing something wrong and I can’t figure out what it is. Could you and Neji show me a few more times, real slow?”

Neji belted out an enthusiastic “Of course!” and Hinata nodded firmly “Mhm.”

It was a struggle to not to smirk at Hiashi. One point for Yuki. Hiashi, zero.

The dick pursed his lips. With a flourish of his robes that must have been practiced, he turned and
Hinata … didn’t relax once he was gone. She kept her posture tight, her elbows stayed drawn in at her sides, and she periodically worried her lip with her teeth. I’d been hoping that with him gone she’d feel better. It felt like a defeat when she didn’t.

I spent the class trying to loosen her up but nothing worked. She was always an easygoing child when we played together over at our house, I didn’t know how to deal with her like this. It didn’t matter how many times I made mistakes to show her that it was okay to not be perfect, or how much I complimented her technique. Even with her father gone, she still flinched every time she messed up.

It didn’t feel right. It didn’t feel like her.

The end of class came and the students scattered to walk their separate ways home. I waved goodbye to Hinata, “Bye bye!”

Neji joined in, “Bye bye!”

Hinata ducked her head and waved back. She murmured “Bye Neji, bye Yuki.”

My skin crawled. What the fuck was that? Hinata was always heartbroken when playtime ended and she had to go home. I couldn’t think of a single time she’d left without running over to give us hugs.

Except this time apparently. It wasn’t playtime, sure, but …

I stewed on that while we walked home. Neji must have noticed something was off, because he stayed quiet. It made for a lonely walk home. Actually, that was another reason to hate Hiashi. He made Hinata walk back home all on her own.

I mean sure, this was Konoha and kids were given ridiculous amounts of independence. And sure, we were just walking a few hundred meters from one of the sparring grounds in the Hyuuga compound to our respective homes, also in the Hyuuga compound. At this exact moment there were at least a dozen Hyuuga who could see us. There was no reason to expect anything would happen to us during the walk home. But Hinata was two. Two and a half if I wanted to be generous and I didn’t. Hiashi could spend time watching her train but not put in the effort to make sure she didn’t have to be alone on the walk home?

Fucker.

Maybe I was being unfair about his behavior. But I remembered Hinata from the story. The broken, stuttering shell of a girl who had latched obsessively onto the first person who stood up for her. Today had felt like watching Hiashi give her a good shove onto that path.

When we got home Neji immediately began boasting to Mom about how he’d done better than me, which forced her to smother disbelief before she hurt his feelings. Just wait until we start learning the Gentle Fist style, Mom, I’m not always going to be the genius twin.

Dad sidled over while Neji was busy with Mom. He knelt down next to me and asked “You okay Yuki?”

I took a breath, wondering how to respond.

Dad pressed on, “It’s okay for Neji to do better than you at something, you know. You’re still
really good at-”

I interrupted, “What? No! No I’m not- no!” I recovered and said, “No, Dad, that’s fine. That’s okay.”

Dad raised a skeptical eyebrow, “Alright. Why are you so down then? Something’s got you upset, I can tell.”

He asked for it. “Uncle Hiashi was mean to Hinata. He’s bad and I don’t like him.” There. Couldn’t ask for me to be more forthright than that.

I didn’t even see Dad move. The next thing I knew we were across the house and he was ushering me into he and Mom’s room. He closed the door behind us and knelt down in front of me on one knee.

His voice was urgent, “Yuki. I need you to listen to me very carefully. Can you do that?”

I nodded, too stunned to do anything else.

“Yuki, I need to hear you say it. Can you listen to me very, very carefully?”

I blinked rapidly before saying, “Sure Dad, yeah.”

“Good. Yuki, you can never say anything like that again. Not about Uncle Hiashi. Not- not about,” he floundered for words, “not about any family, okay? Especially-” his mouth twisted and looked like he was wondering if he should say what came next, “especially not the main family, all right? Not about anyone without a seal on their forehead, okay Yuki?”

I nodded.

“Yuki!”

“Yes, Dad. I get it. I won’t.”

He leaned over and wrapped me in his arms, holding me close.

I’d always been aware that privacy wasn’t a reasonable expectation in the Hyuuga compound. Or rather, I’d thought I’d been aware of that. I’d always assumed that the other Hyuuga could see us but would try to not pay attention to what we were doing as a courtesy. It had never occurred to me to that might not be the case.

It put a different spin on living in the Hyuuga compound. Was somebody watching us right now? Making sure that Dad said the right things, making sure that I wouldn’t be a problem?

The uneasiness I’d felt with Hinata turned into fear.

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(3 ½ years)
Life changed after that, in little ways.

Mom stopped taking us to work with her. Instead we spent our time training to be ninja. Pretraining really, children our age can’t actually fight. But we learned how to handle weapons without killing ourselves, how to jump, how to fall, the general notion of how to throw punches and kicks. The bare basics.

We also spent much of the day playing with the other Hyuuga children, hide and seek, capture the flag, a whole slew of games which trained stealth and evasion. Those games never included the older children with more developed Byakugan, who sparred instead.

All of which was fun and a little bit exciting. Though sometimes marred by Uncle Hiashi spectating our classes and our games. Always with a disappointed or disparaging comment for Hinata on the tip of his tongue. He couldn’t seem to understand that Hinata was the furthest behind because he’d put her in a class with children twice her damn age and not because of some deep character flaw she had.

But no matter how much I hated him, I didn’t call Uncle Hiashi names anymore, even in my head. If I thought of him as an asshole there was always a chance I’d slip up one day and say it out loud, and I didn’t know what the main family would do if one of them saw me call the clan heir a bastard. So I stayed quiet and tried as hard as I could to suppress my rage while he tore my cousin down, piece by piece.

My plan to save Dad was progressing nicely though. I’d worried that Hiashi might bar Hinata from sleeping with Neji and I as she grew older, but my fear was unfounded. I made sure to tell Neji a scary story every month or so, which he inevitably passed on to Hinata, driving her to hysterics. It kept the sleepovers a regular thing and Hiashi never put a stop to them. (It also made me feel terrible. If I figured out a way to explain the situation to her when she was older I’d apologize on my hands and knees. Sweet little baby Hinata did not deserve nightmares of scary creatures with fangs and tentacles.)

As for the branch family seal ... I didn’t have a plan for that. Worries about my branding date kept me up some nights. I still didn’t know what determined when a branch member got their seal. I couldn’t remember if the manga had ever talked about it and I’d seen some children as old as eight without one, some as young as four with it. None of the branch adults I asked (or Mom) wanted to talk about it and I’d decided I didn’t want to ask anyone in the main family. So I was stuck waiting. For all I knew they could brand me tomorrow.

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(4 years)

Neji and Hinata each occupied one of Dad’s knees as he read them “The Little Birds of Rice”. Mom had decided that Neji was old enough to start learning how to read, so storytime replaced much of our playtime. Neji loved it, anything to hear his beloved “The Little Birds of Rice” more often. Hinata wasn’t ready to read yet, but she enjoyed storytime enough to make up for not being able to follow what Dad was teaching Neji.
I was not involved in storytime. I’d copied every picture book my parents owned a dozen times each, to say nothing of how many times I’d read them. I certainly was not going to sit and listen to Dad read a sentence a minute so Neji could keep up.

Instead I occupied a space atop Dad’s desk, pushing his papers out of his way to make room for my own project. I was drawing spirals.

My OCD had gotten worse. In my last life I’d used pencils and spent as much time erasing as writing. It was a hassle but a bearable one. This world though, this world had apparently never heard of graphite. Ink was the name of the game. But ink was awful. I couldn’t fix my mistakes. Any character out of line with the rest of the sentence stayed out of line. Lopsided characters couldn’t be fixed. I couldn’t adjust sentences to fix the balance of a page.

It magnified my compulsions, made writing a personal hell. Just thinking of it- I jerked my head to the left and then to the right. Eugh.

I needed a fix. Eventually my handwriting would improve but nobody is perfect and I didn’t relish the thought of losing a page of writing because of one marred character. I needed a way to satisfy the itch without destroying what I’d done wrong.

Hence, spirals. Drawn from the outside in, they were perfect. Horribly lopsided things becoming more and more balanced, until eventually they became stable without any need for symmetry. Beautiful. Drawing them was calming, centering. Finishing a perfect spiral let me write without being consumed by any imbalances in the page.

Of course drawing spirals is hard to do right and fucking up a spiral did not make anything better. It just added another page for me to destroy. But hey, practice makes perfect. Mostly.

I dipped my brush in the ink, wiped off the excess, and set to work. It took me three tries before I got my first acceptable spiral, but it was worth it for that moment of completion. The spirals almost appeared to glow when I finished them, the chakra-thick ink taking on an extra bit of shine.

“Dad, look!” I lifted the spiral up and showed it to Dad.

He paused in his reading and took a moment to look. “That’s very good Yuki.”

Hinata nodded along with him. “Mhm.”

Neji gave my spiral a cursory glance before insisting Dad get back to reading about Chika’s dash home. My little flame loved that story far too much.

The next spiral was … decent. It didn’t have any curves or kinks where it shouldn’t. The spacing between the lines was even. It flowed nicely. I showed it to Dad, got the requisite compliment. But I felt like it was missing something.

Hmmm. The next time I tried for a spiral with uneven spacings, wider at the rim and tighter at the center. The result was abysmal. I was tempted to drown it in the bathtub right then instead of destroying it with the rest of the failures after storytime.

I settled for glaring at it instead, and moved on to the next attempt.

That one wasn’t much better.

Nor was the next.
Or the next.

Gods this was almost as bad as writing my sentences in order.

I was a very grumpy child by the time I failed my fifteenth uneven spiral. Typically by this point I’d finished at least a half dozen neat, evenly-spaced spirals and could bask in the warm glow of their balance. Instead I was surrounded by lopsided monstrosities, hyperaware of every asymmetry in my surroundings. There were more papers on my left side than my right, I had a spot of ink on the right sleeve of my robes, my left hand was covered in ink smudges from holding the papers steady. The chair Dad occupied wasn’t directly behind me, it was also a bit to the right. My head twitched. I scratched an itch on my left arm and struggled not to scratch my right.

I couldn’t even give up. If I left this unfinished it would claw at me. I wouldn’t get to sleep for days. Fuck. I shouldn’t have tried this. I should have just stuck with the even spirals.

One more time. Again.

I let out a shuddering breath. Alright. I placed the brush on the paper and let the spiral flow. Top, to left, to bottom, to right, back up underneath the top line. Then the next layer and then the next, making each closer and closer, tighter and tighter. But this time I didn’t try judging the distance between the layers. This time I judged the distance from the center, simply concentrating on pulling my brush in a little less in each time.

And it worked! Mostly. I’d focused too much on the layer separations, there was a kink where I’d stalled the brush.

So I did it again. Focus on the center. Let the brush sweep around the center, down, under, up, around …

Ahhhhhh.

That was it. That was what I was looking for. That was a good spiral. It wasn’t just balanced, it pulled. It dragged the page around it into a central point and settled it there.

Once more.

The next one was even better. Smooth and gentle, with an irresistible pull to the center.

Actually. I bent down until my nose was right against the page. Huh. It literally did have a pull. It dragged a faint haze of light into its center, almost like a seal. It was like the chakra-laden ink dragged at the chakra which passed through it, giving it a gentle nudge towards the center. The chakra built up inside the spiral and then … It looked like the pull was strongest at the edges, in the center the blood ink spun the chakra but didn’t really pull at it. So the chakra built up a little, but then its added pressure and the force of the spin pushed it back out. The end result was only a faint light of chakra in the center.

I’d never seen a seal use spirals before, so maybe this wasn’t proper seal crafting. But it was still pretty damn cool, and plenty awesome in its own right.

Again!

I rushed the next spiral and actually jerked the brush so badly the curve intersected itself at one point. That paper got tossed fast.

I took my time on the spiral after that. Nice and slow. Focus on the center. Down, under, up,
This spiral wasn’t as tight in the center. I still tightened the layer spacings with each successive loop, but not quite as much this time.

I pressed my nose to the page again. This one kept its pull in the center. The resulting chakra was much denser than the previous spiral. Still barely enough to notice, but definitely there. This chakra spun less too, a slow and sluggish turn rather than a rapid whirl.

I was going to perfect this.

Another dozen attempts and I had reached perfection. This spiral was a work of art. It pulled at the chakra in the air like a drain pulling in water, bringing it almost to a solid glow, like the chakra in a person. Best of all, I’d made the spacings at the very center as tight as I could, much tighter than the spacings just past them. Those tight spacings in the center spun the chakra like a top, focusing it into a bright point at the very center that was held in place by the surrounding wider-spaced lines. Held by the outer lines like that, the spinning sucked in more chakra than it spat back out. The central point was so bright that I could see it even with my face pulled back from the page.

Awesome.

I placed my hand on the spiral. You are awesome and I name you Awesome, my first spiral of awesome. I drew my hand back. I had to show this to Dad.

Huh. The spiral was brighter after I removed my hand. I leaned in close again. It wasn’t just the free-floating chakra either, the blood ink the spiral was drawn in was brighter too.

Weird. I placed a finger on the outer rim of the spiral. The section around my finger glowed a shade brighter, pulling at the air’s chakra a little bit harder. The result made the chakra flow a little imbalanced. I pulled my finger back and the extra glow slowly faded, the flow balancing out. I placed my entire hand on the spiral again. Through the gaps in my fingers the spiral lit up, grasping that much harder at the chakra around it.

I focused my sight as best I could. Whoa. The spiral was pulling at the chakra in my hand! Tiny amounts, barely a drop in the flow that coursed through my veins. But that was why the ink brightened, it was pulling chakra out of my hand!

I closed my eyes and unfocused my sight, to make it harder to see through my eyelids. When my sight of the spiral was obscured I focused on how my hand felt. I couldn’t feel anything strange going on with my hand though. I would have thought I’d feel it, if something was draining my chakra even that little bit. Apparently not.

I opened my eyes. This was so cool. The seals in the hospital hadn’t affected my chakra at all. Why could the spiral? Was it because I was touching it? Was it some special property of spirals? Was this even a seal at all?

I wanted to know.

I concentrated on the hand that was touching the paper. Come on, surely I should be able to feel something. It was my chakra, if the spiral took it, I should know!

I didn’t feel the chakra drain. But focusing on my hand did something else. The chakra in my hand glowed a shade brighter. And the spiral ate that much more chakra, flaring brighter in turn. At this point, the glow was clearly visible around my hand and I see a hint of the central bright point through my palm even without focusing my vision.
Oh, yes! I concentrated harder on my hand. I watched the chakra flows in my arm, trying to focus on the feeling which made it flow down into my hand. The spiral brightened more and more.

I took my hand off. The paper glowed so brightly I was surprised Dad hadn’t noticed by this point. The central point burned, whirling faster than I could follow and searing my eyes with its intensity.

I basked in the moment. *Mwahahaha! I am Yuki Hyuuga, tiny child and master of magic spirals! Fear me! Mwahahahaha!*

I needed to start practicing my evil laugh. I could make a game out of it with Neji and Hinata. Nothing like a good maniacal laugh to tell your enemies you mean business.

`tssssssss`

My attention snapped back to the spiral. The burning point of light was actually burning a hole in the paper.

*What the-* I snapped my head around. “DAD!”

And then there was fire.

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Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: Unexpected explosion in close proximity to the main character.

Canon Terms:

While I try to make this fic as accessible as possible to people who are unfamiliar or only passingly familiar with Naruto, it’s just not always possible to avoid leaning on the original manga sometimes. (This is a fanfiction, after all). To help with that here are a list of characters and terms introduced in this chapter that one can look up on the Naruto Wiki. Hopefully this will help clear up any confusion.

-Gentle Fist
-Branch Family Seal (alternate name for Hyūga Main Family's Juinjutsu)
Chapter 5: Fire

I screamed.

Oh gods it hurts

I threw myself back off the table. Or was thrown. I couldn’t tell.

It hurts it hurts it hurts

Dad caught me.

Please make it stop make it stop

I drew breath so I could keep screaming and choked.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH

Breathing was agony, I throttled my breath. I hissed in the smallest amount of air I could.

Ow ow ow ow ow

Dad did something which extinguished my clothes. I hadn’t even realized my clothes were on fire.

Dad oh gods Dad help

“Oh gods, Yuki. It’s going to be okay. Listen to me Yuki, it’s going to be okay.”

Dad please

Hinata and Neji wailed in the background. Or was that me?

Gods just make it stop

“MEDIC!” Dad bellowed. “MEDIC!”

It hurts

I hissed in small amounts of air. The slightest movement shifted me in Dad’s arms and the pain-

Oh gods the pain

An unfamiliar figure appeared next to me like magic.
Make it stop please

Dad laid me on the ground. He and the figure (a medic?) were talking.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH

Another unfamiliar person snapped into existence.

Please please please please

The newcomer held their hands over me, chakra flooding from their palms into me.

Please let it stop can I just fall unconscious please

My prayers went unanswered. The flow of chakra into me was cut off and I was lifted.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH

I stayed awake all the way to the hospital. Then there was a flurry of doctors, a seal pressed to my face, and everything slipped away.

---

I couldn’t focus. The twists and tangles of light which made up my world blurred, slipping in and out of my awareness. I was nauseous, could taste sick in the back of my throat.

Neji wasn’t there. Where’s Neji? Where ... I ... I ....

A surge of nausea hit me.

Neji? Where ...

The world wrenched, spun, and I was gone.

---

“Neji!” the cry came out of my mouth in a dry croak that I immediately regretted. My throat screamed in protest and the skin around my lips split at the movement.

A cough built in my throat and I choked it. Oh gods no, please . I stilled. Don’t cough, don’t cough . I took slight breaths, as gently as I could manage.

The urge to cough subsided. I kept my breaths as shallow as possible, regardless.

Black spots ate into the edges of my vision. My lungs bu- My lungs cried out. I needed air.

I couldn’t take a deeper breath though. Please no . I couldn’t force myself to breathe. Only short, breathy gasps passed my lips and they weren’t enough. Gods no, it hurts .
The black spots took more of my sight. *I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe.*

That nausea again. There was a sour taste in the back of my throat and the world faded to black.

---

Everything was veiled behind that fuzzy blur again. Sourness clung to the back of my throat.

*I … I’m alone.* I’d just woken up, Neji should be there. My little light was always there when I woke up. I tried to throw my arm out and managed a limp twitch.

*Huh.* That … meant something. Didn’t it? My vision slipped, the world blurred, and my train of thought went with it.

*Neji … where is Neji?*

Rumbles in the distance. A blurry impression of movement. The sour taste in my throat retreated.

*Where am I?* Clarity trickled in. My thoughts held an edge they hadn’t a moment ago. *What’s going on?*

That rumbling again. I tried to focus, made out a brief image of someone standing over me before they slipped into a shapeless blur. *Who’s there?*

I tried to translate thought into speech, “Wh-” the motion cracked my lips. I could taste blood on my lips. The taste stood out from the rest of the world, sharp and metallic.

The fuzzy veil obscuring the world slipped a bit more. The rumbling resolved itself into a slurry impression of speech, a voice I almost recognized.


Faintly, as if from far away, I felt something gently squeeze my right hand. They had tiny hands. Very tiny hands for a doctor.

*What kind of doctors has hands that small?*

I tried to focus. That last thought hadn’t made sense. What? Who was holding my hand?

*Neji?*

For a brief moment my vision swam into a blurry almost-focus and I could see Neji standing next to my bed, holding my hand between his and crying.

*What? Neji’s crying? Why is he crying?*

I tried to twitch my hand again and found that I was too tired for even that. Fatigue dragged me back down into sleep.

---
I woke up slowly this time, awareness seeping in by shades.

The first thing I was aware of was pain. A dull, throbbing pulse of pain with a distant quality to it which made it feel like it wasn’t quite real. It was worst in my left arm, where it wrapped around me like a shoulder-high glove, clamping in and squeezing with a tangible pressure. From there the pain spread across my chest and up my neck to my face, where it gripped the left side of my skull. It was bad, but that was okay because it was only bad, not the all-consuming agony it had been.

I took a breath and winced at the raw spike of pain this prompted in my throat. That too was manageable though, worse than the other pain but not the horrible, awful pain that had devoured my entire world. I took another breath and did my best not to wince when my pain in my throat flared up again.

I was sore too. As I breathed my lungs pressed on my back and I became aware of just how damn sore my spine was. All the way from the bottom of my back to the base of my skull, it felt like I’d been sleeping on rocks for days.

I shifted a little, testing how much I could improve my back without aggravating the other pain. As it turned out, very little. My burned shoulder loudly protested any movement and trying to move my legs only made me aware of another patch of throbbing pain on my left knee that I hadn’t noticed before.

I groaned a little and tried to open my eyes, before quickly stopping.

Ow, okay no, don’t do that.

The left side of my face had not appreciated it when I’d tried to open my eyes. I kept my eyes closed. (Buried in the back of my head was the dim thought that I ought to reach up and scratch the right side of my face to fix the imbalance in what I was feeling. I firmly squashed the thought before it could gain traction).

Well, I didn’t really need to open my eyes to see my surroundings anyway. I focused my vision the tiny amount I needed to see through my eyelids and then kept pushing until my vision was clear enough that I could also see through the tangled web of light which made up the shallow sides of my eye sockets.

I was in a hospital bed, with an IV running into my unburned arm and a mess of instruments clustered around the bed beeping softly. I could see bandages wrapped around my limbs and head, and gauze pressed to my chest covering wet, raw skin. But more importantly I could see Dad, sitting in a chair in the corner of the room, his sleeping face pressed up against the wall and a book opened to the first page draped limply over his leg.

I tried to smile, but my mouth responded with a sharp stab of pain in the left corner of my mouth so I stopped. I felt a spot of wetness under the bandages there which told me I’d split my lip.

So instead of opening my mouth to call for Dad I hummed as loudly as I could, a sound which almost turned into a groan as I tried to make it as loud as possible. Humming like that made my throat prickle, but it wasn’t so bad as moving my lips.

Dad didn’t stir, completely unconscious.

I huffed a breath out through my nose and tried not to feel the pain of that too much. I opened my mouth the smallest slice I needed, accepting the splits in my lips which resulted, and croaked out
“Dad?”

Dad shifted a tiny bit, opening his eyes and blinking groggily. The two always-brilliant stars in his face brightened a shade and then brightened a whole lot all at once as he shot to his feet, book falling to floor. He dashed over to my bed and whispered, oddly quiet with how much energy showed in his movements, “Hey, hey Yuki. How are you doing?” He gripped the corner of my bed with one hand, the other fidgeting about my head like he wanted to touch me but couldn’t.

I tried to smile again. It wasn’t so bad after I’d already cracked my lips calling out for Dad. “Hurts,” I replied.

Dad flinched like I’d struck him. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry Yuki. I-” he trailed off. “I’m so sorry”.

Dad sounded almost like he was begging me for something.

I kept smiling and reached up slowly, carefully, with my right hand. Dad immediately reached for, clutching it oh-so-gently in the hand which had been fidgeting about my head. I struggled for something to say but couldn’t find anything, so I just said, “Dad.”

Dad’s chest heaved like he was going to start crying. “I’m so sorry this happened Yuki. I’m so, so sorry.” He didn’t seem to know what else to say.

After a few heavy breaths he collected himself a hair and pushed a button on one of the instruments beside the bed. He spoke to me, “Alright Yuki, a nurse is going to be here in a minute to help you. Is- is there anything I can do for you?”

I started to shake my head before the way that shifted the skin in my neck made me stop. Then I paused. Actually, yes, there was something he could do for me. I opened my mouth -carefully, carefully- and said, “Book.”

Dad scrunched up his eyebrows in confusion before getting it. “Oh”, he said. Reluctantly letting go of my hand he turned around and picked up his book from where it had fallen on the floor skew to the chair, pages crumpled and mussed beneath the cover. Dad closed the book and set it down in the middle of the chair, lines of the books parallel to the sides of the chair and centered nicely, just as he knew I liked it. Dad stepped back over to my bed and took my hand again, a very faint smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Better?”

I hummed, “Mmhmm”.

This time Dad actually smiled, and chuckled faintly. He rubbed his thumb over the back of my hand and stared down at me. Quietly he said, “Don’t worry Yuki, we’re going to make it all better.”

I woke up again when the nurse came in. I hadn’t even realized I’d fallen asleep. Dad had pulled the chair up next to my bed so he could sit and still hold my hand at the same time, and he was still gently brushing his thumb over the back of my hand. I didn’t move, not fully awake and content to just lay there and feel the warmth of his hand. I only focused enough to barely be able to see the nurse.

The nurse, a young gangly teenage boy, spoke quietly to Dad, “Is he awake?”

Dad shook his head. “No. He was for a few minutes, but he just fell back asleep.”

The nurse nodded. “That’ll happen. The meds will make him sleepy. The worst of the postoperative healing is over now though, so we’ll be pulling him off the drowsy stuff.”
Dad nodded his understanding. “When will he wake up all the way?”

The nurse gave a small shrug. “It’s hard to say for sure. But if he’s started to wake up now he’ll probably be awake for at least part of tomorrow. Today? How late is it?” He looked out of one of the room’s window and apparently didn’t learn anything from what he saw. He shrugged again. “You know what I mean.”

Dad nodded again.

The nurse continued on, “So did he say anything about how bad his pain was?”

Dad frowned and shook his head, “No, he just said it hurts.”

Dad and the nurse kept talking and I found myself drifting off again, lulled to sleep by Dad’s voice.

---

“Come on Neji, let Yuki rest.”

*Nn?*

Indistinct grumbling sounds came from my right.

“Neji,” Mom stated, “If you can’t let Yuki sleep I’m going to have to take you outside.”

Neji said something too faint for me to catch and I heard small footsteps pad away from my bed towards Mom’s voice.

“When will he wake up?”

Mom replied, sounding tired, “I don’t know Neji.”
“But he’s supposed to wake up today, right?”

“He might wake up today. We don’t know for sure.”

I considered calling out to Mom and Neji, telling them I was awake. But I was so tired. And I didn’t hurt while I was asleep. So I let myself slip away.

---

“Here, let me take him.”

Cloth rustled faintly.

Dad spoke again, “How long has he been out?”

Mom replied, “An hour or so. I told him he could go lie down with you but he insisted on staying. Ended up falling asleep on me.”
“Poor little guy, he’s really out cold. Here, I’ve got him now, you go get some rest yourself.”

No, wait. I didn’t want Mom to leave. My lips cracked and bled again as I spoke, “Mom?”

An instant later Mom’s voice was coming from my bedside. “Yuki?”

“Mom,” my voice broke.

“Oh gods, Yuki. Hizashi, Yuki’s awake!”

Dad’s voice came from right next to Mom’s, soft and gentle, “Hey Yuki.”

I sharpened my eyesight so I could see through my closed eyelids. Mom and Dad were both on my right side, Mom hovering with her mouth faintly open and tears welling in her eyes, Dad standing next to her with one arm around her shoulders and one arm holding a sleeping Neji to his chest. Dad had a watery smile on his face and it looked like he was leaning on Mom for support as much as he was holding her up.


Neji finally seemed to come to, turning his head so he could see me. “Yuki?” he mumbled.

I grinned, just accepting that my mouth was going to be a source of pain at this point, “Hey Neji.”

Neji came awake all at once, scrambling out of Dad’s arms and landing on the corner of my bed. “Yuki!”

Neji’s weight jostled my bed and the sudden movement sent a flare of pain through me. I hissed in a breath and the pain that caused was almost as bad as the pain of being moved.

_Pain. Pain pain pain._

Dad scooped Neji back off the bed and admonished him. “Neji. Don’t do that. Yuki is really sensitive right now and jumping on his bed hurts him.”

That was a bit of an understatement. I was pretty sure something had torn at the border between the burned and healthy flesh on my chest. There was a line of fi- a line of awful pain tracing the edge of that wound now. I was not appreciating Neji’s enthusiasm at the moment.

My little light seemed to get that he’d done wrong though. He immediately exclaimed, “Sorry! Sorry, sorry, sorry Yuki I didn’t mean to! Are you okay?!” In his voice was the kind of absolute sincerity that only really young children can pull off. I could no more have held a grudge in the face of that than I could have kicked a puppy.

So I gritted my teeth, measured my breathing, and wheezed out, “Fine.”

Even though that was a dirty, rotten lie. I was not fine, that had _hurt_.

Neji grinned though, and immediately began exclaiming about how worried he and Hinata had been and about how much they missed me at playtimes and how Dad’s office was a really big mess now and how Auntie had been taking care of him sometimes in the past few days and that meant he got to see Hinata more often and she was _really_ worried about me-

I relaxed and tried to not focus on the awful tearing feeling running down my chest - Neji had
really fucked something up - and instead to listen to Neji’s babble. While he was talking I reached out my unburned hand to Mom and she took it, rubbing her thumb over the back of my hand just like Dad had.

Dad leaned over and whispered quietly in Mom’s ear before gently extricating himself from Neji and setting him down next to the edge of my bed. He told Neji to be careful around my bed and then told me he’d be right back, before slipping out of the room.

I tried to watch Dad go but couldn’t see him through the hospital’s walls. I could see through the thick paper dividers which sectioned up our home with ease and I even fancied that I might be able to see shapes through the wooden outer walls of our home when I focused really hard, but the hospital’s walls were another matter. Whatever they were made of didn’t pass chakra as well as organic material, on top of which the seals running through them were bright and difficult to see past.

“-but soon you’ll be back home and you can learn ‘bout berries with me and Hinata!” Neji’s voice turned up at the end of that statement, indicating that an answer was expected to that and I really ought to have been paying better attention to him.

“Mmhmm,” I hummed.

Neji bounced up on the balls of his feet at that and Mom gently gripped his shoulder to keep from moving forward and jostling my bed again.

Mom squeezed my hand gently and said, “It’s okay if you’re not up to any of that for a while Yuki, we- we’re just happy you’re,” her voice cracked, “we’re just happy you’re here.”

I squeezed her hand back. Mom looked like she might start crying.

At that moment Dad came back into the room, leading a serious-looking doctor with Hyuuga-bright eyes and the branch family seal on her forehead. Dad immediately retook his place next to Mom, putting a hand on her shoulders and reaching down to press Neji close to him.

The doctor reached into her coat and pulled out a pair of fingerless gloves, the palms of which each had dim, circular seals packed with detail. She slipped on the gloves and the seals lit up, twisting at the air and drawing in chakra.

I flinched involuntarily as she stepped next to my bed and held her hands over my chest, seals glowing. Chakra pooled in her hands and then drifted into my chest while she stared off into some middle-space, looking at my bed but not really at me.

“Hmm,” she said. The torn feeling in the skin of my chest eased suddenly and I almost gasped in relief before cutting myself short for the sake of my raw throat. The doctor turned slightly towards Neji and said, “I hear you’ve already been told to not jump on your brother’s bed?”

Neji wove his fingers into knots in front of him and nodded at the floor.

“Good,” the doctor said, “because you can really hurt him doing that.” Her voice softened as she turned back to me, “You’re a big boy though, not crying because of that.” She smiled at me.

I smiled awkwardly back at her, choosing to accept the compliment at face value rather than letting the infantilization bug me. (And oh lucky me, the cracks in my lips got wetter when I smiled but at least no new ones opened).

The doctor turned to fully face my parents. “As long as I’m here, I guess we might as well do this
now. How much have you told him?”

Mom and Dad looked at one another before Mom said, “Nothing. We haven’t had time to talk to Yuki about what happened yet.”

The doctor hummed her acknowledgement. “Well then, I’ll try to make this quick so all of you can have some time alone.” She turned back to me, pulling off her gloves and stowing them in her pocket as she did. “Yuki, my name is Suzuko Hyuuga, I’ll be your main doctor while you’re here. You can call me Doctor Suzuko. Now, how much do you remember of what happened right before you ended up here?”

*Fire, burning, screaming, pain, hurt, FIRE-*

I opened my mouth to speak, stopped, and then extricated my hand from Mom’s too gesture at my throat. “Mouth,” I raps. I slipped my hand back into Mom’s.

Doctor Suzuko frowned, slipping back on one of her gloves and quickly holding it over my mouth. “Oh.” She frowned. “That’s not healing quite like it should. One moment.” She took out her other glove again, slipping it on too and then holding both hands over my face. Chakra sunk into my mouth and then flowed on down to my neck while she looked off into empty space. “Mmmmm.” Suzuko paused and then cocked her head. “Hmmmmmmm.” She took her hands away from me, pulling off the gloves again. “Is that better?”

I shifted my lips experimentally. The cracks were still there but they didn’t bleed when I moved and no new ones opened. I let out a sharp exhale and was relieved when my throat felt a bit sore but didn’t outright hurt. I grinned, a real honest grin this time, and said, “Better. Much better. Thank you.”

Suzuko nodded. “Good. Alright, where were we? Right, what do you remember?”

*Fire.*

I flinched and tried to find my voice. “Uh, I, uh, I was drawing spirals. And I was trying to get the spirals to be bright. Really bright. And one-”

*Exploded, burned me, hurt me, it hurt so bad I thought I was going to die again-*

“One of them detonated.” There, detonated. A clean, sanitary word I didn’t have to flinch away from.

Suzuko exchanged a glance with my parents. “Mmm. Well, that just about sums up what happened”.

*No it doesn’t it doesn’t cover any of it, it hurt, it hurt so bad I wanted to die again.*

She continued, “The blast burned you rather badly. The left side of your body in particular received some rather nasty burns. Those will take a while to heal and you’ll have to work hard to help us make sure you heal right. Have you noticed how tight your skin feels where you were burned?”

How could I not? The pressure never went away. “Yes.”

Suzuko nodded. “Right. Well that’s because the new skin is scar tissue. It’s a special kind of skin that forms after you get hurt. It’s harder than normal skin, doesn’t feel things quite as much as normal skin, and most importantly it’s not as flexible. Scar tissue likes to pull in on itself and if it’s allowed to do that it can get really hard to move what’s been burned. So you’re going to be doing a
lot of special stretches over the next few months to make sure the scar tissue stays as loose as possible. And those stretches are going to hurt some, but we’ll give you some medicine to make it hurt as little as possible.”

Suzuko’s voice turned saccharine sweet and she smiled down at me, “I don’t think you’re going to have too much trouble though. You handled that ouchie on your chest really well, so I think you’ll do really well with your stretches.”

I remembered my old neighbor Rima from down the street in my past life. How she’d gotten burned in a blast and how her foot had pulled up into a twisted claw. How her flesh had stretched until it split open down to the bone.

“Yes,” I told Doctor Suzuko, “I’ll be really good with my stretches”.

She smiled. “Good.” The smile dropped from her face. “As I said earlier though, your burns were pretty bad. It was worst around your neck and face and there might be some issues there. You might have problems moving and feeling parts of your face. Your left eyelid will almost certainly never open all the way again. But it could be worse. Your hand only received incidental burns from your clothes, nothing from the initial blast, so you’ll keep full mobility in your hand. And you’re a Hyuuga, you’ll still be able to see just fine even with a fused eyelid. None of this will stop you from becoming a ninja.”

I hadn’t even realized that was a possibility. Not being a ninja. From the moment I’d realized what world I was in I’d assumed I’d become a ninja. My parents and my clan certainly acted like becoming a ninja was just What Would Happen when I grew up. What would I even do if I didn’t become a ninja?

*Left eyelid. She said my left eyelid, just my-

“We can’t say for certain until you’ve done a lot of stretching, but right now it looks like the majority of the permanent effects will be cosmetic. A lot of skin melted across your neck and face and it will look very different now. It will look most different to non-Hyuuga, their eyes see texture differences much more clearly than ours do and, well, they also see this thing called ‘color’ which will be different where your scars are. You can ask your mother about that later. Once your wounds have healed some more you’ll be able to feel the differences in your face though, and when you’re a bit older your sight will be good enough to see that through your own body. Now, some of these differences may be kind of scary to you, but if you ever feel nervous or frightened about any of it you can always talk to me or any of the nurses who will be working with you.”

“There’s one more difference you’ll notice pretty quickly. We had to shave your hair off when we were operating on you, so it wouldn’t stick in any of your wounds”. And now that she mentioned it, no, I did not have hair. I felt like I should have noticed that sooner. “Another way in which scar tissue is different from normal skin is that hair doesn’t grow from it. And the left side of your head in particular got burned pretty badly. So when your hair starts growing back it won’t grow back on the left side-”

I stopped listening then. I clenched the hand Mom was holding and desperately tried not to clench my left hand too. The burned hand, the hand which was burned when my other hand wasn’t. The muscles in my left hand tensed and the pain lanced up my arm. This was wrong. I needed to touch the left side of my head, there needed to be something there which wasn’t, I needed to touch it, needed to touch the right side of my head too to make it even afterward, but I couldn’t just use my right hand to do it I needed my left hand too but I couldn’t move that arm and I couldn’t touch the left side of my head anyway and-
This was wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong, the world was wrong and there was no way for me to fix it
I needed … I needed … I clenched the hand Mom was holding again (my right hand, my right hand
and not the left) and struggled not to jerk my head to the left to make it better-

“Yuki?” Doctor Suzuko asked.

_Huh?_

She smiled faintly. “I get it, it’s all a bit much to hear right now and you want to have time with
your mom and dad.”

“And me!” Neji exclaimed.

“And you too,” she acknowledged. Doctor Suzuko nodded at me. “We’ll finish talking about this
later, when I come back for your stretches.” She backed away from my bed and nodded in turn to
my parents. “Hizashi, Keiko. You should stay around for Yuki’s stretches, but Neji …” she trailed
off.

Mom nodded. “If you could have an orderly send for his Aunt Yuki, from the Hyuuga compound,
that would be wonderful.”

“Mhm. I can do that. Oh, and Yuki, I know your throat feels better right now but it’s not actually
healed all the way yet. Try not to talk too much while I’m gone.” With that parting remark Doctor
Suzuko stepped out of the room, leaving me with Mom and Dad and my little light.

My parents pressed up against my bed as soon as Suzuko left, cooing over me and assuring me that
everything would be okay, that I’d be out of the hospital in no time at all and ready to play and go
to class with Neji and Hinata. Neji chimed in that Hinata had been having horrible nightmares
about the fire and I needed to get better soon so I could calm her down because it didn’t work when
he tried to do it.

I tried to focus on what my family was saying and not on how they were all on right side of my
bed. How uneven that was. How that made me want to rub my left hand over the bed to make it
better and how I couldn’t do that because I wasn’t even. I tried to listen to my little light’s babble
and not on the hyperawareness I had of my own body, on the way I could feel every asymmetric
difference carved into my body and the way that made those wounds impossible to ignore.

I tried.

It almost worked.

“Mom,” I interrupted them, “could you and Neji … could you and Neji move over to the left side
of the bed?”

_Please don’t ask why, I don’t want to say it out loud, it’ll just make it worse._

Mom scrunched her eyebrows, confused, but before she could say anything Dad nudged her and
nodded slightly. Mom let go of my hand and moved over to the other side of me, pulling Neji
along with her. She looked confused, but she did it anyway. Dad took her place holding my hand,
rubbing his thumb over the back of my hand.

I sighed. That was … better. By a little bit. Dad was taller than Mom, but that was balanced out by
Neji being on Mom’s side. Things were a little more balanced now. Only a little, but that was
enough. It was what I needed. I was still lopsided and off, but with the rest of the room being even it didn’t grab my intention so insistently and I could relax a little bit.

I smiled as Mom and Dad started talking again. Even though it hurt now, things would be alright. Mom and Dad would make it better.

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Chapter End Notes

Content Warning: Graphic description of burn injuries, hospitalization, and disfiguration.

Canon Terms:

While I try to make this fic as accessible as possible to people who are unfamiliar or only passingly familiar with Naruto, it’s just not always possible to avoid leaning on the original manga sometimes. (This is a fanfiction, after all). To help with that here are a list of characters and terms introduced in this chapter that one can look up on the Naruto Wiki. Hopefully this will help clear up any confusion.

-Medical-Nin
Chapter 6: Scars

In my previous life I’d once had to get a long set of stitches without anesthetic. That had hurt. Stretching my burn wounds was far worse, even though the nurses gave me a strong dose of painkillers before each session. Every session left me covered in sweat and trembling head to toe, world tumbling and blurred under the influence of the drugs they gave me.

“There, just a little longer,” the nurse told me, “just fifteen more seconds.”

I closed my eyes and unfocused my vision, not wanting to look at my hand and the nauseating pain radiating from it. I convulsed, bile finding its way into my damaged throat and triggering a flare of pain. It was nothing compared to what was coming from my hand though, laid out as flat as I could get it on a wooden end table next to the hospital bed where I sat.

“Ten seconds.”

Dad gave me soft encouragement, “You’re doing so good Yuki, almost done.”

My whole body shivered and I clenched and unclenched my other hand in the bed sheets. I reopened my eyes and stared at my burned hand, willing the pain to stop and accomplishing absolutely nothing. The pain was so intense my hand didn’t even seem like a real part of me. There was my body, two legs, a torso, a head, and two arms, sure. But where one of my arms had a hand attached to it the other just had pain.

“3.”

“2.”

“1.”

“Done.”

I snatched my hand away from the table like I had been- I snatched my hand away. I clutched it protectively to my chest, shivering and sweating. The room swooped and whirled around me and the nausea from the pain only got worse. I heaved, glad I only had weak broth to cough up splashes of rather than anything solid.

Dad rubbed my right shoulder, the one with no burns.

You need to rub the left one too Dad, but it’s all burned so you can’t, but that just means it needs to be touched more-

“You did so well Yuki. I’m really proud of you.”

I leaned into Dad and took deep breaths, trying not to think about my hand.

The nurse nodded. “You did great. Actually Yuki, we were thinking about starting a new stretch
today. You’ve been doing so well that we think you can handle it. Do you want to try it?”

I stared disbelievingly at the nurse, then up at Dad, then back at the nurse. Was he fucking kidding me? Did I look like I was ready to try something new?

The nurse continued on, “You don’t have to do it right now if you don’t want to. But if you start now you’ll be out of here sooner and we thought you might like that.”

Dad continued rubbing my shoulder. “You don’t have do this Yuki. You can wait a few days if you don’t want to do it right now. No matter what you choose it’s fine.”

I looked back at the nurse, still disbelieving. Something in my mind just wasn’t clicking. I couldn’t actually think about what it would be like to do more stretches right now, couldn’t process what that would actually entail and the pain it would bring.

But-

I remembered my neighbor Rima. When she’d tried to take a step and the skin on her foot had snapped open. Not split, like I would have expected of proper flesh, but snapped, like some hard rubber stretched too tight. I remembered the way she’d screamed and fallen over and just kept screaming and screaming.

I looked at my hand and imagined that happening to it, hitting my hand on something and having it snap open, leaving a gaping rent that exposed the glistening white of my knuckle bones. My stomach turned and I had a whole new reason to be nauseous.

“What’s the stretch?” I asked.

Dad squeezed my shoulder.

The nurse said, “It’s another hand stretch. You put your hand on the table again, but not all the way stretched like before. Then I’ll lift each one of your fingers, very gently, just a little bit above the table. Twenty seconds each, three times all around.”

He was fucking with me. Three times for each finger? I tried to sum up the total amount of time involved, but the drugs and the pain were both messing with me and I couldn’t wrap my head around the numbers. That was just … That was too much.

But-

I was doped up on extra painkillers right now, enough so that even bile in my throat didn’t hurt too bad. My shoulder and my elbow would be in agony right now if I was on my resting level of painkillers, but with this much in my system they barely itched. If stretching with extra drugs was this bad, what would it be like for the skin in my hand to split without any anesthetic at all?

Rima hadn’t stopped screaming for a very long time.

I nodded. “I’ll do it.” Hesitantly, slowly, I held my hand out until the nurse gently took it by the wrist and guided it back to the table.

“You’re a very brave boy Yuki,” he told me.

Then he lifted my finger.
I gripped the waist-high balance bar with my right hand and stopped to pant. Just a few more meters. Just a few more meters I kept telling myself.

Then I could turn around and do it all over again.

With a groan I took another step forward, struggling to bend my left knee and walk like a normal person rather than just taking the easy route and swinging my leg around without bending it. When I’d first started my stretches I’d thought stretching out my knee would be one of the easier stretches, because it wasn’t burned as badly as the rest of me. But the problem with my knee was that I could cheat. I could bend my knee just enough to take the step and no more, I could put a little swing in my gait to make the angle my knee needed to bend at shallower, there were a dozen little things I could do to make it easier that weren’t immediately apparent to the nurses and Doctor Suzuko.

I couldn’t cheat finger extensions. Those I just had to endure, to take it until I didn’t have to take it any longer. It wasn’t easy, but it was passive in a way this wasn’t. To do this I had to push. I had to make myself take each step with good form and not slack on how high I brought my leg up. It hurt like hell and every single step I knew I could cheat just a little and make it hurt just a little less.

I took a step with my other leg, shifted my grip on the balance bar and hissed as the rotation of my hip pulled at the scars along my side.

One more step with my burned leg, knee up, up, up until it screamed… and then back down.

Another pair of steps.

And another.

And another.

And I was at the end of the balance bar.

“Just one more time Yuki, and then you’re done!” Aunt Yuki called out. Hinata nodded fiercely along with her mother’s statement, ensconced in her mother’s lap.

I grinned weakly back at them (ignoring the twinge in my brain telling me that my mouth was wrong, wrong, wrong, because of how the left side of my mouth didn’t turn up properly). I was really lucky to have everybody rooting for me. Mom, Dad, Auntie, even Hinata and my little flame. It helped so much just to have them there, to know that if I couldn’t take it they’d help me up and get me to try again. And it helped to have someone witness my successes along with me too, made my progress somehow more real than if I’d just been keeping track in my head.

I turned around, gritting my teeth through the pain of rotating my left leg, and started again.

I reached the end of the balance bar after what felt like half an hour and collapsed. Well, ‘Collapsed’. Actually letting myself fall to the ground would have been excruciating. So instead I slowly let myself down and moaned theatrically about how I couldn’t go on anymore, that Auntie and Hinata should just leave me here.

Hmm. The wooden floor of the hospital’s physical therapy room was actually nice and cool. I could just lie here for a while, couldn’t I?
Hinata giggled and squirmed out of her Mom’s lap so she could run over to me. “No Yuki! Up! You need to be up!”

I flopped my head over so I was looking straight at her (the skin on my neck protested the stretch) and gave Hinata my best flat stare.

She giggled again. “Up! You need to be up!”

_Hinata is becoming a bossy little thing._

“Do I have to?” I whined theatrically.

“Yes!” she insisted.

“But whhhyyyyyyyy?”

Aunt Yuki inserted herself into our back and forth, “Because Hizashi made you those turnip cakes you like and you can only have some if you get up.”

I played at thinking this over, bringing my hand up to my chin in a gesture of thought. (My left hand, because Doctor Suzuko said I needed to get used to using my left hand on a regular basis even if it hurt).

I looked at Hinata. “That does sound like a good reason, doesn’t it?”

“Yes! Now up! Yuki up!”

“Yes, yes, Yuki up.” I slowly pulled myself to my feet, gratefully accepting a helping hand from Aunt Yuki.

“So Yuki,” Auntie said, “I can bring the wheelchair over to you. But you’ve been walking rather well these past few days. Do you want to try to walk over to it?”

Always one more thing to do.

I nodded and held up my right hand, “Yeah. Can you help me stay balanced though?”

_Not balanced, won’t ever be balanced-_ 

Aunt Yuki took my hand gently in hers and pulled me along another miserable half dozen steps to where my wheelchair waited. Hinata took her mother’s other hand and walked with us.

Sitting in the wheelchair was another ordeal and a half, requiring that I bend my knee further than it wanted to go. But that was just the way the hospital worked. Everything was another test, another exercise, something to push me just a little bit further. It was the kind of thing that might have frustrated me, but I understood the logic at work. Burn wounds need to be stretched constantly for months, if not years, to stave off contractures and the first few days and weeks of work could permanently dictate the flexibility the burned areas would achieve. And of course ninja need an enormous degree of flexibility in their line of work. Therefore the hospital was going to push me as far as I could go at every opportunity available. It made sense and it was done to help me, so I couldn’t really get upset about it.

Once I was seated all the way in the wheelchair Aunt Yuki pushed me out the door of the physical therapy room and towards the cafeteria. Hinata pitter-pattered along with us, reaching up to one of the wheelchair’s handles and resting her hand on it, ‘helping’ her mom push me down the hall.
Aunt Yuki leaned down as she wheeled me down the hallway, “Oh, and Yuki?” Her voice was sweet and inquiring in just the right way to set absolutely every hair on my neck on end.

“Yes Auntie?” I twisted in the wheelchair to see her. (When possible Doctor Suzuko wanted me to turn my head to see things instead of looking through the sides of my face, to keep my neck flexible).

“I bought you an extra treat that you can have if you use your left hand to eat the turnip cakes. It’s really tasty. Does that sound good?”

I sighed. *It never ends.*

-----

Some days were pushing boundaries. Testing my limits, seeing how far I could stretch, how far I could walk, how well I could feed and clothe and bathe myself. Some days were simply enduring, keeping momentum and making sure I didn’t lose the progress I’d made. Other days ...

I couldn’t see my face in a mirror. No Hyuuga can. Mirrors reflect light, not chakra. Older Hyuuga can see through their entire bodies with the Byakugan though and in doing so see a sort of inside-out version of themselves. My Byakugan was only advanced enough to see accurately through a few centimeters of flesh, only enough to see part of my own face. But that was all I needed to see.

I was ugly. Hideously ugly.

There was no way around it. My left eyelid was a melted mass that drooped so low only a bare sliver of the eye beneath showed. My left ear was a melted lump with no defining features others than the hole the doctors had bored into it so I could hear. The left corner of my mouth drooped almost to my chin, twitched convulsively whenever I spoke, and had a nasty tendency to leak if I was incautious while drinking. The skin on that entire side of my face was absolutely slagged, as if some sadistic god had reached down and *dragged* at that part of me. I had no hair on that side of my skull either. No hair grew from the melted skin that covered a third of my scalp, starting from the middle of my forehead and sweeping back across my head to the left corner of my nape where hair would have grow. My left eyebrow no longer existed.

I could follow the rest of the damage to my neck by touch. The vertical space between the left side of my neck and my collarbone was just gone, replaced by more melted flesh. The skin there had been stretched by the doctors so I could keep full range of motion in my neck, creating grotesque flaps of flesh when my neck wasn’t at full extension. Looking lower, the damage to my chest and arm wasn’t quite as bad. The flesh there was raised and distorted but probably wouldn’t qualify for horror movie status. My hand had some raised patches on the palm as well. And apparently everything from the top of my head to the tip of my fingers on that side of my body was discolored and mottled weird shades of stark white and deep reddish-brown, going by what one of the nurses had told me when I’d asked.

Oh. And the left side of my nose had been melted a bit too. It drooped now, my left nostril a little lower than my right nostril. Barely even worth mentioning so far as my appearance went. Though unlike the rest of my melted flesh, my nose still had plenty of undamaged nerves and I could *tell* that something was off every time I needed to sneeze.
All in all …

I would be lying to myself if I said I wasn’t ugly. I … In my past life I probably wouldn’t have dated someone who looked like me. Oh if asked I would have said that what really matters is a person’s behavior, their personality, how they make you feel and how much you love them. I would have meant it to. But I don’t think I would have ever gotten to that point with someone who looked like I did now. I would have had to get attached to them first and … and that probably wouldn’t have happened.

I’m not a good person.

I was a an ugly monster of a creature now and everybody would react to me with horror and revulsion and I didn’t even have the right to complain about it because I would have been one of those people and I was a hypocrite for wanting more than I would have given to others and-

Yeah. Other days weren’t so good.

-----

Two months after my spiral detonated I was finally released from the hospital, with a promising verdict from Doctor Suzuko. My scars were healing well and I’d kept up with my stretches better than they’d expected of a child, so I would keep a full range of motion. I had extensive nerve damage throughout my scars that even medical chakra had proved unable to heal but that was mostly limited to my face and shoulder, not my hand where it would have been truly crippling. So long as I made sure to stretch religiously for the foreseeable future and rub some lotion they gave me that smelled like sesame oil into my wounds every few hours, I would make a full recovery.

Aside from being a living example of what it looks like when human fat melts of course.

At least my scars were healed enough that I could claw over and rub them now. The simple ability to touch both sides of my body did wonders for making me feel balanced again. The moment I was out from under the watchful eyes of Doctor Suzuko and her nurses (ever-vigilant for me scratching my wounds) I developed a dozen and one tactile ticks for dealing with my asymmetry. Rubbing my hands from wrist to elbow on each arm, left-right, left-right. Clawing just over the surface of my left shoulder when I felt a phantom itch and then imagining repeating the gesture over my right. Pulling at my sides with both hands at once, one arm on top and then the other, and then running my hands over my neck. I became a very fidgety child, for the sake of my sanity.

(And I did not bite Mom when she made me sit still at dinner. Though I was sorely tempted).

I wasn’t the only one who developed ways to cope with my scars. My little flame and I made a new ritual, in which Neji would insist on being called Nurse Neji and I would fondly tolerate him inexpertly slathering burn ointment over me every time I needed to moisten my scars. Mom and Dad developed a habit of hovering, even insisting on walking Neji and I to our pre-training classes inside the Hyuuga compound. Aunt Yuki bought tasty treats for me much more often than she had before. (And of course treats for me also meant treats for Neji and Hinata, which made my life substantially stickier than it had been previously).

Everybody had their little rituals for dealing with my scars. Except for Hinata. Little Hinata just acted like she couldn’t see my scars at all. So far as she was concerned, the moment I was out of
the hospital and capable of playing ninja again everything was exactly as it had been before. She never made any comments about my scars, or acted like I was any different than I had been before. Which was nice. I appreciated everyone else’s gestures of affection, of course. But with Hinata … it was nice to have someone in my life who didn’t see a difference.

Chapter End Notes

No look-up terms this time. Instead I just want to say thank you so much for everyone who has left kudos. Seriously, thank you all so much. This is the first piece of fiction I've ever put out publicly and it was incredibly nerve-wracking to do. But knowing that people have read this story and liked it so far is just amazing. It's made it completely worth all the anxiety and the the work involved in creating it.

Also, if anyone wants to leave some constructive criticism in the comments, to tell me what parts of the story have worked best for you, or just to say hi, I'd love to hear from you!
I rolled my neck, trying futilely to scratch my neck without unclasping my hands and failing. My hands were clasped behind my back, right arm reaching up and past my neck and left arm pulled tight up the length of my spine and I still had thirty seconds left in the stretch before I could use my hands and nnnnn, nnn, nnnnnnnnnnnnnnn rolling my neck was not doing the trick. The itch was right there where the edge of my scar tissue climbed my neck. It was. Right. There.

I grunted and hauled on my left arm a little harder, pulling the stretch until I could feel a line of pain tracing up my arm into my shoulder socket. Just … a … little … bit … further …

I pulled my clasped hands up until they were most of the way up my neck and then extended a pinky.

Come on. Come onnnnn. Just- nnnnn

My pinky connected with the itch.

Ahhhhhhhhhhh

So much better. Now I could hold my stretch in peace.

My hourglass ran out of sand.

I glared at the tiny apparatus set on a rock in front of me. It remained unmoved. I unclasped my hands and slid out of the stretch with a sigh, properly scratching my itch now my hand were free. And then scratching the other side of my neck, of course.

I flipped the hourglass and repeated the stretch with my arms switched. Doctor Suzuko’s orders didn’t actually obligate me to stretch my right arm, but last week I’d discovered I could do this stretch better with my scarred side. Some panicked experimentation had then revealed that my hospital stretches had left me more flexible on my damaged side than my healthy side and that- just- no.

None of the coping twitches I’d developed for dealing with my scars worked for an imbalance rooted in my healthy side and I’d just about gone insane trying to scratch all the phantom itches that had popped up.

The hourglass ran out and I paused my stretch only long enough to flip it before returning to the same pose.

My solution to this problem was simple. Stretch both sides, and do double time on my healthy-side stretches until everything was equal. And it was working. Only a week in and I could feel the progress I’d made. Already I could pull further into this stretch with my right arm than I’d been
able to a week ago.

Of course once I began stretching my healthy right arm it had occurred to me that I wasn’t really stretching the other healthy parts of my body either … Which wasn’t as awful a sin as flawed bilateral symmetry to be sure, but … eh. Stretching all of me felt more right than stretching some of me.

So now I went out into the Hyuuga gardens three times a day and stretched my entire body as far as it would go, instead of just my left arm and neck. Which took a full hour each time and proved to be surprisingly relaxing, aside from the occasional difficult-to-scratch itch.

The hourglass ran out again and I switched to a new pose that pulled my left arm tight across my chest.

Across the garden from me Neji and Hinata diligently practiced sheathing and drawing blunt kunai from tiny little sheaths strapped all over them. And by diligently practicing I mean turning kunai practice into a game, because they were still little kids and of course they turned it into a game.

Hinata carefully, carefully, set about sheathing a kunai in a sheath strapped to the back of her shoulder, tongue stuck out in deep concentration and trying very hard to not giggle.

“Boo!” Neji shouted.

Hinata’s concentration collapsed and she keeled over sideways, wracked by giggles.

“No fair!” Hinata gasped out through her laughter. “No fair!”

Neji giggled. “My turn! My turn!”

Hinata levered herself up off the ground and found her way unsteadily to her feet. “Kay. Go!”

Neji decided to sheath his kunai in a sheath strapped to the underside of his wrist, inside his sleeve. His form was good and only a little impaired by the way he eyed Hinata, on guard for her attack. The attack never came though and he sheathed his kunai without incident.

Neji blinked and cocked his head at Hinata, opening his mouth to ask-

“Boo!” Hinata shouted, exclamation warped by the laughter bubbling out of her mouth.

Neji blinked once, unsure what had just happened, and then burst out laughing. Through his laughter he managed to barely squeak out, “B-boo!”

Hinata and Neji both collapsed to the grass laughing.

I grinned and had to make an effort not to laugh myself. If I started laughing they’d pull me into their game and I’d never finish my stretches.

Aunt Yuki felt no such compunctions though and tittered to herself. Aunt Yuki was seated on bench nearby, reading a book and keeping an eye on us, and she loved seeing Hinata play with Neji.

“Boo!” Hinata shouted again and Aunt Yuki laughed right along with her and Neji.

I loved Aunt Yuki. She was like a second mother to Neji and I. We were too old and mobile for Mom to bring us with her to work now, so we spent a good chunk of our day being watched over by our aunt. She struck me as a frail woman, always moving slowly and cautiously, but that didn’t
stop her from loving us dearly. She loved us so much, Hinata and Neji and I, and it shone out of her. Her chakra lit up a little every time she saw us and she adored seeing us laugh.

Case in point, she hadn’t stopped grinning since Hinata and Neji had started their game and I hadn’t seen her flip a page in her book in the last quarter hour.

I got to my feet and settled into the best approximation of the splits I could manage. My pudgy little child’s limbs, so flexible in other ways, just did not want to let me do the splits. I frowned at my legs and tried to sink further into the stretch, only to wince and flail for balance when that didn’t work.

“Oh! Are you okay Yuki?” my aunt asked. She had her book laid face-down on the bench beside her and looked ready to move if I needed it.

“Mmhmm,” I found my balance and settled back into the stretch. “I’m good.”

“Alright. Be careful Yuki, okay?” She admonished me in a soft voice, gentle and full of love.

“I will Auntie,” I reassured her. I smiled at her and felt warm when she answered with a smile of her own.

Aunt Yuki picked her book back up and resumed not paying attention to it at all in favor of watching Hinata and Neji play.

When I was done with my stretches I’d see if I couldn’t convince my little light and my cousin to make a flower crown for Aunt Yuki. She deserved it.

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“Come on Mommy, come on!” Hinata tugged at her mom’s hands, pulling her toward my parents’ house.

Aunt Yuki smiled and demurred, “We’ll be there soon Hinata, it’s not that far.”

“But food Mommy, fooooood!”

Neji smiled, sneaking up behind Hinata while she tugged at her mom. Her poked her on the shoulder, startling her, and then he poked me a moment later. “Hey.”

I raised an eyebrow and Hinata asked, “Whaaat?” her voice still in plaintive begging mode.

Neji grinned as wide as he could. “Race you home.” Then he immediately turned around and booked it down the beaten path as fast as he could, laughing as he ran.

“Hey!” Hinata yelled, before promptly letting go of her mom’s hands and following him. “Wait!”

I ran with them, keeping pace but not trying to overtake them. I didn’t really feel any need to beat my little light or my cousin, but racing them was plenty of fun without trying to win. So I just puffed along with Hinata as she tried to pour on enough speed to catch Neji, and cried out indignantly with her when he turned around to stick his tongue out at us.

We were getting close to home when all of sudden Aunt Yuki overtook us, flower crown askew.
Her longer legs carried her straight past Hinata and I, and then promptly closed the gap between her and Neji. She leaned down and scooped Neji up into her arms, who squawked in protest. Aunt Yuki reached our house a few seconds later, turning around and exclaiming, “We’re here!”

Hinata and I kept running, going as fast as we could until we slammed into the door and slumped against it. “Made it,” I said weakly.

Aunt Yuki let out a hard breath and set Neji down. “Now,” she said, “someone cheated when he started that race, didn’t he? What do you think is a proper punishment for that?”

Neji spluttered out protests as Hinata and I perked up, childish instincts to do mischief overriding any tiredness we may have felt after our run.

Aunt Yuki grinned, “I think someone should be tickled!” She made grasping motions at Neji, prompting him to leap back. Right into the waiting arms of me and Hinata. Neji’s protests immediately dissolved into laughing wails as he pleaded with us for mercy. We gave none.

Aunt Yuki smiled at our antics and leaned heavily against the wall of the house, arm pressed to her side.

The door to our home opened a few moments later to reveal Mom holding a partially peeled turnip and a short thin knife. She looked down at the pile of squirming children on her doorstep and then looked over at Aunt Yuki.

“This is your fault isn’t it?”

Aunt Yuki gave a strained grin, still pressing her hand to her side. She placed her other hand over her heart and exclaimed in mock affront, “Me? You think the wife of the clan heir would have anything to do with such ruffians?”

Hinata popped her head up and exclaimed cheerfully, “Yup! Mommy told us to!”

Aunt Yuki gasped theatrically, “How could you? Betrayed by my own daughter!” Then she winced and pressed both hands to her side.

Mom was at her side a moment later, knife stowed in a sheath in her sleeve not unlike the ones Neji and Hinata had been practicing with earlier. She put her hand on Aunt Yuki’s shoulder. “Lung acting up again?”

Aunt Yuki grimaced, “It’s my fault, I stressed it.”

Mom frowned, “Nonsense. Is there something I can do for it?”

I stopped tickling Neji and straightened up. “Is there something I can help with?”

Aunt Yuki smiled at me and said, “Oh aren’t you a dear? Actually yes, some tea might help. That grass blend you have?”

I grinned, “I can get that!” I immediately turned words into actions and ran into the house.

Mom shouted after me, “I’ll get the hot water Yuki, you just get the cup and the tea blend, okay?”

“Ohay!” I shouted back. I was followed into the house by Hinata’s cry of “Yuki, no!” as I left her to fend against Neji on her own.

I scampered around to grab a cup, the relevant tea jar, and the tea strainer. I also filled the tea kettle
and set it on the stove, but didn’t light the burner. Mom preferred that I not mess around with fire and I was perfectly happy to accommodate her.

Mom followed me inside a minute later and rubbed my head when she saw how I’d set everything out. I leaned into her head rub and hummed happily. I wrapped an arm around her waist as best I could and hugged her tight.

Hinata’s cries rang through the house, “Help! Heeeelp!” She streaked into the kitchen a moment later and hid behind Mom’s legs. “Safe! I’m safe!” Mom gave her a brief glance and set to work heating up Aunt Yuki’s tea, far too used to being a living safe zone to react to Hinata’s antics.

Neji followed Hinata into the kitchen at full speed, fingers outstretched and a promise in his eyes. He pulled to a stop before reaching Mom though, narrowing his eyes and evaluating the situation.

Hinata turned to me and pleaded, “Help!”

I stroked my chin and thought about it. “Hmmm. The way I see it, Neji wants to tickle you more than he wants to tickle me. Isn’t that right?” I directed my last sentence at Neji.

Neji thought about it for a moment before nodding, “Yup!”

Hinata wailed, “Noooooo!”

I patted her on the back and said, “Hinata, I’m sure you can put up a good fight. I believe in you.” And with that I sauntered out of the kitchen, leaving Hinata to her fate. Hinata’s wails and Neji’s victorious laughter followed me.

I walked into the living room, where Aunt Yuki was resting in a chair, arm still pressed to her side. I walked over to her and clambered up the chair and into her lap, being careful not to disturb her side as I did. “Are you okay?” I asked.

Aunt Yuki shifted to make space for me. “Well, not really.” She adjusted her flower crown so it didn’t fall off.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Do you know what shrapnel is?”

I hummed acknowledgement and nodded. Looking at her skin I couldn’t see any major scars though. Aunt Yuki had all kinds of little scars, thin lines and patches on her skin that had less chakra than the rest of her and were edged by eddies of chakra where the primary veins of her chakra network flowed close to them. But that was normal, every adult ninja I knew was covered in little scars like that. None of them seemed large enough to indicate serious shrapnel damage.

“Well I didn’t actually get hit by shrapnel directly. But a bomb went off nearby and a piece of shrapnel landed in my mouth. I was so surprised that I swallowed it, and it went down the wrong pipe and ended up in one of my lungs. Then, even worse, it turns out the bomb had been covered with a sticky acid, and so I had an acid-coated piece of shrapnel in my lung. It did a lot of damage before our medics managed to take it out.”

I sharpened my eyesight and peered inside Aunt Yuki. Sure enough, there was a gnarled jumble of scar tissue in her left lung, showing up as a faint absence of chakra where there should have an uninterrupted flow of light. The whole lung itself was also dimmer than her right lung, even the unscarred parts.
“It got worse though. See, this was before Princess Tsunade reformed our medical system, so the
hospital wasn’t covered in sterilization seals back then. I got an infection pretty quickly and it did a
number on my lung. I lived through it, but I wasn’t in any kind of shape to be a ninja and they
discharged me. I’m mostly okay now though, it just acts up sometimes.”

“Oh,” I said. What else was I supposed to say? ‘Sorry you grew up in a military state Aunt Yuki’?

Aunt Yuki hugged me close. “It’s alright. Means I get to spend more time with you kids.”

I smiled and hugged her back.

We sat there for a while before the silence started to get uncomfortable. I searched for something
to say.

“Hey, Auntie?”

“Hm?”

“That book you were reading earlier, in the garden?”

“Mm?” She drew her eyebrows together quizzically.

“There was a word on the title I could read, but I don’t know what it means.” I’d found out early
on that this world didn’t speak Japanese. I had no idea what the language was, or if it even had an
analogue in my old world, but fortunately the written form of the language was phonetic and that
meant I could sound out words I didn’t know.

Aunt Yuki turned to me. “Oh?”

“Yeah.” I sounded out the word as slowly as I could, “Soh. Poh. Riff. Ick. It was ‘Mixing Soh-poh-
riff-ick Medicines’. What does that word mean?”

“Oh,” I said, “okay.”

“Auntie?” she said, “you could read the title of my book?”

Now it was my turn to look at her quizzically. “Uh, yes? I can read, remember?”

“No, no, that’s not what I meant. I meant that I was surprised that you could see the title of my
book. It wasn’t written with blood ink and you’re still pretty young.”

Of course I could see the chakra disturbances that ordinary inks made. I’d been able to for almost a
year now. I could miss it if I wasn’t concentrating sure, but it wasn’t hard to see now. “Of
course I can see it,” I pouted, “it’s not that hard”.

“Huh. Could you see the letters in the book too?”

“Mmhmm.” Those had been harder to read though, because they were turned the wrong way for
me to read them. Also the subject material had been at a high enough level that I couldn’t read
most of the words, so I hadn’t really tried that hard either.

“Huh,” she said. And with that we lapsed back into silence.
Mom came out of the kitchen a minute later, holding a mug of steaming tea. “Here you go Yuki.”

My aunt shifted me around so that she could safely hold the tea. “Thank you Keiko.” Aunt Yuki blew on her tea and then took a long sip. “Mmm.”

Mom took a seat on the couch opposite to Aunt Yuki and sat down. “Do you need anything else, or …?” Mom let the question hang.

Aunt Yuki shook her head. “No, this is wonderful, thank you.” Then she asked Mom, “Where are Hinata and Neji?”

“Aunt Yuki’s eyes flared with light for a moment and then dimmed. “Aw, they’re adorable. We should probably wake them up soon though, Hinata was hungry and I don’t want to wait too long before feeding her.” I turned myself around in Aunt Yuki’s lap, intent on going upstairs and packing in as much cuddle time as I could when she said, “So Keiko, did you know little Yuki here can read ink without blood in it?”

Mom blinked. “I thought Hyuuga weren’t supposed to be able to see anything that subtle until almost halfway through the Academy?”

I stopped my exodus from Aunt Yuki’s lap and perked up.

_Hm?_

Aunt Yuki shrugged and took another sip of her tea. “Yuki has good eyes apparently.” She rubbed my head and I preened under the attention. “You can probably start teaching him how to write again if he wants to, now that he doesn’t have to use blood ink.”

Oh. So that’s why we hadn’t resumed my writing lessons when I’d gotten out of the hospital. I hadn’t given much thought to it, because honestly I was a bit nervous about getting anywhere near blood ink again and that had kind of damped my enthusiasm for writing. Apparently Mom and Dad shared my fears.

Mom turned to me. “What do you say Yuki, do you want to learn how to write again?”

I nodded fiercely. “Mhm, mhm.” So long as blood ink wasn’t involved of course I wanted to start writing again.

“Alright. I guess I’ll talk to Hizashi about it when he gets home.”

I looked at Aunt Yuki and Mom, checking to make sure that neither of them had anything more to say about me, and then finished squirming out of Aunt Yuki’s lap. “I’m gonna go take a nap with Neji and Hinata, okay Mom?”

Mom smiled. “Of course, Yuki. I love you.”

“Love you too, Mom.” A moment later I added on, “And you, Auntie. Love you too.”

Aunt Yuki smiled. “Aw. I love you too, little Yuki.”

With that done I turned away and rushed up the stairs. Sure enough, there were my cousin and my little light, flopped down on our bed. Neji was sprawled facedown on one of our pillows, with his arms and legs spread out like a starfish. Hinata was lying on her back, head curled into the crook of
his arm and her arm laid out over his back in a position only a little kid could find comfortable. Aunt Yuki had been right, they were absolutely adorable.

Awwwwww

I scooted onto the bed and crawled up to them as carefully as I could. I nestled in between them, head pillowed on Hinata’s stomach and body curled up against Neji. They barely stirred when I moved in, totally out of it. I smiled and soaked in their warmth, adding my own warmth to the pile in turn.

A minute later I was asleep as well.

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Mmrmf

Someone’s hand shook my shoulder again. “Yuki.”

Mmrmf! Mrble mrf.

I snuggled further into Hinata’s stomach to get away from the hand.

“Yuki, it’s time for dinner.”

No it’s not. It’s snuggle time forever.

“Come on Yuki, get up.”

I turned over to face my dad, choosing to look through my eyelids rather than opening my eyes. Neji was standing next to him, which explained the lack of warmth and squishiness against my back.

“Come on Yuki, I just got home, we can have dinner now.”

I considered this for a moment before rejecting it in favor of a proposition of my own. Eyes still closed I reached over and grabbed Dad’s shirt, pulling it towards Hinata and I. “Or,” I mumbled, tugging on his shirt, “you could snuggle with us.”

Dad barked out a short laugh. “I’d love to Yuki, but Keiko will probably be upset with us if we don’t eat the dinner she made.”

Neji chimed in, “Yeah, Yuki, I wanna eat!”

My rebuttal in favor of cuddles was interrupted before it could start by Hinata shifting about. She yawned broadly and rubbed at her eyes, making a much less comfortable pillow as she moved. Blinking her eyes open she stared down at me. “Yuki?”

“Mrrrr,” I rumbled back.

Neji explained to Hinata, “Dinner is ready but Yuki wants to sleep.”

Hinata looked at Neji. “Dinner?” She looked down at me. “Yuki, off.”
I glomped onto Hinata harder. “Orrrrrr, more snuggles.”

Hinata shook her head. “Uh-uh. I want dinner. Yuki off.”

I sighed theatrically and rolled off of Hinata, grabbing a pillow instead. “Fine. I suppose I will have to make do snuggling this pillow all on my own. Go on without me, I’ll be fine.”

Dad smiled, grabbing my ankles and tugging me toward the edge of the bed. “Or you could sit down to eat your mother’s food.”

I answered that with pillow-muffled mumbling, keeping my eyes shut as I wrapped tighter around the pillow.

“Alright,” Dad said, “I guess we do this the hard way.” And then he scooped me up off the bed in one swift motion, depositing me on his shoulder. “Come on Hinata, Neji, let’s go downstairs.”

I considered protesting further but decided the joke had lasted as long as it would. Instead I opened my eyes so I could see Dad more clearly and hugged him as best I could from the awkward position I was in. “I love you Dad.”

Dad smiled widely and shifted me around so I was clinging to his front rather than draped over his shoulder. “I love you too Yuki.” At Hinata’s tug on his pant leg he continued, “And you too of course. And you too Neji,” he said, preempting any protest Neji might have had about being left out.

I pulled myself into the crook of Dad’s neck and mumbled, “We missed you.”

“I was only gone one shift,” he said, “I left this morning.”

“Mmhmm. But we missed you anyway. Right?” I directed that last bit at Hinata and Neji.

Hinata nodded mutely, still holding onto Dad’s pant leg. Neji chirped “Yup!” and tried to hug Dad’s other leg, which had mixed results as Dad was walking while Neji tried to latch onto him.

Dad laughed and rubbed Neji’s head. “I miss all of you while I’m at work too. Though I may actually have good news on that front.”

That caught my attention. “Oh?”

“Let’s wait for dinner,” was his reply.

Dinner turned out to be mess of turnips and pieces of leafy vegetables I couldn’t recognize (being unable to see color made it hard to identify some chopped foods). Hinata dug in ravenously, not even waiting to be fully seated before she started plucking food off her plate. The rest of us followed somewhat more sedately, at least waiting until we were seated before digging in.

We were halfway done with dinner when Dad spoke up. “So. I’ve got some big news to share with everyone.”

I looked up at him, sharpening my vision unconsciously as I focused on what he was saying.

“Keiko, remember how a week ago your office had all those rumours about Kumo deescalating?”

Mom nodded and Aunt Yuki leaned in closer, obviously interested.

“Well you won’t believe who showed up at our main gate today.”
Holy crap this is it.

Aunt Yuki gasped, “No.” Mom’s eyes widened and she got a faraway look like she was processing too much information to pay close attention to what was going on around her.

Dad nodded. “Kumo sent an envoy. They showed up at our border this morning and requested an escort. Ran down here as fast as they could, showed up right before my shift was over. They say they want peace.”

I looked over at Hinata. I needed to find an opportunity to tell her a scary story, or get her to ask Aunt Yuki to let her stay the night, or something, and I needed to make it happen right now.

Dad continued talking, “And get this. They sent their head of operations as part of the group, the same guy I always hear you and your coworkers complaining about.”

Mom blinked. “They did? Wow. He’s good at his job. If they lose him that represents a huge strategic loss for them. They’re actually serious about this.”

No, no they’re not. They sent him because he’s the only one the Raikage trusts enough to pull off this kidnapping.

The adults kept talking, musing about how Kumo’s exit from the war would affect their lives. I tuned it all out though. That wasn’t important to me right now. I wasn’t alone in my disinterest either. Neji and Hinata weren’t paying the slightest attention to what our parents were saying, much more interested in their food than the machinations of war and politics.

Perfect.

“Hey Neji,” I said, idling nudging my own food with my chopsticks. “Do you think that if the war ends the Dark Cloud will stop prowling around?”

Neji blinked and frowned for a moment before realizing what I was talking about. One of the many scary stories I’d fed him was of Kumo’s Dark Cloud, a monster Kumo had supposedly released into Konoha which would gobble up children if they went outside at night. A smile spread over his face when he got it.

My little light loves horror stories entirely too much.

Neji gasped. “You’re right! Maybe they’ll stop the Dark Cloud!”

Hinata looked at the two of us, unsure what we were talking about.

I nodded sagely. “Maybe. But maybe they’ll also just let it go. Who knows what the Dark Cloud would do to little kids then?”

Neji’s mouth stretched into an awed smile, as if I hadn’t just dropped the possibility of a children-murdering monster getting worse. “You’re right! Oh no, what if the Dark Cloud stops obeying their orders? What if it starts attacking good kids too?!”

I was sure the Dark Cloud story hadn’t mentioned anything about good or naughty children, but I’d told Neji a lot of monster stories. He could be forgiven for confusing some of the finer details.

Hinata wasn’t eating her food anymore, instead staring wide-eyed at Neji and I, eyes darting back and forth between us. “Wh- wh- what’s the Dark Cloud?” she stammered out.
Really, by now she should have known better than to feed Neji an obvious line like that. Neji leapt on her question. “The Dark Cloud is a monster from Kumo! It came to Konoha when the war started and now it roams the streets at night!”

I could see Hinata’s heart begin beating faster in her chest, her lungs pumping fast shallow breaths. Neji continued gleefully, “The Dark Cloud looks like thick, black mist with lightning bolts inside of it and when it eats a child it leaves nothing but bloody bones behind.”

*Oh, nice touch, making the bones bloody.*

“When children go outside after dark the Dark Cloud will follow them and if they’re naughty …“

Hinata was visibly panting now, staring at Neji like *he* was the Dark Cloud. I side-eyed the adults momentarily, making sure they were still talking politics and not paying attention to our little side-show.

Neji jerked his arms up, “Boom! The Dark Cloud eats the kid and spits out their bones!”

Hinata squeaked, “Eep!”

Neji nodded, as if in agreement with her sentiment. “But it’s even worse now. See, Kumo told the Dark Cloud to eat naughty children, but once Kumo leaves the war they won’t control the Dark Cloud anymore. So maybe it will eat good children too. Maybe it won’t wait for kids to leave their house anymore, maybe it will creep in through the windows and gobble them up!”

Wow. That was an impressive bit of improvisation for a four year old. And it worked too, because Hinata completely lost it at that last line. She shrieked at the top of her lungs and clapped her hands over her ears, shaking her head back and forth.

“No! No, no, no, no, no! I don’t want to be eated!”

That put a rapid end to our parent’s discussion. Aunt Yuki was immediately next to Hinata, stroking her and asking what was wrong. Mom glared at an very remorseful Neji. Dad didn’t eye Neji though, he eyed me. I put on my best innocent face and internally cursed how well Dad understood me.

Hinata was in full-on tantrum mode now, flailing her hands at her mom and refusing to say what had frightened her so much. She shook her head, hair flying everywhere and getting in her food. Aunt Yuki looked almost as frightened as Hinata, clearly at a loss for how to get Hinata to calm down. She did her best to murmur soothing nothings to Hinata and stroke her back, but it wasn’t helping her much.

As Mom lit into Neji for frightening Hinata I got out of my seat and made my way over to Hinata. I pulled myself up onto Hinata’s chair, squished in beside her and glomped on as hard as I could. “It’s okay Hinata, the Cloud can’t get you in here, it’s alright.”

Hinata immediately reciprocated, latching onto me in turn and rambling about how she didn’t want to be eated. Through it all I just held her. I didn’t do anything specific to calm her, no gestures or words, I just held her.

Hinata ran out of steam pretty quickly after that. Panicky wails dissolved into thick sniffles and she buried her head in the crook of my neck, leaking tears and snot and drool all over me. Which was kind of gross, but I’d made this mess and I could deal with it.
Aunt Yuki gave me a tight smile when Hinata finally stopped screaming. She looked appreciative but … Well to be blunt, Aunt Yuki hadn’t been able to calm Hinata down and I had. I couldn’t imagine that sat well with her. If no one had been able to get Hinata to calm down that would have been one thing, but I could calm Hinata and Aunt Yuki couldn’t. Hinata just didn’t find her mother as comforting as she found me. That fact had to hurt on some level.

Well, at least Hinata would be sleeping with Neji and I. There was no way she’d be able to sleep alone in her own bed after having that kind of reaction to Neji’s story.

Hinata hiccuped and continued crying into my shoulder. Mom was still chewing Neji out in the background, moving on from the ‘why did you think this was a good idea?’ phase of her lecture to the ‘you had better apologize to your cousin’ phase.

Well, I thought, I feel like a pretty shitty person right about now. I’d have to find a way to make this up to Hinata and Neji later. Neither of them deserved this. At least my plan is working though.

With a loud snort Hinata expelled a mass of mucus from her dripping nose, which she proceeded to wipe all over my shoulder.

Yup. This is what victory feels like.

Chapter End Notes

Canon Terms:

While I try to make this fic as accessible as possible to people who are unfamiliar or only passingly familiar with Naruto, it’s just not always possible to avoid leaning on the original manga sometimes. (This is a fanfiction, after all). To help with that here are a list of characters and terms introduced in this chapter that one can look up on the Naruto Wiki. Hopefully this will help clear up any confusion.

-Tsunade
-Head Ninja of Kumogakure
-Raikage

Side Note: I’ve got a writing tumblr where I talk about some of my thought processes behind this story (sengach-writes) and I put a post up there about Yuki’s recovery from his trauma. I know a couple of people were interested in how he was going to cope with his traumatic event and I know this chapter doesn’t portray him as traumatized as some people would expect. So I wrote a little snippet about the whole thing. Go check it out if you’re interested.
Chapter 8: Caring

I couldn’t sleep.

I wiped rheum from my eyes, left then right then both at once, and kept pacing. I looked down at Hinata and Neji, limbs tangled together on our bed in a way that made my heart ache. What would happen if the Kumo ninja came tonight? What if they figured out what I’d done, what if they found Hinata anyway, what could I do? I couldn’t do anything. I was a child. A tiny child. If Kumo ninja came bursting into our room there wouldn’t be anything I could do, they’d grab Hinata and it wouldn’t matter how much she screamed or I screamed, they’d just take her and-

I took a shuddering breath and pushed the images out of my head.

What if they didn’t come tonight? Then I’d have to do this again the next night, and the next, and the next, until they did and I didn’t know if I could take that. I was just about ready to scratch my skin off from the stress of this one night, I wouldn’t be able to keep this up.

Unthinkingly I scratched my left elbow, then my right, then ran both hands along the sides of my neck. I kept pacing, walking one step past the left end of our bed, then back one step past the right end of our bed, and then back again.

I focused my eyes until they ached with the strain and I could see Mom and Dad through the wall between our rooms. They were sleeping peacefully in their bed, Mom’s arm draped gently over Dad’s chest.

I looked back at Hinata. She was also sleeping peacefully, nightmares staved off by Neji’s presence and warmth. I really ought to go back to bed and snuggle up to her as well. Hinata would probably panic if she woke up and I wasn’t in bed, it’d be best if I got back in bed.

I couldn’t though. I couldn’t get to sleep, couldn’t untense, couldn’t stop fidgeting. That’s why I’d gotten out of bed in the first place, if I’d kept fidgeting under the covers I’d have ended up waking both of them.

I bit my nails, systematically working each finger through my mouth until I’d bit each nail once. This was too much. The stress was just too much. What if the Kumo ninja took Hinata? Oh gods, what if they took Hinata and because I’d changed things this time Hiashi didn’t catch and kill them? What if Hinata was lost because of me?

Please gods no, don’t let that happen.

To work off my nervous energy I ranged further in my pacing, sketching a long ‘U’ around our bed. It didn’t help much, not enough space. Sixteen short steps up one side of bed, past the door, stop at our closet. Turn right, a dozen steps along the short end of our bed to reach the wall. Turn right, another sixteen steps down the other side of the bed, past the window, stop at the wall. Turn around, do it all over.
I didn’t know what bedrooms in the rest of Konoha were like, but in the Hyuuga compound they were small places meant for sleeping and dressing and nothing else. Not nearly enough room to pace properly. Even the main family members’ bedrooms were no larger.

Fuck, they’re going to put the Caged Bird seal on Neji and I soon, aren’t they? When did they put it on Neji in the manga? Did it even say? Fuck, I can’t remember.

Thinking about the Caged Bird seal was awful, but it was a familiar sort of awful. Better than sharpening my eyesight every ten seconds and looking outside for Kumo ninja I wouldn’t be able to do anything about anyway. Thoughts about the seal hurt but those thoughts had ruts, they followed familiar patterns rather than skittering around like water on a hot pan. They drained me less than the directionless panic Hinata’s abduction inspired.

Are we going to be allowed to keep seeing Hinata after we’re branded? I mean we’re already branch family, it’s not like that isn’t already true. But people make up plenty of stupid rules based on arbitrary milestones, it wouldn’t shock me if branded branch members weren’t allowed to talk to someone in the main family’s line of succession. And …

I’d had this thought a dozen times before, but even so it made me flinch.

What if Hinata doesn’t want to talk to us when we’re branded? She loves us but … But she’s also young. Little kids sometimes put a lot of emphasis on tiny things like that. And she can see how her father treats branch members. Once we’re clearly labeled as such she might make the connection and push us away, try to earn some approval from Hiashi.

My stomach twisted.

I looked back over at Hinata while I paced.

I don’t want to lose her.

My plan wasn’t just about Dad anymore. Now it was just as much about Hinata. She was as much my sister as Neji was my brother, as much family as my father. Which meant I had to do more. It wasn’t just enough to save Dad’s life, I needed to make sure I didn’t lose Hinata either. Not a problem for my current plan, the current plan would keep Hinata safe.

Or so I hoped. I shot a glance through our wall and confirmed there still weren’t any ninja outside our house.

But no, my problem wasn’t immediate, it was more general. How to make sure Hinata wasn’t taken away from us? How to make sure Hinata didn’t end up the broken shell of a person Hiashi would turn her into given half a chance? How to make sure Hinata, so gentle and unsuited to combat, didn’t die in the daily life of a ninja? Those questions were … not easy to answer. Protecting Dad involved preventing a single point of failure. Hinata’s situation presented no such easy solutions.

I wasn’t going to find an answer tonight. But it gave me something productive to think about. So I paced, and thought about how to make Hinata’s life a brighter place.
I glared. At Mom. At Dad. At Aunt Yuki. At passerby. At the thousand streamers fluttering in the breeze. At the throngs of excited people clogging the streets. At everything really. I had not gotten nearly enough sleep last night and my body was making sure I knew it. And if I had to know it, everyone else might as well know it too.

Hinata and Neji didn’t give any sign they noticed my mood, too busy leaping about and pointing at anything and everything. This was the first time we’d left the Hyuuga compound since the three of us were infants (actually I didn’t know if Hinata had ever left the compound) and they were ecstatic about the whole experience.

This morning Konoha had formally announced that it was entering peace talks with Kumo. Both sides had signed a temporary truce until a more permanent arrangement could be reached. A festival was in full swing within hours of the announcement. No one had planned it, but that didn’t seem to slow anyone down. The war was ending, loved ones would be coming home, and that demanded a celebration. A celebration which our parents apparently thought would be a good opportunity to introduce us little ones to Konoha proper.

A crowd of people whooped and hollered as a ninja did some kind of fancy acrobatics. I winced at the noise.

Hinata ran over to me and grabbed my left sleeve. “Yuki Yuki! Come on! Lookit the ninja!” She pointed behind her at the acrobatic ninja, who was currently balancing on one finger on top of a long metal staff. I did my best to smile and tried to think of a way to dissuade her.

Aunt Yuki came to my rescue. She leaned down and smiled sunnily at Hinata, “Sweetheart, Yuki and I were going to grab some dango for everyone. How about you and Neji go on ahead and we’ll catch up with you soon?”

Hinata puzzled over this for a moment. “Dango?”

Aunt Yuki grinned. “Yes sweetheart, we’ll get you some dango.”

“Yay!” Hinata shook my sleeve one last time and said “Thank you Yuki,” having apparently decided I was the source of her forthcoming treat. Then she ran off to join Neji in staring at the acrobatic ninja. Who was … apparently breakdancing now and wow could ninja breakdance. I almost allowed myself to be impressed before remembering that I was tired and grumpy and that even amazingly talented breakdancing ninjas deserved to be scowled at.

Aunt Yuki reached down and lifted my up onto her hip. “Oof. You’re getting heavy little Yuki.” Then she turned to my parents and sent them a one-handed flurry of signs. Fatigued combatant. Retreating for treatment. Acknowledge.

Mom signed back her acknowledgement and then, with a small smile, signed at me. Mission: acquire food, recipient: children. Acknowledge.

I gave a weary smile back. Acknowledge. My fingers didn’t have the dexterity for the more complicated signs, but the confirmation sign was simple enough.

Mom beamed at me and I could feel how proud she was of her little boy who already knew Konoha Sign by his fourth birthday. Then she turned around and took Dad’s arm, following Neji and Hinata on their excited exploration of the festival.

Aunt Yuki waved goodbye to Mom and Dad and set off with me on her hip.

I slumped against her side. Gods I was tired.
Aunt Yuki scratched my scalp and I hummed happily. That felt nice. Being carried was nice.

A sudden jolt woke me up. I blink rapidly. I hadn’t realized I’d fallen asleep. I took stock of my surroundings. Aunt Yuki had taken me to a grassy training field a ways away from the festivities. She was sitting propped up against a tree, cradling me against her chest.

Aunt Yuki looked down at me as I awoke. “I’m sorry Yuki. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Mmmrrrr”. I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. “How long was I asleep?”

“Only a few minutes. We only just got here, I was just sitting down.”


Aunt Yuki squeezed me gently. “Because you seemed very tired and you weren’t having any fun, so I thought it would be best if you got some rest.”

“What about the dango?”

Aunt Yuki huffed a laugh. “We’ll get them some dango when we go back. But I don’t think they’re expecting us back for some time.”

“Mmmmm.” I squirmed around, snuggling up closer to Aunt Yuki.

I lay there motionless for a moment before asking, “How long can I sleep?”

“An hour. Maybe a little longer. But it would be a shame if you missed the whole festival, wouldn’t it little Yuki?”

I considered that. I was so damn tired. I wanted to sleep more than anything right now. And I certainly didn’t want to participate in the celebration of this awful ruse Kiri was going to use to kidnap my baby cousin. But … Hinata and Neji had been awfully cheerful, hadn’t they? For them, today was a happy day. And I should try to be a part of that, shouldn’t I?

“Alright,” I said, “in an hour”.

“In an hour,” my aunt agreed.

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My aunt gently shook me awake. “Yuki, it’s time to get up. Wake up Yuki.”

“Mmmmmrmmrrrblemmmmrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
out of them. Then I stretched out, pushing my arms and legs out as far as I could while nestled in Aunt Yuki’s grasp.

I smacked my lips and said “Alright. Alright I’m up. I’m up.” Then I closed my eyes and promptly began to nod off again.

“Nope. Come on Yuki, we need to get up. The hour is up.” Aunt Yuki gripped me under my arms and set me down upright on the grass.

I teetered for a moment before deciding that part of this whole ‘being awake’ thing was properly balancing myself.

“Yuki, getting up means open eyes too.”

“I can see just fine with my eyes closed.”

“Eyes open Yuki.”

“Do I have to?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because doing that will eat into your chakra reserves.” Aunt Yuki stood up, using the tree behind her for support, and then looked down at me. “Come on Yuki.”

_Eat into my chakra reserves my ass._ I kept my vision at least this focused all the time when Mom and Dad were giving me reading and writing lessons. And I never ran out of chakra. … At least I didn’t think I ran out of chakra. My chakra network _was_ consistently dimmer than my little light’s. And he did always seem to have more energy for running around than I did. And it did get really hard to keep my vision sharp enough to read ordinary ink towards the end of the day.

…

_Dammit._

Aunt Yuki was totally right, using my vision like this was depleting my chakra reserves, wasn’t it?

Well, screw it. I liked actually being able to see things and having good peripheral vision. I opened my eyes but kept my vision sharp enough that I could still make out the ninja wire Aunt Yuki had coiled around her arms under her sleeves. I tried not to twitch at the difference between how my left and right eyelids responded to me.

Aunt Yuki gave me a very unimpressed look. “I can see the chakra in your eyes, Yuki.”

I crossed my arms and stared back at her.

She raised an eyebrow.

“This way I can see more of the festival,” I said defensively.

She sighed. “Alright. You’re going to make yourself more tired doing that though.”

I shrugged.

Aunt Yuki grimaced, but let it drop. She took my hand in hers (my right, no one grabbed my left
hand anymore) and started leading me back to the festival. I rubbed my left palm against my robe and tried not to focus on how people only ever held my right hand now.

I kept my eyes open and walked with Aunt Yuki. I was still tired and left to my own devices I would definitely be napping right now. But I wasn’t miserably tired anymore. The nap really had done the trick.

“Hey Auntie.”

“Yes?”

“Thank you for the nap. It was really nice.”

Aunt Yuki let go of my hand for a moment to rub my head. “No problem little one. The rest was nice for me too,” she said, pressing her other hand to her ribs.

“Mmm,” I hummed, and butted my head up against her leg.

“By the way Yuki, why were you so tired? Did you not get much sleep last night?”

I hesitated before responding. “No.”

“Why not? Did Neji’s story scare you too?”

Hah. No. Definitely not. I shook my head, no.

“Why then?”

We were close to the edge of the training ground, and I could hear the sounds of the festival wafting from the houses up ahead. I could just not answer her, pretend to be distracted and let the topic drop. Aunt Yuki knew me as an exceptional child, but no four year old ought to be sophisticated enough to have my fears and concerns. The smart thing to do would be to dodge the question.

But-

I don’t want to be alone with my thoughts anymore.

“I was scared about Kumo. Sometimes I’ll tell Neji scary stories about monsters that Kumo has made to creep around in the night and take naughty kids. But I’ve heard Mom and Dad talk. Read between the lines in the kid's books the Academy makes about foreign ninja. Kumo really does take children. But not naughty children or foolish children like I tell Neji. They take children like us. Children with bloodlines. And they have a reputation for ignoring the terms of treaties. So having Kumo ninja in town is scary. Last night I couldn’t stop thinking about what would happen if they broke into our room and took us. It was scary. It was really scary.”

There. That wasn’t quite the truth, but it was as close as I could get without spouting off about foreknowledge and things I shouldn’t possibly be able to know.

Aunt Yuki stopped walking and looked at me, stunned. She blinked. I winced. I could just see the wheels in her head turning, thinking ‘he’s not really a four year old, no four year old could possibly-’.

And then she was hugging me. Kneeling down in the grass in front of me, arms wrapped all the way around me and clutching me to her chest as tightly as she could.
I blinked. (My left eye never blinked quite right, always slow on the draw–)

“Oh Yuki,” my aunt breathed, “I’m so so sorry.”

Huh?

My aunt continued, her voice soft and full of emotion, “Yuki we will always keep you safe. Your mom and your dad and I will always, always, always keep you safe. So long as we are around nothing bad will ever happen to you. And I’m so sorry you were scared and we didn’t notice. If you are ever afraid of anything you can tell us and we will make it right, but that doesn’t make it okay that we didn’t notice in the first place.”

I blinked again. That was a lot to process. But … Aunt Yuki’s hug was comforting. And I couldn’t possibly mistake the steel in her voice, that same steel I’d heard in my past life from mothers as they said “you will harm my child over my dead body”.

So I smiled, just a little, and I hugged her back. I hugged her as hard as I could. And then I was balling her robes up in my fists and then tears started streaming down my face and then I start crying.

“I, *hic*, I, *hic*, I don’t.” I snifled. “I don’t want.” I couldn’t think of what I was trying to say. So I just cried. I clutched my aunt and cried. She couldn’t keep me safe, couldn’t keep us safe, if I did nothing Dad would die I knew that, but I wanted so badly for her words to be true. I wanted to believe her and on some level I did. Wrapped in her arms, I felt like I didn’t have to be the person pulling strings and keeping us all safe, I felt like I could just let her take care of everything and it would all be fine. Even though I knew that wasn’t true.

So I cried. I rubbed my face in her robe and smeared a wet spot of snot and tears into her robe and I cried.

Through it all Aunt Yuki held me, rubbing my back and whispering soothing nothings to me.

It was a while before I calmed down.

When I had finally stopped crying and let go of Aunt Yuki so I could rub my eyes and wipe away my snot with a handkerchief Aunt Yuki produced, she asked me a question. “Yuki, is there anything I can do to make you feel safe? Is there anything your mom and dad can do to make you feel safe?”

Without thinking I whispered, “I don’t want to sleep alone tonight. I mean, not just with Neji and Hinata. I don’t want us to sleep alone.”

Aunt Yuki nodded. “Well we can fix that. We’ll drag some blankets into your parents’ room and make a nest for you three. And–” she trailed off for a moment, brow furrowed in thought. Then she nodded fiercely, “And I’ll stay over too. We can set up a watch, make sure one of your parents or I is awake at all times. Does that sound good?”

I was stunned. “Uhhhhh. What about my parents, will they be okay with this …” I trailed off.

Aunt Yuki nodded fiercely again. “Yes, they absolutely will. Yuki, this is something very important, so I want you to listen up and listen well.”

I nodded, still stunned.

“In Konoha, ninjas look out for one another. We make sure that each other are safe. We make sure
that other ninja feel safe. And if you feel unsafe because of the Kumo ninja in Konoha right now then we will do whatever is necessary to make you feel safe. To make you be safe. I know that your parents will do this. There is not a question in my mind. Because that is what it means to be a Konoha ninja.”

Oh.

“Do you understand that Yuki?”

I nodded.

“Good.” Then she muttered under her breath, low enough that I don’t think I was supposed to hear, “And if Hiashi isn’t happy about that then that’s too bad for him.” She returned her attention to me, smiling warmly. “Now, let’s go get some dango and find the others.”

I nodded again and reached out to take her hand. (With my right hand, no one ever reached for my burned hand). Then I stopped.

“Auntie?”

“What is it little one?”

“Can you- can you hold my left hand?” I pulled my right back and offered her my left.

Aunt Yuki looked puzzled, but to her credit didn’t hesitate an instant before replying, “Of course.” She smiled and took my left hand in her right.

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By the time Aunt Yuki and I got back Hinata and Neji had already gotten hungry and eaten every scrap of festival food they could wheedle and beg out of Mom and Dad. This did not stop them from eating the dango we returned with anyway.

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“My tummy hurts,” Hinata whined.

Neji let out a bloated groan of agreement.

Mom paused in the act of hauling an extra quilt into her room. “Uuhh. And what have we learned from this?”

Hinata whimpered, “Dango is evil.”

Neji nodded, an exaggerated pout on his face. “Evil,” he whispered.

Mom gave them an exasperated look. “No, the lesson is that you don’t keep eating after you’re full. If you’d told us you were full we could have saved the dango for later. You don’t have to eat
something just because you want it.”


Hinata shook her head. “Nuh-uh.”

Dad passed us, carrying pillows. He gave Neji and Hinata a sympathetic smile. “Keiko, love, 
they’re children. They’re supposed to eat themselves sick at festivals.”

Mom gave him a baleful look as he passed. “That’s not helping Hizashi.”

Dad gave her a wry smile back. “Nor is standing in the hallway with that quilt.”

Mom laughed, a quick sharp sound. “Alright. You take it then.” She threw the quilt at him, 
covering his head. “I’ll get the kids ready for bed.”

Dad laughed too, muffled by the quilt. “I’ll come help as soon as I’m done setting this up.” He 
pulled the quilt off his head and started to walk into his room before pausing in the doorway. “Hey, 
Keiko?”

“Mm?”

A warm dopey expression crept onto Dad’s face. “I just wanted to say that I love you. Tonight was 
wonderful, and I can’t imagine anything I’d have rather done than spend it with you and the kids.”

Mom smiled against her will, chakra flooding through her and lighting up her extremities. “Oh you- you-” she flapped her hands at him. “Shoo, you charmer.”

Dad laughed, a deep warm belly laugh that crinkled his eyes.

“Hey,” Mom stopped him just as he was about to enter their room, “I love you too Hizashi.” She 
grabbed his robe and pulled him in for a quick peck on the lips.

Dad grinned delightedly before continuing on his way.

Okay, Mom and Dad are officially the most adorable couple I’ve ever seen.

Mom turned back to us. “Alright, come on, let’s everybody get to the bathroom. You all need to 
brush your teeth, especially after all those festival treats.”

The mention of festival treats brought another chorus of groans from Hinata and Neji.

I patted them each gently on the back.

pat pat

They both let out more groans.

We were halfway through brushing our teeth when Aunt Yuki came in. She poked her head into the 
bathroom and addressed Mom, “Hey Keiko, I got my gear. Who’s taking first watch?”

“I’ll take first watch, ordinary mortal eyes don’t do so well in the dark you know?”

Aunt Yuki tilted her head. “You know it’s weird that you can barely see half of the time, right?”

Mom gave her that same baleful look she’d given Dad earlier and did not dignify that remark with
a reply. “And then you get second watch, because you don’t have work in the morning, and Hizashi will take the last watch. He needs to get up early in the morning anyway, all the guards are pulling long shifts.”

Neji piped up. “You can’t see sometimes? Why not?”

“Well, you know how you see chakra?” Mom replied.

Neji nodded.

“Well, Hyuuga see chakra. But other people, like me, see this thing called light. And unlike chakra it doesn’t go through stuff, which is why I can only see the outside of things, and also light is produced by this thing in the sky called the sun which is what makes the day warm and during the night when it goes away there’s less light and it’s harder to see.”

Neji looked completely and utterly lost. Hinata was staring slack-jawed at Mom, toothbrush dangling out of her mouth.

This was too good of an opportunity to pass up. I piped up, “Makes sense to me Mom.”

Mom nodded at me before looking at Neji and Hinata. “Does that make sense to you?”

Two heads shook side to side.

Mom sighed. “Hey Yuki,” she looked between me and my aunt, “ah, big Yuki. Help me explain…” she trailed off.

Aunt Yuki chuckled. “You’re on your own with this one.” She waved her hands in front of her brilliant star-like eyes. “I’ve never seen this ‘sun’ thing either. Good luck explaining it to them though!”

With that she left Mom alone to try to explain light and surface-level vision to two very bewildered children.

I tuned out Mom’s fumbling explanation (as funny as it might be) and stared at Aunt Yuki as she headed off to talk to Dad. She had a whole lot more gear than the simple ninja wire she’d had looped around her arms at the festival. She was wearing a wire mesh shirt and leggings under her robe, and tactical webbing which had several dozen kunai attached to it, a couple canisters full of shining seals, and a several canisters of pills which also shone with chakra.

They’re really taking me seriously, I wondered.

Well, they weren’t exactly taking me seriously seriously. I didn’t think this represented them actually gearing up to defend against a potential assault by kidnapping Kumo ninja. That would have probably involved a full-scale mobilization of the Hyuuga clan and a metric fuck-ton of warding seals. But my family was responding to my fears by being protective and trying to make me feel safe. And that … that felt good.

Mom interrupted my musings to prod me back into brushing my teeth. “Brush your teeth Yuki, you don’t want cavities now, do you?”

Mechanically I resumed brushing my teeth, still lost in thought.

A few moments later I paused again. “Hey Mom?”
“Yes Yuki?”

I sidled over to her and hugged her waist. “I love you Mom.”

“Aww. I love you too Yuki.” Mom hugged me back.

Neji and Hinata took that as their cue to join in, piling in around Mom and hugging her from all sides. Hinata piped, “I wuv you too Auntie Keiko.” Neji nodded in agreement.

Mom beamed and did her best to hug all of us at once.

Later, after we had finished brushing our teeth, Mom decided that bathing three tired children would be more trouble than it was worth and that baths could wait for the morning. She ushered us into her and Dad’s room, where Dad and Aunt Yuki were finishing setting everything up.

To the right of our parents’ bed was a nest of quilts and blankets and pillows, obviously intended for us little ones. To the left Dad and Aunt Yuki were stepping away from a hammock, the ends of which were bound to the ceiling with … seals? Thin lines of glowing spidery script spread out from each point where the hammock’s lines touched the ceiling, which I assumed were binding seals. Any other time I probably would have been fascinated by them but right now I was just too tired. I’d check it out in the morning.

I flopped down on the blanket nest along with Neji and Hinata. We snuggled up together and sleepily accepted good-night kisses from all our parents.

Aunt Yuki ran a hand over my hair after kissing me goodnight. “Is this good Yuki?”

I nodded sleepily. “Mmhmmmmmm”.

Aunt Yuki smiled and then gave Hinata an extra peck on the forehead. Hinata squirmed happily and turned over, clutching Neji closer. Aunt Yuki got up and spoke softly to Mom and Dad. I could have listened in by focusing my eyesight until I could see their lips and tongues but that seemed like too much effort. So instead I let myself drift off with the faint murmur of their conversation as background noise.

The last things I was aware of before falling asleep entirely were Aunt Yuki hoisting herself up into the hammock and Dad laying down in bed with Mom sitting beside him.

---

I woke to the sound of bombs falling. The thundering crash roared through me and instantly I was awake, every nerve alight.

Aunt Yuki leapt out of her hammock with chakra blazing through her hands and eyes. Mom leapt out of bed while pulsing chakra through a seal in her right hand and a moment later was armed with a short one-sided sword. Dad was already up and awake, hands held together in the snake seal and eyes glowing brighter than I had ever seen before, more like suns than stars.

Neji thrashed awake, still hazy and barely aware. Hinata jerked upright, breathing too fast.

Mom shouted at Dad while she performed a one-handed jutsu with her free hand, “What’s
happening?!” She finished her jutsu and ran her left hand along her sword, which burst into flames.

I flinched back and cried out, but was drowned out by Dad responding, “There’s been an explosion at Hiashi’s home. It looked like it got hit by lightning. The wall of Hinata’s room was destroyed.”

Hinata did not take that news well, breathing even faster. I wanted to comfort her, to hold her, but I couldn’t look away from Mom’s sword. The flames around it glowed with inner light and even though Mom was at least three meters away I felt like if I just reached out I’d be able to touch that light.

More thunderous crashes sounded in the distance. Neji asked, voice shaking, “What’s going on?”

No one answered his question. Aunt Yuki flashed through her own series of hand seals and her eyes exploded into the same brilliance as Dad’s. A moment later she pointed, exclaiming, “There!”

Dad shifted his head minutely and then said, “I see him.”

“What is it?” Mom asked.

Aunt Yuki spoke, “Kumo’s head of operations. He’s moving towards the southwest end of the compound, being harassed by Hyuuga ninja. He’s using some kind of elemental transformation technique, turning into lightning for bursts of movement.” As Aunt Yuki spoke more thunder rolled over us.

Mom froze and the flames surrounding her sword almost seemed to still with her. Then she said, “He came for Hinata. That must be why he’s here.”

Dad and Aunt Yuki both jerked their heads towards Mom. Dad spoke quietly, “Oh fuck.”

Aunt Yuki seethed, voice roiling with hatred, “If that bastard tries to lay a hand on Hinata I’ll kill him.” She popped two of the pill canisters she had and downed a pill from each. The chakra at her core flared and the faint, almost invisible chakra flowing along her nerves dimmed.

As Aunt Yuki took her pills, Dad raised his hands above his head and made wide sweeping signals with his arms. A moment later he nodded. He said to Mom, “Confirmation from Hiashi. He’s coming here with a full guard compliment, in case the Kumo ninja turns around and comes towards us.”

Mom nodded back. “Good.” Then she turned towards us, extinguishing her sword as she did. I shuddered and let out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. She flicked her right hand and her sword vanished back into its seal. “Alright, children, get in the closet.” She reached out and gently pulled the three of us together.

Neji asked again, “Mom, what’s going on?”

“No time to explain. Just get in the closet. We’ll keep you safe.”

Hinata whimpered, “Mom?”

Aunt Yuki turned to her and said, “Hinata, do what Keiko says.”

Mom ushered us into the closet. “Alright. Neji, Yuki, Hinata. The three of you need to stay in this closet. No matter what happens, stay in the closet. Okay?”

The three of us nodded. More thunder echoed.
“Good.” Mom leaned forward and gave us all a swift hug. “This will be over soon.” Then she stepped out of the closet and shut the door.

Hinata looked like she was about to start crying. Neji looked lost. I … I felt floaty. Like none of this was really happening.

I tried to focus my sight to see clearly through the closet door and failed. The concentration required just wouldn’t come.

Hinata started crying in earnest, quiet hiccuping sobs that wracked her frame. Neji began crying too, silently and with intermittent sniffles. He reached out and grabbed Hinata’s hand in his left and mine in his right.

I tried to focus my sight again and managed a small rise in my eyes’ chakra, just enough to see out of the closet.

Mom was planted in front of closet, feet wide and her sword held out in front of her. The sword was once again aflame, a fact I noted as if from very far away. Dad and Aunt Yuki stood in the far corners of the room, flanking the bedroom windows. Both of them stood with one hand behind them and raised above their head, the other proffered in front of them as if asking for a dance, their hands open and flooded with chakra. I vaguely recognized the pose as one of the Gentle Fist’s ready stances.

Time passed. Thunder pealed and roared, sometimes far away and sometimes closer.

The door to the bedroom burst open and I flinched. I hadn’t thought to look through the walls into the hallway. But no Kumo ninja came through the door. Instead Hiashi and three other Hyuuga crowded into the room. Hiashi hardly spared a look in our direction before he and his guards took up positions. He took Aunt Yuki’s place, facing off opposite his brother. Aunt Yuki joined Mom standing ready in front of our closet. The guards Hiashi brought with him took up positions by the door and at the foot of the bed.

A moment later I heard a series of thumps from the roof. A bit more chakra in my eyes and I could see through the roof to three more Hyuuga standing atop the house. Each of those three was wrapped in a jutsu I could not recognize and they all stood very still.

Then the thunder stopped.

Hiashi, his guards, Dad, and Aunt Yuki all immediately breathed out and relaxed. None of them left their positions but they did not hold themselves so tensely.

Mom whispered to Aunt Yuki, “What happened?”

Aunt Yuki replied, “One of the pursuing Hyuuga tagged some of the tenketsu in his legs between transformations. After the next transformation he tripped and his pursuers got him. All his tenketsu are sealed, he’s paralyzed and unable to use chakra. The perimeter guards say there are no other Kumo ninja within a dozen kilometers.”

Mom let out a deep breath. “Thank the gods.”

Hiashi interjected, “We’ll wait for confirmation from the Hokage that his retinue has been detained and the forest surrounding the village has been swept before announcing the all-clear. My presence is no longer needed here, however.” Hiashi relaxed his stance. “I must go.” He nodded to each person in the room and spared a look for our closet.
Aunt Yuki exclaimed, “What?! Go where? Our daughter is here!”

Hiashi gave her a disdainful look. “Kumo has just attacked Konoha’s most prestigious family and attempted to steal Konoha’s most valuable bloodline in the midst of peace talks. Every member of the Hokage’s council will be needed to discuss our next move. As my father is currently on a diplomatic mission to the daimyo, that responsibility falls to me.” And with that he swept out of the room.

Aunt Keiko looked like she’d been slapped. Mom was furious, glaring daggers at Hiashi’s retreating back. Dad looked … disappointed? His face was hard to read. The guards in the room with us gave Mom flinty eyed stares.

Vaguely I noticed that the room seemed too quiet. It wasn’t just the lack of thunder…

Hinata had stopped sobbing. She still cried, tears still streamed down her face in earnest. But she sat silently, staring in the direction her father had left.

I let go of Neji’s hand and scooted past him towards Hinata. I reached around her and enveloped her, holding her as tightly as I could. A moment later Neji, still sniffing, joined us.

I wanted to tell Hinata that her dad was an asshole. That he could go fuck himself. That she didn’t need him because she had us. But right outside the closet were six Hyuuga who all reported to Hiashi. If word got back to him that his branch family nephew has been bad-mouthing him to his daughter, without a doubt we would never see Hinata again. This close to so many Hyuuga I barely even felt safe thinking about Hiashi like that. So I said nothing. I couldn’t protect Hinata from her father’s callousness.

But I had protected her from this.

Dad was alive, Konoha had no reason to kill him to placate Kumo, and Hinata hadn’t been kidnapped.

We won.

Chapter End Notes

Canon Terms:

While I try to make this fic as accessible as possible to people who are unfamiliar or only passingly familiar with Naruto, it’s just not always possible to avoid leaning on the original manga sometimes. (This is a fanfiction, after all). To help with that here are a list of characters and terms introduced in this chapter that one can look up on the Naruto Wiki. Hopefully this will help clear up any confusion.

-Wire Strings (i.e. Ninja Wire)
-Hand Seal
-Lightning Transformation (not canon, for analogs see: Hydrification Technique, Earth Release: Mud Body Technique, Iburi Clan’s Kekkai Genkai, and Sand Body)
-Gentle Fist
-Tenketsu
-Konoha Council (Canon information on this is contradictory, sometimes describing it as a four-person council and sometimes more. I’m going with a larger council.)
-Daimyo

Side Note:

I’m gonna break a cardinal rule of writing and ‘spoil’ my own story. It’s more of an anti-spoiler than a spoiler anyway. Neji, Hinata, and Yuki do not ever end up in any kind of romantic or sexual relationship together. Their intimacy and closeness is just the standard skinship which shows up between close siblings in societies which don’t stigmatize physical contact. I wanted to make this explicit because incest ships are pretty common in fanfiction and just as common is a revulsion to such. I don’t want to either disappoint or scare away anyone, so I feel like I ought to make this clear now rather than later.

TL;DR: No incest in this story.

A few more things:

First things first, I’m scaling updates back to one every three weeks. I’ve got ~75 hours a week of coursework and research right now and I’m kind of struggling with the current update schedule. This shouldn’t be a permanent thing, I expect to have a much reduced workload next semester, but for now I just need to slow down a bit.

Second, would anyone be interested in being a beta for this story?

And lastly, thank you so much everyone who’s left comments and kudos. I really can’t express how much your feedback means to me. Especially you commenters. It’s an absolute delight to see you commenting on this story. Y’all deserve hugs and kisses and good food.
Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for this and the next two chapters (9-11): Dehumanization, enslavement, cruelty to children.

Chapter 9: Sealing, Part 1

Aunt Yuki was not a terribly good cook.

“That’s not how you scramble eggs,” I said.

Aunt Yuki looked down at me and raised an exasperated eyebrow.

“You can’t just sweep the fork back and forth, you have to move it in an oval so that it catches at the yolk and pulls it along with the fork. That’s how you make it a smooth mixture, rather than,” I waved at the bowl of splotchy barely-mixed eggs she was holding, “that.”

“Yuki,” she said, “right now we just need breakfast. It’s okay if it’s not perfect.”

I opened my mouth for a rebuttal but was beaten to the punch by Hinata.

Hinata, still sleepy enough that she hadn’t bothered opening her eyes yet, groused at me, “I like Mom’s eggs Yuki.”

Aunt Yuki poured the eggs into a pan and turned to me, “Yuki, I know you like your parents’ food better, but they can’t be here right now and I’m doing the best I can.”

Neji jumped in, “When are Mom and Dad going to be back?” Neji always asked that question whenever our parents came up in conversation.

“As soon as they can Neji, as soon as they can,” Aunt Yuki said, repeating the same she’d given the last dozen times he’d asked.

Strictly speaking our parents weren’t ‘gone’. They just weren’t around. They left for work before we woke up and came home well after we’d fallen asleep. Each night when they came home they would gently wake us up so they could say hello and then kiss us back to sleep, but aside from those brief moments each night we never saw them.

Dad was on gate duty, as always, but now he pulled two shifts a day. He wasn’t alone in that, every active-duty Hyuuga who could be spared now pulled two watch shifts a day. They manned the walls, patrolled the streets, swept the surrounding forests, and stayed at the side of every war-critical figure in Konoha. Their all-seeing eyes scanned everything and everyone, constantly on alert for Kumo’s next attack.

Mom pulled overtime at her job too. Her office was frantically churning through intelligence
reports, trying to piece together some idea of what Kumo could do next. No one had any idea how Kumo would respond to their raid failing and their head ninja being taken captive, so it fell to Mom’s office to plan for everything they could do. Which was apparently a great many things. Some nights Mom didn’t even make it home to wake us up and kiss us alongside Dad and she slept at the office instead.

Which left Aunt Yuki to take care of us. And make poorly scrambled eggs for breakfast.

Aunt Yuki slopped eggs onto plates and set the table. “Alright, eat up little ones.”

The three of us hoisted ourselves up into our seats and dug in. The eggs were … not bad. Kinda bland, and Aunt Yuki hadn’t made anything else to eat alongside them, but it could have been worse.

“Hey, Auntie,” I said.

“Mm?” Aunt Yuki looked over at me with a defeated look on her face.

I winced at that. I wasn’t that bad, was I? “So um, I think I remember most of Dad’s breakfast recipes. I always watch him when he cooks and most of his stuff is pretty simple. If you want, I could write them down. During writing practice. Um, if you want.”

Aunt Yuki gave me a weary nod. “Sure Yuki, if you want to.”

“And, um,” I played with my hands, “the eggs are cooked pretty well. Thank you Auntie.”

This actually drew a smile from her. “You’re welcome little Yuki.” She reached across the table and rubbed my head.

Hinata nodded firmly. “Eggs are important Yuki.” She waved her spoon as she spoke, sending a fleck of egg flying.

I raised an eyebrow at her. “I think you mean ‘eggs are good’.”

She shook her head. “Nope,” she said, popping the p, “eggs are important.”

Neji spoke up, “Why are eggs important?” He put down his spoon while he waited for her answer.

“Because…” Hinata faltered, “because…” she trailed off.

We waited in silence for Hinata to finish her sentence. She didn’t continue.

Aunt Yuki asked, “Because what, Hinata?”

Hinata found her train of thought, “Because they are tasty.” And with that she scooped up a large spoonful of eggs and planted it in her mouth.

Neji nodded, as if this made perfect sense to him. He too returned to consuming his eggs.

I looked up at my aunt, who seemed as bemused as I was. I raised a spoonful of eggs in the air. “Eggs are important,” I said, and then ate them.

Aunt Yuki smiled. She replied in kind, “Eggs are important.”

We were halfway done with breakfast when there was a knock from the front of the house. Aunt Yuki’s eyes flared for a moment before she said, “It’s Hiashi’s assistant. Stay here and finish your
eggs while I see what this is about.”

We all nodded and she left the table.

Hinata was enthusiastically shoveling eggs into her mouth when Aunt Yuki’s raised voice came from the other room. “What?!”

I immediately focused my vision so I could see through the wall between us and get a good look at their mouths.

The assistant was shrugging sheepishly. “Look,” she said, “this is Hiashi’s order. While his father is gone he’s in charge of what gets brought before the council of elders, and this is what he brought before them and they said yes.”

Aunt Yuki ran her hands through her hair. “The council of elders signed off on this? The old guard who bring up tradition and proper practice at every single clan meeting? You’re asking me to believe they voted to cast aside tradition and ritual and do this now?”

“Well, yes.” The assistant shrugged, “I mean, it was a close vote, but a yes is a yes.”

Aunt Yuki stared at her, mouth parted. “What? It wasn’t a unanimous vote? You’re saying that Hiashi used clan head authority on this, which his father will have to review when he gets back, to what? To push the ceremony ahead? Why?”

The assistant’s voice changed to an uninflected monotone as she recited a clearly scripted line. “It is Hyuuga Hiashi’s opinion that unsealed children represent an unconscionable security risk given Kumo’s recent attempt to kidnap a Hyuuga child.”

My jaw dropped. No. Oh gods no. They were talking about sealing us. About putting that evil fucking branch family seal on Neji and I.

Distantly I heard Hinata saying, “Yuki? Are you okay? Yuki?”

Aunt Yuki heaved her shoulders and said, exasperated. “Alright, and what’s the real reason?”

The assistant repeated, “Hiashi decided that unsealed branch family children constitute a-”

Aunt Yuki interrupted the assistant in a sudden burst of emotion. “That’s bullshit and you know it!”

The assistant flinched and spoke as though expecting a blow, “Hiashi has also said that he will begin training Hinata to fight as soon as he has the available time, to mitigate the risk main family children represent, and that he hopes his example will encourage other parents to do likewise.”

“He what.”
“Hiashi says that-”

“I heard you,” Aunt Yuki snapped. She took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. Look, Ise, we’ve known each other since we were kids. I’ll talk with him about that particular fool idea later. Just … I know Hiashi. There is no way he’s risking this much of his father’s political capital on some idiotic notion which doesn’t actually make us any safer and which a good chunk of the elders don’t even think is a good idea. And-” she took another deep breath, “Look, Ise, can you just tell me why he’s actually doing this? At least do that for me?”

The assistant, Ise, looked around nervously. She performed a series of handseals and her eyes blazed. She paused for several seconds before letting her eyes dim and speaking to Aunt Yuki.

“Yuki, look, if I tell you this it can’t ever get back to him, okay?”

Aunt Yuki nodded. “Of course Ise. Thank you.”

Ise nodded back. “Okay,” she started, wetting her lips, “so just before he made this decision he gets this list of class rearrangements for the young Hyuuga, for out-of-the-Academy classes. You know, all the teachers have been called to active duty in the village, so elders are being called out of retirement and teenagers are taking over some of the classes, all that stuff, right?”

Aunt Yuki nodded warily. “Uhuh.”

“All the parents were asked to submit what classes their kids should be in, it was the usual silly bureaucratic stuff that I handle, I did the work on it and Hiashi was just supposed to sign it. But then he looks at it and says ‘there’s a mistake here, this can’t be right’. He says ‘Hizashi has his kid Yuki signed up for third level reading classes and Neji signed up for preliminary classes.’”

Aunt Yuki closed her eyes and moved her lips minutely, the motion to faint for me to see what she was saying.

Ise continued, “He says ‘The preliminary classes make sense, but third level classes? Hizashi does know those are taught with ordinary ink, right? His kid can’t possibly take those classes.’ And then one of his guards, Samba, says ‘no, that’s right’. He says he’s seen Yuki reading with Keiko in the gardens sometimes, that they use books with normal ink. Then the other guard, Shuzo, speaks up. Says he has drinks with his sister-in-law Doctor Suzuko sometimes. Says she said that when she was describing Yuki’s nerve damage to his family, that both he and Neji asked questions as if they could see the nerves. Then Shuzo says that if the kids can do that then the only question is why Neji’s not in the third level classes too, because they’re obviously both geniuses.”

Aunt Yuki shook her head slightly but said nothing.

“Yeah. So both the guards say they’re pretty sure that’s right, that there’s no mistake. And Hiashi gets real quiet. Says, real simple, ‘okay’, and signs off on it. But Yuki, I know him as well as you do. And you know how he gets when he’s displeased with something, right? Well he was not happy about this. Then an hour later an elder comes in and asks him what his safety measures for the children are and …”

“And he suggests sealing the younger branch children now, even before they enter the Academy.”

Ise nods. “Yeah.” There’s a pause before Ise continues, saying, “Is there a reason why this would piss him off so much…”?

Aunt Yuki gave a strained smile. “Hinata’s eyes have been developing a touch on the slow side. She still can’t see clothes well so I still have to help her get dressed and undressed, she has a bit of
difficulty differentiating strangers, things like that. The doctors say this kind of thing isn’t
uncommon at all, that her eyes will be just fine when she’s older, her development is just delayed a
bit that’s all.”

Aunt Yuki rushed to add, “But this really isn’t a problem. I take care of Hinata most of the time
anyway, so I’m the one dealing with stuff like helping her dress and I don’t mind that at all. It’s not
like I haven’t been doing it for the last three years anyway, what’s one or two more? So Hinata’s
eyesight has never been a hassle for Hiashi.”

She continued on. “Just, well, if her eyesight isn’t good enough to read by the time she’s six, we’ll
have to hold her back from entering the Academy for a year or two.” Aunt Yuki held up her hands
defensively. “Which really isn’t that uncommon. Kana’s kids both started the Academy just this
year and they’re seven.” Aunt Yuki was rambling by that point.

Ise spoke, “But Hinata’s eyesight isn’t as good as her cousins’. Her branch family cousins who
apparently have the highest definition Byakugan any child has had in … how long?”

Aunt Yuki shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know. We could ask the elders, but Keiko doesn’t want
her Yuki to start the Academy early and they’d push him in early in a heartbeat if they knew how
gifted he was. They’d push Neji in with Yuki as well, on the strength of his eyes alone, whether
Neji was prepared intellectually or not.”

Ise pinched the bridge of her nose. “Damn. So Hiashi did all this because he’s pissed that his
daughter’s Byakugan is weaker than his brother’s kids’. Because of course that’s an insult to him,
somehow, and he needs to respond to that insult.”

Aunt Yuki gave Ise a tight smile and said, “Hinata’s Byakugan isn’t weak, her eyes are as bright as
any mother could hope for. She’s just developing a little slower, that’s all.”

Ise waved that off. “Yeah, yeah. But Yuki, if this is personal for Hiashi it’s happening. He’s not
going to budge on this. Especially if this is the reason, there’s no argument you could make to
change his mind. You’re going to have to do as he says on this one. And Hiashi’s orders are that
you need to take Hizashi’s kids down to see Elder Naganori, and that it needs to happen today.”

“Can’t it wait until tomorrow? At least give Hizashi some time to talk with his kids about this, tell
them what’s going on?”

Ise shook her head. “No, sorry, Hiashi was very explicit. This happens today.”

“Ise, I’m not-”

“Ise I don’t even know how branch families talk to their kids about this. I
don’t know what to say.”

Ise shrugged apologetically, “I’m sorry. But I have to go.” She gave Aunt Yuki a little wave and
then leapt away in a blur of chakra enhanced speed.

Aunt Yuki walked slowly back into the kitchen. She was greeted by Neji yelling, “Auntie, Yuki
won’t eat his eggs.”

Hinata chimed in, “Eggs are important.”
Huh. I blinked and looked at the table. Hinata and Neji had long since finished their plates. Mine was still half-full, congealed eggs lying cool in front me.

Neji continued, “Yeah we’ve been telling him to eat them but he just sits there!”

Oh. Right. They’d been talking to me as I watched Aunt Yuki. I hadn’t really listened to anything they’d been saying.

Aunt Yuki looked at me and her eyes widened in shock. She rushed over to me and placed the back of her hand on my forehead. “Yuki! Are you okay? You’re so clammy!”

Dazedly I looked at myself. My chakra was pulled in tight around my gates and my nerves sparked and jittered with activity. The capillaries in my extremities were so constricted they might as well have been shut. There was so little blood in my face that someone with ordinary eyes might have mistaken me for a corpse.

Oh. I did look pretty bad didn’t I?

“Yuki?!” she exclaimed again.

“Nn?” I finally responded to her.

“Yuki,” she said, “what’s wrong?”

I swallowed with a dry mouth. I tried to say something, anything, but nothing came out. I don’t want to be a slave. I looked over at Hinata. Now that this moment was here, it suddenly seemed much less important how this might affect Neji and I’s relationship with Hinata and much more important that we were going to be branded as slaves.

“Yuki,” my aunt said in a much softer tone of voice, and placed a hand on my left shoulder.

I jerked convulsively and knocked her hand away. My left shoulder tingled where she’d touched it and my right pulsed with the need to be touched in the same way, I should ask her to-

But I didn’t want her to touch me. I didn’t want Aunt Yuki anywhere near me right now.

Aunt Yuki opened her mouth but didn’t speak, and I could see her struggling to find the right thing to say. But I didn’t want to hear her words either. I didn’t want to listen to her.

So I ran.

I shoved my seat back from the table, almost overbalancing it in the process, and leapt to the ground. I landed hard, staggered, and kept moving. I was out of the kitchen when my aunt cried out, “Yuki wait!”.

I slammed open the front screen door and barreled outside. Back inside the house I saw Aunt Yuki start after me, only to stop when Hinata called out for her. Aunt Yuki froze, looked at Hinata, then back at me, and hesitated.

I kept running.

Wood flooring gave way to the beaten path outside of our house and I didn’t stop. Pebbles and grit jabbed painfully into my bare feet and still I kept running. I tripped, fell to my knees and elbows, and got back up. I pushed off the ground with my hands, clawing myself back upright so I could keep moving.
And I ran.

I didn’t try to run away. There was nowhere to hide, no way to escape the Hyuuga’s all-seeing eyes. Nowhere to run to either, no power in this world that would treat an unsealed Hyuuga child as anything other than breeding fodder. I couldn’t escape the Hyuuga if I tried, wouldn’t want to if I could.

But what else was I going to do?

So I ran down the beaten paths of the Hyuuga compound, desperately trying to be somewhere that wasn’t here.

Chapter End Notes

Canon Terms:

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-Eight Gates

Note: This chapter was a struggle to write (as were the next two chapters), and while I’m satisfied with how they turned out I’m not as ... sure ... about them as I’d like to be. I especially struggled to pin down the mood I wanted this chapter to portray. So any commentary would be helpful. What works, what doesn't, and especially how this chapter 'felt', all of it would be helpful to me as a writer.
I curled up in a hollow space under a row of bushes in the compound’s garden, alone with my hurts. My feet were swollen and raw. I’d skinned my knees and long swathes of my arms when I’d fallen. But even worse than those injuries was my head. My head pounds. My mind was full of too much, too many thoughts and too many feelings. It pressed on the inside of my skull until every beat of my heart sent a pulse of pain through my forehead. It hurt. I hurt.

I sniffled and tried not to wince at the pain which followed the action.

A person-shaped knot of fire entered the edge of my vision some two dozen meters away. They paused when I looked up at them and signaled at me in the broad gestures meant for distance communication. Partial approach permission?

I grimaced and thought about saying no, but didn’t. Instead I nodded gingerly, trying to bob my head without causing myself too much pain.

They closed half of the distance between us and then stopped, taking a seat criss-cross in the grass. Now that she was closer I could see Aunt Yuki’s features and make out her face well enough to lip read. I hadn’t realized that Aunt Yuki knew my eyesight so well, she was just within the range where I could read lips without having to focus my vision.

Aunt Yuki spoke quietly, her voice barely crossing the distance between us as an indistinct murmur. Reading her lips I caught, “Neji doesn’t know what the seal does.”

She didn’t say it as a question but I shook my head anyway, a sliver of movement left and then right. A pained whine escaped my throat.

“I’m so sorry your parents couldn’t be the ones to be here for you.”

That brought a hiccuping sob from me and I rubbed my puffy, inflamed eyes with my fists.

“I don’t know how to do this for Neji. I don’t know how to explain to him what the seal is. And clearly you already know what it is but I don’t know how to explain to you why it exists. I …” Aunt Yuki trailed off.

She looked up at the sky for a moment before performing a quick flurry of seals. Her eyes blazed. She paused just as Hiashi’s assistant had earlier and then grimaced. She let the light in her eyes fade and worried her tongue with her teeth.
“I …” she trailed off again. “I … I have trouble explaining to myself why the seal exists.” She followed that up in a rush, “I mean, it’s complicated to explain. There’s no simple way to put it.”

Aunt Yuki sat there for a few more seconds before asking, “Yuki, do you know why you are part of the branch family?”

Dad had never talked about that. I shook my head no.

She took a deep breath. “Alright. Do you know about ---?” She used a word I’d never heard before. “About how --- pass traits from parents to kids?”

Oh. The word was genes. I nodded yes.

Aunt Yuki snorted softly. “You’re a bright kid, you know that Yuki?” She continued, “Okay, and you know about dominant genes too?”

I nodded.

“Good. So, the Byakugan is carried on a dominant gene. It’s actually a lot more complicated than that, but this is what’s important.”

“If someone with two copies of the Byakugan gene has a kid with someone else who also has two copies of the gene, the two of them will always have a kid with two copies of the gene. Their children will always have the Byakugan. That’s what it’s like for Hiashi and I. We both have two copies of the gene and so Hinata has two copies of the gene.”

“Now your father Hizashi has two copies, just like Hiashi. But your mother Keiko has none. So you and Neji were both born with one copy of this gene. Which is enough to give you the Byakugan, of course. But if you have kids, your children might not have the Byakugan.”

Aunt Yuki paused and took a deep breath, in and out. “And this is what decides who is a main family member and who is a branch family member. The Hyuuga whose children will always have the Byakugan, they are the main family. And the Hyuuga whose children might not have the Byakugan, they are the branch family.”

She paused again to ask me, “Is this making sense so far?”

I hesitated before nodding. The inheritance pattern made sense in a ‘this is the way the world works’ kind of way, sure, but not exactly in a ‘this justifies slavery’ kind of way.

Aunt Yuki continued. “The first reason this matters is inheritance. The position of clan head is hereditary. It’s passed from parent to child. And the clan head must have the Byakugan. Otherwise they can’t lead the Hyuuga. And this is why your father is branch family. Originally he was main family, like Hiashi, but then he fell in love with your mother Keiko and decided to marry her instead of another main family Hyuuga. Which means his children, you and Neji, couldn’t inherit the position of clan head, so he couldn’t inherit the position, so he couldn’t be a member of the main family anymore? Does that make sense?”

I nodded more readily this time, wincing at the pain the motion brought.

“Good. Now, long ago before Konoha was founded, when the Hyuuga were all on their own, there were many more matters of inheritance than just who got to be clan head. There were techniques passed down through specific families and lesser positions of inherited authority. So the divide between the main and branch families was created to make sure that there would never be a situation where a person without the Byakugan was heir to a technique or position which needed
the Byakugan."

Sure. That explained the family split in a cheerfully simple and straightforward manner. And probably painted over a mountain of ‘true, pure-blooded Hyuuga’ rhetoric in the process.

Aunt Yuki had hit a stride with her explanation and she forged on ahead. “Of course that explains why the main and branch families exist, but it doesn’t explain the seal itself. The seal is a protection from people who would try to steal our bloodline, a way to prevent our enemies from capturing Hyuuga to take the Byakugan. Even if a Hyuuga were rendered unable to take a suicide pill” -or was unwilling, it went unsaid- “their comrades can trigger the seal remotely. It’s an honorable way to die.”

“All Hyuuga who are sent on missions outside the Land of Fire must be sealed. It’s the only way to stop our enemies from stealing the Byakugan. And all branch family members, as members of Konoha’s general forces, can be called on to take missions in enemy territory. So they have to be sealed.”

“But the main family has different duties. The Byakugan is incredibly useful to Konoha, so useful that Konoha always needs more of us. We patrol Konoha, we watch for spies and infiltrators, we keep track of the Daimyo’s nobles for him, we do so many things and there’s never enough of us. And children of the main family always have the Byakugan. So it’s very important to Konoha that we live and have lots of children, so that they can help keep Konoha safe too. But because of that, Konoha won’t let us leave the Land of Fire. The main family, we-”

Yeah, how are you going to phrase “we’re not expendable like you are”?

“If-” Aunt Yuki stumbled, losing her stride.

“But, um, that’s why the main family isn’t sealed. Because we never leave the Land of Fire anyway, so we’re not at as much risk of being captured.”

I looked at Aunt Yuki. Then very deliberately turned my head to face in the direction of her house, where I knew her Byakugan had enough range to see the construction still underway to fix the gaping hole in Hinata’s room.

Aunt Yuki fixed a brittle smile on her face.

My head pounded harder and I squeezed my eyes shut as hard as I could to deal with the pain. There were a dozen places I could start. Aunt Yuki hadn’t even touched on the way the seal could be partially activated to cause crippling pain rather than death. She hadn’t mentioned that the branch family still wasn’t allowed to learn any of the best Hyuuga combat techniques, despite being used as the clan’s front-line fighters. Her explanation answered for none of that. But …

I only really needed one question answered.

“Auntie.”

Aunt Yuki’s brittle smile cracked and her voice trembled as responded, “Yes Yuki?”

“Sometimes when branch family members have children, their kid should have two copies of the Byakugan gene, right? Are those children part of the main family?”

She grimaced. “Well, no, because back when these rules were written people only knew about the patterns genes followed. They couldn’t actually see the genes, so they couldn’t tell which children of the branch family had one copy of the Byakugan gene and which might have two.”
I nodded. “But we can check that now, right?”

She nodded hesitantly, “Yes, but-”

“But now we can, right?” I talked over Aunt Yuki, ”If a branch member got tested and had two copies of the gene, would they become a main family member?”

“Well … no, they wouldn’t.”

“Wouldn’t they be,” a hollow note crept into my voice “more useful to Konoha if they stayed in the Land of Fire and had more kids though?”

“The seal is permanent Yuki. It can’t be removed. Even if they were tested and found to have two copies of the gene, they would still wear the branch family seal.” Aunt Yuki fidgeted as she said that.

“So the other branch children who are going to be sealed today, the ones who have two branch family parents with the Byakugan, are their genes going to be tested before they’re sealed?”

Aunt Yuki waited a long time before responding. “No.”

“Okay. I understand.”

I crawled out from my hole in the bushes and mechanically stood up. I still ached all over. My head throbbed even harder than it had before and my skinned limbs complained horrendously when I scraped them on the ground again crawling out of my hole. Well, except for my scarred left knee. I couldn’t feel anything from the torn flesh there. But despite how badly I hurt, and the asymmetry of my sensations I just … didn’t care. Thinking about all the reasons this was unfair was exhausting. Being careful with how I moved my head took too much thought, too much energy to bother with. My asymmetry was just too much to deal with, too much for me to fix, too big for any fidgeting to mitigate, so why even bother?

Aunt Yuki stood up and carefully walked over to where I stood swaying. She raised a hand as if to place it on my shoulder, before hesitating and letting her hand fall. Even though her hand hadn’t touched me I still felt it on my left shoulder, another asymmetry added to my body, and I shuddered.

“Are you going to take me to get sealed now?”

Aunt Yuki nodded cautiously.

“Will it hurt?”

“Yes. It will, Yuki.”

“Okay.”

“Yuki, is it … is it okay if I clean you up?”

Without bothering to move my head I sharpened my eyesight and gave myself a quick once over. I looked pretty bad.

“Okay.”

Aunt Yuki took a handkerchief out of her robe and held it out in front of her. Chakra welled up in her hand and then pooled, turning into water and wetting the handkerchief. She started with my
face, gently dabbing at my puffy eyes and wiping away my tear tracks. She moved onto my hands next, wrapping the cloth around each finger and gently rubbing to clear away the dirt.

When Aunt Yuki reached my arms she paused. “This might sting a bit Yuki.”

I didn’t respond. I didn’t care.

She pooled more chakra in her hand to wet the handkerchief again. I tensed when she ran it over the scrapes on my arms, but otherwise didn’t move at all. She held up my arms to clean them and I let them drop limply to my sides when she was done. She lifted my robe and rolled up my pants legs so she could clean my knees and I still didn’t move. Even though the way she rolled up my pants legs was uneven and crooked, I didn’t bother fixing it.

When she was finished with my knees she said, “Can you sit now Yuki? I need to get your feet.”

I sat and let her take hold of my feet.

Aunt Yuki spoke as she cleaned my raw, dirty feet. “I should have brought your shoes with me. You shouldn’t walk back to the house like this.” She worked the cloth between my toes. “I’ll carry you on the way back.”

An image of what that would be like flashed through my head. Being cradled against her front with my arms wrapped around her neck, her arms wrapped under me and holding me close. Being pressed up against her as she took me to be branded, hugging her as I would hug Mom or Dad but it wouldn’t be Mom or Dad it would be Aunt Yuki acting as a main family member, it would be a member of the main family taking me away to make me a slave-

Suddenly I was hyperaware of how she was touching me. Of the way her handkerchief pulled little bits of grit across the membranes between my toes. Of how she was right next to me in my space-

Bile rose in my throat. I turned my head to the side, leaned over, and vomited. Undigested eggs splattered onto the grass. I heaved again, stomach clenching convulsively, and brought up another splash of fluid.

Aunt Yuki didn’t recoil. She placed her hand gently on my back.

At the touch of her hand I heaved again. It was too much. Everything was too much. The sensation of her hand on me and the dampness between my toes and on my cheeks and-

I threw up again.

Aunt Yuki waited until I was done and then gently wiped my mouth. I flinched away from her and she stopped, waiting until I stopped trembling to resume.

Aunt Yuki spoke carefully, softly, as if she was afraid I would shatter if she raised her voice, “Yuki. Is there anything I can do to help?”

My breath caught in my throat. And I started to cry. Tears ran down my face in a stream and I cried. There was nothing she could do to help me. I couldn’t even bear to have her touch me. What the fuck did she think-

What the fuck did she think she-
I can’t do this.

I was too tired. I couldn’t muster up the energy to hate Aunt Yuki. To scream at her, to attack her. I just couldn’t.

Nothing left to give.

I stopped crying slowly, hiccuping sobs fading into sniffles and those fading into silence. Several times I thought I was done, only to burst into tears again a moment later.

Aunt Yuki waited patiently through it all. When I was truly finished she said, still quiet, “We do need to go Yuki.”

I didn’t move.

Aunt Yuki scooped me up in her arms. She pressed me to her chest and squeezed me once. She sat there with me for a long while. Several times I thought she was going to say something, but she never did.

---

Aunt Yuki carried me all the way home, her breathing growing increasingly laboured as she walked. When we arrived she panted, “Yuki. I need to-” she took a breath, “to put you down. Okay?”

I didn’t respond.

Aunt Yuki awkwardly shifted me into one arm and opened the screen door. She set me down inside roughly, her grip slipping just above the ground.

I stood still where she placed me, not reacting to the rough treatment.

She hunched over, breathing deeply. “N-Neji!” She called out. “Hinata!”

Neji and Hinata raced into the entryway. Neji exclaimed, “Is Yuki okay?”

Aunt Yuki hesitated before answering, “No. Not really.”

Hinata gasped and Neji yelled, “Is he going to have to go to the hospital again?”

“Ah, well, that’s a complicated question. No, he doesn’t need to go to the hospital. He’s not hurt that badly. Not that kind of hurt. But we do need to go to the hospital anyway, for a, uh, a doctor’s appointment.”

Neji blinked, trying to take all that in. “So … we’re going to the hospital?”

Aunt Yuki nodded, straightening as her breath returned to her. “Yes Neji, we’re going to the hospital. Not just for Yuki though, the appointment is for you too.”

I let my attention drift away from their conversation as Neji asked what the appointment was for.

I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to be listening to this.
Hinata crept towards me, one slow step at a time. I watched her approach, but didn’t bother turning my head towards her.

“Yuki?” she said, “Are you okay?”

No.

“Yuki?” Hinata frowned.

“...” I stayed silent.

pat

Huh? I blinked. Hinata had placed her hand on the left side of my face and was resting it there. I shifted my head to face her, stunned, and she laughed.

Hinata smiled, a brilliantly sunny expression that lit her entire face, and patted my face again, saying out loud, “Pat pat, Yuki”.

My face twisted and the scarred side of my face spasmed. I didn’t know what expression I should have or what I should be feeling but I was feeling something and it was so strong I couldn’t breathe-

I started to cry again. I hiccuped, scrubbing furiously at my eyes and hating every moment of it. I didn’t want to cry, I didn’t want to feel this, I didn’t want to feel anything.

Hinata dropped her hand from my face, alarmed. “Mom! Mommy! Yuki’s crying!”

Aunt Yuki hesitated, reaching out a hand but not touching me, opening her mouth but not saying anything.

Hinata looked at her mom for a few more seconds, clearly expecting her to do something. But when Aunt Yuki didn’t do anything more Hinata turned back to me. She stepped in close, put both of her arms around me, and hugged me as tight as she could.

“Shh Yuki, shh. It’s alright. Everything will be alright.”

I laughed through my tears, almost hysterically. That was exactly how I calmed her down when her nightmares woke her up in the night.

Neji hugged me from behind, squishing me between him and Hinata. “Please don’t cry Yuki. I don’t want you to be sad,” he said, head pressed into the back of my shoulder.

I kept crying, slumped against the two of them.

Aunt Yuki didn’t join us. But she did wait. She let me cry as long as I needed to.

---

Aunt Yuki brought all three of us to the hospital. Initially she’d asked Hinata if she would rather stay back at the Hyuuga compound with an elderly neighbor but Hinata had absolutely rejected that idea. Hinata was dead set on sticking with us. She even held my hand the whole way there.
Aunt Yuki ushered us into the hospital’s reception lobby and told us to stay put while she talked to the receptionist. Neji and Hinata immediately dragged me to the children’s corner of the lobby, which was stocked high with simple puzzles and picture books.

Hinata, unwilling to let go of my hand, directed Neji, “Neji, get the ducky book.”

Neji complied, pulling a well-worn book out of a teetering pile of equally well-worn books. He handed it to Hinata, who promptly handed it to me.

Hinata pushed the book into my free right hand and told me, “The ducky book is a good book Yuki. You should read it.”

I looked at the book listlessly. “I-” I paused, surprised by how rough my voice came out. “I’m not in a ducky mood right now Hinata. I’m sorry.”

Hinata took the book back from me and thrust it at Neji. “Okay. Neji, you read the ducky book.”

Neji opened the book to the first page, brightened his eyes until he could see the ink the book was written with, and stared at it.

Hinata huffed out a breath and poked Neji with her free hand. “Out loud Neji.”

Neji stared at her for a moment before realizing his mistake, and then laughed, prompting Hinata to laugh too. The two of them giggled for a moment. Their laughter ended quickly though, with both of them looking at me as I stood there silently.

Hinata took a seat in one of the squat children’s chairs and pulled me down into the one next to her, still holding my hand. She looked up expectantly at Neji.

Neji, still standing, obliged her. He read slowly and haltingly, “Once … upon … a time. There … were … seven ducks. They … loved, no, … lived …”

I tuned the story out but I didn’t stop listening to Neji speak. I squeezed Hinata’s hand and focused intently on the sound of Neji’s voice.

Neji read slowly. It took him almost fifteen minutes to finish the short, dozen page book. Despite her assurances that the ducky book was a good book, Hinata grew fidgety and restless during Neji’s reading. I’m pretty sure the only reason she stayed in her seat was because she still didn’t want to let go of my hand.

I wasn’t bored. I didn’t pay attention to the story, couldn’t have said what happened to the seven ducks for the life of me. But that didn’t matter. This moment, clasping Hinata’s hand and listening to Neji stutter his way through a children’s story, felt important. It felt real.

This situation with the main family and the branch family, the fact that I was going to be branded a slave, that my little light was going to be branded a slave, none of it felt real. It wasn’t something that could really happen, it was too awful, too enormous, too much. Trying to wrap my head around it made me feel unreal.

But Neji was real. Hinata was real. Her hand and his words were real. I clung to them, hoping that if I just listened hard enough I could feel as real as they were and the world would start making sense again.

And then the story was done. Aunt Yuki, who had been waiting patiently for Neji to finish, came up to us and said, “It’s time to see Doctor Naganori now.”
Chapter End Notes

Canon Terms:

While I try to make this fic as accessible as possible to people who are unfamiliar or only passingly familiar with Naruto, it’s just not always possible to avoid leaning on the original manga sometimes. (This is a fanfiction, after all). To help with that here are a list of characters and terms introduced in this chapter that one can look up on the Naruto Wiki. Hopefully this will help clear up any confusion.

-Land of Fire

Question For The Readers:

The nature of first person storytelling limits how much I can describe what’s going on in the minds of secondary characters, so Aunt Yuki’s thoughts never get explicitly described in this chapter. By necessity, I’m forced to leave some blanks for you to fill in. And I’m really interested to see exactly how those blanks get filled.

So, what do you think is going on inside Aunt Yuki’s head right now?

Also, as a bonus question, what do you imagine Aunt Yuki’s views on the branch seal as being like before all this started? (I say imagine because it’s something I haven’t touched on before this and it really is left entirely up to your imagination). How do your thoughts on that affect your answer to the first question?
Chapter Notes

There may be some confusion about the shape of the Hyuuga branch family seal. If you are confused at any point, see the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 11: Sealing, Part 3

Aunt Yuki brought us to a general examination room that was instantly familiar to me. I’d sat in rooms like this for checkups on my scars at least a dozen times. There was a bed which could be raised at an angle in the center, a stool for the doctor, a couple of chairs for family, and a sink counter stocked with tongue depressors, cotton swabs, and paper diagnostic seals. The only things out of place were a tattoo gun on the counter and a pair of thick scrolls flanking it that held so much chakra they almost looked like solid bars of light.

Inside the room was Doctor Suzuko and another Hyuuga doctor I’d never seen before, a tall elderly man I assumed was Doctor Naganori. Doctor Naganori was main family, with an unmarked forehead, and he was washing his hands in the sink as we opened the door. Doctor Suzuko was standing in the corner of the room, reading through a sheaf of papers packed with terminology I didn’t understand.

Doctor Naganori glanced at us as we entered. “You’re late. Last group to arrive.”

Aunt Yuki replied simply, “The summons were sudden.”

Doctor Suzuko put her papers down on the counter and walked over, crouching slightly in front of Hinata, Neji, and I. She frowned as she looked over my injuries. “That looks like it hurts Yuki. Do you want me to help with that?” She pulled her healing gloves out of her pocket and held them in one hand, waiting for my answer.

I looked at Doctor Suzuko, and at the branch family seal embedded in her forehead. I’d noticed before that she was sealed but that had never really meant anything to me. She had just been Doctor Suzuko. Now ... Now the fact that she was branch family too seemed like the most important connection in the world.

“Yuki?”


Doctor Suzuko pulled her gloves on and held her hands over my knees. Immediately they began to feel better, my scrapes sealing over and becoming wet, tender flesh rather than open bloody abrasions. When she was done with my knees she moved onto my feet. “Oh dear,” she clucked, “what happened to you Yuki?”

Doctor Naganori interrupted us. “Suzuko, could we just get this over with? This is going to take long enough as is and I would like to get home sometime tonight.”
Doctor Suzuko put on a bland smile and replied smoothly, “Of course Doctor Naganori.” She cut out the chakra pooling in her hands as she stood and flashed me a quick sympathetic smile. “I’ll fix this up later, okay?”

I nodded.

Doctor Naganori finished washing his hands and dried them off. “Alright, which of these three is going first?”

Aunt Yuki interjected quickly, “Hinata is my daughter, she’s part of the main family.”

Doctor Naganori gave her an unimpressed look. “Then what is she doing here?”

Hinata chirped, “Holding Yuki’s hand!”

Doctor Naganori gave Hinata a look I couldn’t interpret and said to Aunt Yuki, “She’s a child, she shouldn’t be here for this. Could you take her back down to the lobby, please?”

Hinata blinked at him and tilted her head, like he had just said something very stupid. “I’m holding Yuki’s hand.”

“Yes I can see that. Ma’am, could you please get your daughter out of here?”

Aunt Yuki crouched down in front of Hinata. “You heard Doctor Naganori. We need to go now. Can you say goodbye to Yuki and Neji?”

Hinata scowled and stamped her foot. “No!”

I could have let go of Hinata’s hand, told her that I would be okay and that she should go. I didn’t. “Hinata, we really do need to go. The doctors need room to work.”

“No! I don’t want to!”

Aunt Yuki looked at Neji and I. She reached out and ran her fingers through Neji’s hair. “The two of you will be fine. I’ll be waiting for you in the lobby, and as soon as the doctors are done I’ll come back up to get you.” She turned back to Hinata. “Hinata, we’re going now.”

“NO!” Hinata gripped my hand harder, pulling back from her mother.

Aunt Yuki took Hinata under the armpits and lifted her up, pulling Hinata’s hand away from mine. She balanced Hinata on her hip and said, “Alright, we’re leaving now.” She shot Neji and I a quick smile before making her exit.

The sounds of Hinata’s protests, rapidly escalating into a tantrum, followed them out into the hallway.

Doctor Naganori looked thoroughly unimpressed by this point. He glanced over Neji and I. He pointed at me and said, “Alright, you first.”

I opened my mouth to reply but couldn’t find any words to say.

Doctor Suzuko offered me a hand and asked, “Do you want me help you up Yuki?”

I nodded quietly and placed my left hand in hers, remembering all the times she admonished me to make use of my left hand. Doctor Suzuko flashed a grin as she helped me clamber up onto the bed.
Neji took a seat in the corner of the room, eyes glowing bright, hands clasped tightly in his lap.

“Lay back Yuki,” she said. I did.

Doctor Naganori slipped on a pair of thin latex gloves and opened up a small kit resting next to the tattoo gun. “Suzuko, could you get the files that the front desk sent up?”

“No need Doctor. They’re O-positive. Yuki was my patient sometime ago.”

He glanced over at her. “Alright, I suppose we’re using your blood then.” He pulled a small flat inkwell out of the kit and set it down on the counter. He stepped aside to let Doctor Suzuko in.

Doctor Suzuko stepped over and calmly shook her right sleeve down. She called up a faint line of chakra on the pad of her left middle finger and swiftly tapped over a vein in her forearm, opening a small slit in her skin. A bubble of blood welled up and she quickly positioned her arm over the inkwell.

drip drip drip

A steady drip of the liquid fire running through Doctor Suzuko’s veins splashed into the inkwell, brightening the ink until it shone a pure silver. Once the ink had brightened Doctor Suzuko called up another flicker of chakra on her finger and pressed it to her arm, sealing the wound and leaving no trace she’d ever been cut. She stepped back from the counter, letting Doctor Naganori resume unpacking his kit.

Doctor Suzuko pulled up a stool behind me, and asked, “Are you comfortable Yuki?”

I didn’t know how to respond to that.

“This first part won’t hurt,” she assured me.

Doctor Naganori pulled a stool of his own up beside me, the tattoo gun held in one hand and the well of blood ink in the other. He swirled the inkwell and fiddled with the tattoo gun. He dipped the needle-end of the tattoo gun in the ink, scooted closer to me, and then paused.

“Suzuko, do you have any idea if scar tissue can hold tattoos?”

What? Hope swelled in me, surging up irrationally and desperately. Can they not seal me if they can’t will they just let me go-

“It can.”

Oh.

She continued, “Burns scars don’t hold tattoo ink in quite the same way as ordinary flesh, and you’d have to pay attention to that if this were an aesthetics tattoo, but for sealwork there’s no problem. The ink will still carry and hold the chakra imprint. I’ve helped a number of patients redo skin seals after getting burned and their scars have never interfered with seal functionality.”

“Good, good. And there’s no nerve damage to the application site?”

“No,” Doctor Suzuko shook her head, “The scar tissue may go up to to his scalp, but the nerve damage only extends to immediately above the left eye socket.”

Doctor Naganori nodded. “Good. Let’s get started then.”
Doctor Suzuko gently placed her hands on either side of my head, chakra sheathing her hands. “Are you ready Yuki?”

No.

Her chakra billowed out in a cloud that stretched between her hands and through my skull. My head immediately relaxed, every muscle from my scalp to my neck going limp. The left corner of my mouth fell open and drool began to trickle down my cheek. I couldn’t feel the drool though, couldn’t feel anything above my shoulders.

Doctor Naganori scooted his stool a step closer and leaned over me. He raised the tattoo gun, tip shining bright with blood ink, and began.

I felt nothing when the needles pricked my skin. Nothing at all.

The doctor started with the outer brackets of the seal, two long horizontal bars set above each eyebrow. Progress was slow, long minutes slipping past as he painstakingly filled the bars in. Neji fidgeted in his chair, but said nothing.

Lastly the doctor added two hooks to the inside point of each bar, turning them into shapes akin to dentist’s picks. The right hook twisted up and the left hook twisted down. I twitched when the doctor started on the second hook, preparing myself for a rush of wrong not right not balanced that never came. I was sure the asymmetry of the hooks would eat at me, but it ... didn’t. The hooks were asymmetrical, but they didn’t feel unbalanced. Instead I felt like there was a twist at the center of my forehead, a rotating draw which dragged my attention.

My stomach churned as I realized that the draw would never go away. That part of me, that patch of skin where my curse seal would sit, I would always be aware of it. Not just able to see it, but able to feel it, a twist more insistent and present than any true physical touch.

I don’t want this.

The doctor finished the hooks and leaned back, rolling his neck. He sighed as the joints in his neck popped. “Alright,” he said, “that’s the anchoring component finished. Suzuko, could you bring one of the scrolls over here.”

Doctor Suzuko nodded, releasing the chakra that had been flowing through my head. Sensation flooded through me, a rush of pins and needles that flowed from my scalp to my collarbone, followed by my forehead stinging badly enough to draw tears to my eyes.

Doctor Suzuko shook her hands out and said, “I’ll be back in just a moment Yuki.” She stepped over to the counter and picked up one of the brilliantly glowing scrolls. She hesitated for a just a moment, weighing it in her hand, before turning around and handing it to Doctor Naganori.

“Thank you.” He opened the scroll, letting one end drop and roll across the floor. The scroll was long, almost a dozen meters, with every space on its surface covered in a thin geometric scrawl of blood ink. Characters and symbols I didn’t know formed sweeping curves and lines, spiderwebbing from one end of the scroll to the other.

It was as beautiful written on a scroll as it had been etched into Dad’s head. I felt a moment of rage, so strong it shocked me, that it could be so beautiful. I hated it, for being so lovely. The world would be a better place, would make more sense, if the seal was monstrous and ugly.

Doctor Suzuko sat behind me again. “I’m going to relax your head again Yuki, okay? But I can’t numb you again, because this seal needs to bond to your nerves. So this is going to hurt.” She
placed a hand on the side of my head. “It’s not a big hurt though. You went through worse during your recovery and you were very brave during that.”

Doctor Naganori slid the scroll through his hands until he found a circle of symbols the width of his palm which surrounded the symbol of the branch seal. He tapped a finger against the symbol and channeled a brief flare of chakra into it, triggering an answering flare of chakra from the scroll.

*Oh. I forgot that’s what the branch seal looks like.*

When I’d examined the branch seal on my father, or glanced at it on other Hyuuga, it had looked like a thousand fine filaments of light flowing through the skull and into the brain. The chakra of the seal was a three dimensional construct more intricate than anything I had ever seen before. The ink the seal was rooted in only formed a loose foundation for those gossamer threads and its form was easy to miss amidst all that complexity.

And it had been so long since I had *seen*, since my world had been comprised of surfaces and colors. It was difficult for me to even remember what sight had been like in my old world, let alone what specific things had looked like. So I had forgotten the shape of the branch seal’s ink.

The branch seal, which would be tattooed on my forehead forever, took the form of the Nazi swastika. Oh it wasn’t exactly the Nazi swastika. It had additional hooks at the end, just like the bars already tattooed on my forehead, and it rotated in the opposite direction of the swastika the Nazis had used. But that’s what it was. It was unmistakably a swastika.

On some level I knew it wasn’t actually a swastika. I didn’t know the specifics, but I was aware that this symbol had been used by more cultures and more religions in my old world than I could name. I was aware that this world had never seen a Nazi flag or felt a Nazi boot.

But when I looked at it that’s what I saw. In my past life, in my past world, my grandfather and his parents had fled Austria one step ahead of the Nazis. His extended family hadn’t been so lucky. I remembered a family reunion where my mother’s family had tried to compile a family tree and failed, their knowledge riddled with gaps left in the wake of those monsters. I remembered being told what had happened, being *shown* what had happened, and not being able to understand. The swastika had haunted my nightmares for weeks, jolting me from sleep to run sobbing into my parents’ room, certain that the monsters were coming to take my mother too.

Now every day I would see the swastika branded on my forehead as I looked out on the world.

A snide, awful part of me said that this was what I had wanted. I had wanted it to be ugly, to look as monstrous as the evil it represented, and I had gotten what I’d asked for.

*No. I can’t. I can’t.*

I couldn’t. This was too much.

So I went away.

Chakra billowed between Doctor Suzuko’s hands, rendering my face slack and lifeless. Doctor Naganori placed the middle of the scroll on my forehead, swastika centered between the bars he had tattooed, and channelled chakra into it. The seal pulsed with light and pain sliced into my skull. I didn’t move. The pain faded and when it did the branch seal had burrowed its way through my skull, a thousand filaments of chakra gently binding my brain to the seal inked into my forehead.

Doctor Suzuko helped me up, wiped a trace of blood off of my forehead, and lifted me off the bed. She told me to sit in the chair next to Neji and I did. She told Neji that it was his turn and he should
get on the bed. He didn’t, instead asking me if I was okay, how it felt, did it hurt. I didn’t respond.

Doctor Naganori told Neji to get on the bed and he did. The doctor inked Neji’s bars, retrieved the second scroll, and placed it on Neji’s head. He channeled chakra into the scroll and Neji thrashed, his body twitching and jerking even as his head remained perfectly still between Doctor Suzuko’s hands. When she pulled her hands back Neji cried. He wailed and sobbed.

Doctor Suzuko helped him down off the table and he ran to me, latching onto me and whimpering. I didn’t comfort him. I didn’t move or speak or care.

Eventually Aunt Yuki came and took us home. Hinata held both our hands.

Aunt Yuki fed us. While Neji and I had been being branded she had gone to three different restaurants and bought all our favorite foods. For me she bought turnip cakes and bean paste buns and asparagus in a strong thick sauce. For Neji she bought three types of shrimp dumpling and dango and a white wobbly pudding. For both of us she bought a dozen different sweets.

Neji ate and cheered up considerably by the end of dinner. I ate.

Aunt Yuki put us to bed and I fell asleep between my little lights.

---

I woke to the sound of yelling. Adrenaline spiked through me, waking me up hard and fast, but I didn’t move. I stayed frozen where I was.

Downstairs I could hear my mother raging. Her voice rose to a crescendo and a SLAM shook the walls of the house.

Dad responded, quieter than her but still loud enough for his voice to brush my ears.

I could have sharpened my eyesight until I could see through the walls and read their lips. I didn’t.

Mom launched into another tirade, long and loud. When she was finished the house rang with the silence she left behind. In that silence I could hear Aunt Yuki crying.

Neji stirred beside me, rubbing sleep from his eyes. “Whuzzit?” he mumbled. Hinata rolled over, face contorted in the throes of restless dreams.

Dad spoke again, still quiet but insistent. The noise from downstairs dropped to bare whispers.

Neji raised his head quizzically, but upon hearing nothing worth investigating he laid back down. He pulled me closer to him and nuzzled his face into my shoulder, falling back asleep in seconds.

If I’d strained I could have still listened to my parents and my aunt downstairs. I didn’t.

Eventually I slept.

---
Before the treaty festival I’d sometimes had nightmares about Kumo ninja coming to take Hinata. Of monsters with steel headbands from far away coming to take my sister. Before even that, in another life, I’d dreamed about monsters with red armbands coming to take my mother. After being sealed, the nightmares came back. Except now the monsters were coming for me, for Dad, for my little light. And now the monsters weren’t from far away.

Now the monsters owned me.

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Chapter End Notes

Canon Terms:

-Forehead Protector (each ninja village has a unique headband)

Branch Seal Shape: In the original release of Naruto, the Hyuuga branch family seal is depicted as described in this chapter, as a hooked manji bracketed by two hooked bars. However, in some English releases, the manji was changed to an X to avoid confusion with the Nazi swastika. So if you’re reading about Yuki’s seal and swastikas and wondering where the hell this came from - “what in the world there were no swastikas in Naruto” - you probably saw one of the altered releases with the X-shaped seal.

I struggled a lot with deciding which seal design to use but ultimately I think this design meshes best with what I’ve got planned for this story.

Author’s Note: One last thing. To everyone who has left comments, short and long, emotional and analytical, thank you. From the bottom of my heart, thank you. Prior to putting Better on AO3, I often heard fanfiction authors talk about how fantastic commenters are and how much comments mean to them. But even so, I was completely unprepared for how much your feedback and encouragement has impacted me. So I think that I can say, literally, that my words cannot express how much your comments have meant to me.

Your words have inspired me to work harder, to edit and redo passages I would have otherwise judged “good enough”, and just in general made writing this story worth it. Going into this story I was concerned about how much time it would take and that it might become an emotional burden. And the first worry was valid, I’ve had to fight for every scrap of time I’ve spent on this project so far (I expect to have a reduced workload after this chapter, thankfully). But the second worry never materialized. Working on this story has been nothing but motivating and that’s largely due to all of you and your kind comments. Thank you all.
Chapter 12: Distance

(1 week later)

“I’m home!” Mom called out.

Neji leaped out of Aunt Yuki’s lap and ran for the door. “Mom!” he cried out.

Hinata squirmed her way out of Aunt Yuki’s lap as well and scrambled over to Mom. “Auntie Keiko! What’s for dinner?”

Mom gave Neji and Hinata strained smile. “I’m sorry Hinata, I- I just don’t feel up for making dinner tonight.” She looked over at Aunt Yuki, “Can you run out and pick something up for us?”

Aunt Yuki closed the book she had been reading to Neji and Hinata and stood up. “I can do that,” she said, without looking at Mom. She walked over to Mom and handed her the book. “We were on page seven.”

Mom accepted the book. “Okay”.

Aunt Yuki slipped out the door without ever making eye contact with Mom. She set off down the path at a slow pace that wouldn’t aggravate her bad lung.

Mom could have picked up dinner on her way home if she had wanted to. Aunt Yuki would take an hour to get dinner and she would return exhausted and out of breath.

Mom resumed smiling after Aunt Yuki left. “Alright,” she said to Neji and Hinata, “want me to finish the book?!”

Neji and Hinata both nodded cheerfully. They milled enthusiastically around Mom as she took the seat Aunt Yuki had been occupying, leaping onto Mom’s legs once she was seated.

Mom called out to me when she was seated. “Yuki?” she called.

I finished copying another line of text so the page wouldn’t be lopsided when I put the brush down. *the result of the destruction of Uzushio in the Second Shinobi War.*

“Yuki? Mom called out again. The was a note of fragility in her voice. “Yuki do you want to come read with us?”

I looked up and nodded. Tension flooded out of Mom’s body and she allowed herself a shallow smile. She patted her lap between Neji and Hinata. “Come sit down then.”

I carefully wiped my brush clean and capped my inkwell. I set the brush parallel with the edges of the dining room table and double-checked that my paper was centered properly. Only when I was...
Mom held the book up above her head so I could pull myself up into her lap. Once I was secure between Neji and Hinata she lowered her arms back down, pulling all three of us against her. The position must have been awkward for her, but she didn’t say anything about it. She just squeezed us gently and started reading.

“After the bison had crossed the river, it was the frog’s turn to cross.” She turned the page.

I pulled my knees up to my chest, curling inward so I formed a ball in Mom’s lap. I wrapped my arms around her and rested my head between her breasts. Nestled against her I drowsed and faded out of the world.

I came to later with Hinata shoving my shoulder. “Yukiii. Yukiii,” she said.

I opened my working eyelid, face still nestled in Mom’s chest. Hinata didn’t need line of sight to see that I’d opened my eye.

“Mom and Uncle ‘Zashi are coming home. You need to be up.”

I shifted around and rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. I blearily looked up at Mom.

Mom leaned down and gave me swift peck on the top of my head. “I need to get up and set the table for dinner, okay?”

I nodded and scooted off of her lap. Hinata followed suit a moment later. Neji was already gone and a quick glance showed he had run off to the bathroom.

Mom stretched as she stood up, twisting her arms and back. “Yuki would you mind picking your stuff off the table?”

I nodded again. “Okay.”

Hinata exclaimed cheerfully, “I’ll help!”

“Ah, Hinata, try not to crumple the papers, okay?” I said before she could rush off. “And be careful not to spill the ink.”

Hinata agreed enthusiastically over her shoulder as she rushed into the dining room to ‘help’ me clear off the table. By the time Mom and I made it to the dining room she had already piled all my papers in her arms, stacked the inkwell on top of the pile, and grabbed my brush between her lips. “Aah go’ thi’,” she mumbled.

Mom grinned and for the first time since she’d gotten home there was no sign of strain in her expression. “Be careful Hinata,” she admonished.

“Aah a’,” Hinata assured us.

Mom turned to me as Hinata waddled out of the room and her expression fell, smile slipping off her face. “How was your day Yuki? What did you do today?”

“I stretched. I wrote some. Took a nap. Instructor Ruri showed us how to untangle ninja wire. Stretched some more, wrote some more. Almost finished copying the history book.”

“Did you play with Neji and Hinata at all?”
I shook my head. “Too tired.”

Mom’s eyes darted to my forehead. She did sometimes that when my eyes weren’t pointed in her direction. Her face twisted and for a moment all I saw in her was grief.

*No. Please don’t.*

Her grief hit me with a spike of emotion in my chest, something I could physically feel in my lungs.

*Makes it that much harder to cope.*

Then Mom took a deep breath and fixed her expression with another strained smile. “Okay. Well, tomorrow your Dad and I don’t have work so we were thinking about going on a picnic. There’s this lovely little park on the edge of town with all kinds of birds that chirp all day long. Would you be up for that?”

I pushed my emotions down and thought about the offer. Neji and Hinata would be exhausting. Hinata especially so. She loved small animals. But …

“You said it’s near the edge of Konoha?”

“Mhm.”

‘It’s outside the Hyuuga compound’ went unspoken.

“Okay.”

Mom crouched down and hugged me. “I’m sure you’ll have a lot of fun,” she said. She stood back up. “Okay, do you want to help me set the table?”

I shook my head. “I’d like to fix my papers actually.”

Mom tilted her head quizzically at that before looking over her shoulder where Hinata had gone up the stairs. “Oh, okay.” She laughed a little. “That really bothers you doesn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Huh. Alright, go fix your papers.” She grinned. “I guess I’ll just have to get Hinata to help me set the table when she comes down then.”

I snorted a little at that, sharing her humor. I had no doubt that Hinata would be delighted to give her assistance, but the messy pile of papers in our closet upstairs spoke to how much Hinata would be actually be helping.

I passed Hinata on my way up the stairs. “Mom wants you to help her set the table now.”

Hinata answered me with a high pitched squeal entirely out of proportion with being asked to help set the table and rushed down the stairs past me. Well. ‘Rushed’. Hinata was deathly afraid going down stairs for some reason and refused to do so at any speed faster than a shuffle. When I gave her the good news she did quicken her pace to a fast shuffle though, and only clutched the railing with one hand instead of two.

I smiled at Hinata’s antics. The smile was gone by the time I reached the top of the stairs.

I entered our bedroom, opened the closet, and knelt down in front of my papers. True to her word
Hinata hadn’t crumpled them or spilled any ink. The papers were still flat and crisp and the inkwell was still corked. But none of the papers were in line with each other, my brush was set skew to the wall behind it, and the inkwell had been placed in a position that was ineffably off.

I pushed the inkwell into the back corner of the closet and slotted the brush between the curve of the well and the wall. Then I picked up the pages one by one and started laying them atop one another.

With each page I slowed, movements winding down. First page, second page. Third page. Fourth … Fifth … Sixth …………..

I stopped.

My skin itched. I could feel the seventh page where it lay skew in the closet. I could feel it as a tangible presence resting on the first bone of my left ring finger.

Why bother?

The itch became a pressure. It climbed my scars and pressed on my forearm and my cheek. The page needed to be fixed. But I didn’t care.

What’s the point?

Slowly, I tipped to the right. I lay on the floor and the pressure covered my left side, covered all of me that was exposed to the world.

My skin became tight under the weight and without warning my pulse leapt. I became hyperaware of my arm, of my neck, of my face. I could only move so much before my scars would pull and the pain would be back and I’d seize and that would make it hurt worse-

Not there. I’m not in the hospital. I’m more limber than I’ve ever been, it won’t hurt if I move.

My pulse pounded in my ears, pushing through me so hard the skin on my neck fluttered in time with my heartbeat. I could feel it in my skin, count the beats without even having to hold my fingers to it.

Onetwothreefourfivesixseveneightnineteeneleven-

The seventh paper lay there in the closet, skew to the wall. Skew to the other papers. Skew to everything. Skew to me.

I didn’t move. My pulse raced.

My skin crawled. Just over the surface of my skin I could feel movement. Shifts and changes in the pressure, bunching up over my scars. The pressure became real, became a thing that slid over my skin, with dimensions I could intuit and a form I could see in my head. The sensation of it on my skin was like lying on crumpled sheets, if the sheets were smoother than reality and carried the weight of continents.

Scale vanished and the bottom fell out of the world. The peaks and valleys of the pressure became as large as mountains and the size of grains of sand. The seventh paper became a seventh of a world and a seventh of the pinprick of a far-off star. The paper moved without moving and the pressure shifted in sync. I had to fix it. Had to make it right.

I didn’t move. I couldn’t.
I imagined moving instead, smoothing out the peaks with hands I didn’t have. I used imaginary hands to press down on mountains and pull apart at the edges of valleys to raise them up. Sensation burst into existence on the palms of my unreal hands and the unreal smoothness spread to them as well. I smoothed and smoothed and smoothed but it kept bunching up. There was more and more and more of it. I pushed and pulled and swept with a dozen imagined hands, trying to make my skin feel like skin again and trying to stop the mad dance of the seventh paper that was tied to this silken pressure.

In the distance there was desperation. Panic. A faint part of me worked faster and faster, screaming in horror at the sensation and the thought that it might never go away, that I might be broken and this would be my world forever and what if it never stopped, please gods let it stop.

More of me didn’t care. I smoothed. I felt. There was nothing else in the world but silken pressure and silken hands.

Time passed.

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The seventh paper moved. The pressure lifted and the world righted and for a moment I was filled with vertigo. Then the sensation was gone and my skin was my own and I was allowed to exist again.

Dad picked up the eighth and ninth papers as well, stacking them neatly on top of the rest. He nestled the stack lengthwise against the back wall of the closet, just far enough away from the inkwell that they didn’t conflict and just close enough that the space between them didn’t have a presence.

He knelt by my head and spoke softly. “Hey Yuki. How are you doing?”

I didn’t speak. I was allowed to exist but I didn’t have words yet. So I shook my head slowly instead.

Dad placed his hand gently on my right shoulder and the contact lit through me like a bolt of lightning, so real I could barely process it. “What’s wrong?”

I checked to see if I could speak. My mind was slowly ordering into something real, something that could be described with thought and feelings and words. A conversation was beyond me but I could manage a word or two.

I opened my mouth. “Tired.”

That hadn’t been what I meant to say. As soon as it passed my lips I wanted to take it back. It wasn’t an honest answer to Dad’s question, didn’t tell him anything about the awful mindlessness that had swallowed me up, but at the same time it was also too true. I was exhausted and acknowledging that had made it real. I was filled with cotton thoughts and lead and now that I’d admitted it I just wanted to lay down and stop moving forever.

Dad shifted so he was sitting cross-legged. He stroked my shoulder and I shivered.

“Why are you tired?”
I tried to look at Dad but I still couldn’t focus. Didn’t want to focus. My attention wandered to my bed and I stared at the wrinkled sheets. The folds in the fabric looked something like the shape of the pressure that had flowed over me. I stared at the folds and wondered how each fold had fallen into its position. Maybe-

“Yuki?”

I stirred and my focus was pulled back from the bed to Dad.

“Why are you so tired Yuki?”

Again I spoke and a truth I didn’t want to hear spilled out. “I don’t feel real.”

Dad’s face barely shifted. Just the slightest twitch in his cheeks and around his eyes. But I could see his heart breaking.

No don’t. Please don’t.

I felt his despair and something in my heart cracked. My eyes welled up and I sniffled.

Dad shifted closer and moved his hand to my back, rubbing small circles between my shoulder blades. “Hey,” he said softly, “It’s okay. I’m here. You can cry if you need to.”

My face screwed up. I hiccuped.

No. No I don’t want this.

I pulled back. I wasn’t in my body anymore. I was watching everything from somewhere far, far away. It wasn’t me that sniffled. I wasn’t whimpering or scrunching my eyes up to keep the tears out. That was something else. Something that wasn’t part of me. I was hollow and empty and felt nothing.

Without any emotions for fuel the tears dried up. Ragged breaths slowly gave way to steady ones.

I’m okay. Everything is okay.

I sat up.

“I’m okay.”

The look on Dad’s face said that no, this was definitely not okay.

“Yuki…”

“I’m hungry. Can we eat?”

Dad hesitated. “Yuki, sometimes just talking about things makes them better. Do you want to talk about anything?”

“No,” I said. “I’m okay.”

“Yuki,” Dad’s face twisted and he begged, “Yuki, please.” I could see tears forming in the edge of his eyes.

His emotions found a place inside me again, tugged at it, but that place wasn’t a part of me anymore. It was possible to look at him and feel nothing but numb.
“No. It’s … there’s nothing to talk about.”

And there wasn’t anything to talk about. Nothing that could be said inside the Hyuuga compound. Nothing safe enough to say anywhere inside Konoha. I’d almost lost Dad once before to the Kumo ninja. I wouldn’t lose him to this. To treasonous, hateful thoughts given sound and life.

So they would go unspoken. Unthought. And the world would go on.

I would go on.

So long as I didn’t think about it, so long as I didn’t dwell on it, I would go on.

Dad took a deep, shuddering breath. “Alright. Okay. If it’s something you can’t-” he caught himself, “don’t want to talk about it, we don’t have to. Just …” He reached out. “Would it be okay if I hugged you?”

I didn’t respond. I was still numb. Still somewhere else. Somewhere not here. But I didn’t flinch or pull away and that was apparently enough. Dad pulled me in, turning me around so my back was flush to his front. He crossed his arms over my shoulders, all the way down to my hips, and held me tight against him.

Dad spoke again, his voice rough and unsteady, “You don’t- Yuki you don’t ever have to say anything you don’t want to. You know that right? Just- just … If you ever need a hug, Mom and I are here for you. You don’t have to tell us anything, or even say anything at all. You can just have hugs whenever you want. Your Aunt-” His voice hitched.

“Your Aunt Yuki is here for you too. I know- I know things have been not so good around her lately. Especially between her and your mother. And- and I don’t know how you feel about her but I would understand and she would understand if you didn’t feel so good about her right now either. But she loves you Yuki. Your Auntie loves you as much as Mom and I do. She’ll always love you. And if for whatever reason you don’t want to come to Mom and I, Aunt Yuki will be there for you.”

Dad tilted his head down, resting his cheek gently atop my head. He fell silent. His breaths pushed gently on my back, a steady, present rhythm.

Somewhere far away I knew that I should say something back. Tell him that I loved him too. That I was grateful for his support. That his hug made me feel calm and warm and loved. But at the moment none of those things were true. Or rather, they were true. But distant. They were true someplace that wasn’t here. Somewhere far away where they couldn’t reach me. From where nothing could reach me.

So I stayed silent. I listened to his breaths. Felt the rise and fall of his chest.

Downstairs Mom, Aunt Yuki, Neji, and Hinata were waiting, seated around the dinner table. Mom stood up from the table to come get us and Aunt Yuki stopped her, hand on her wrist. Mom jerked her hand back, face twisted into a snarl. But then Aunt Yuki spoke to her, quietly, and Mom’s expression smoothed. She sat back down. And they waited.

Dad and I sat together for a long time.

And somewhere far away I felt warm.
Chapter End Notes

Canon Terms:

-Second Shinobi World War

Author’s Note: I have no idea what happened in this chapter. I did not intend for this kind of dynamic to evolve between Aunt Yuki and Keiko, I did not intend for Yuki to ever go through a sensory overload / OCD overload like what I’ve experienced, I did not intend for Yuki to have this degree of dissociative response, I did not intend to Hizashi to do anything that he did in this chapter, or to pick this way of comforting Yuki, and I definitely did not intend for the pseudo happy ending. This chapter was supposed to be a steady slide down, not have a perk up at the end.

My characters have completely stolen this arc from me and while that’s fantastic and I think it’s making the story better, it also means that I am panicking a little what is going on?

Also this is the fourth iteration of this chapter and the previous three were wildly different and, I think, much weaker. And I only got the time to do a fourth rewrite because of I extended the update schedule to three weeks instead of two, so yeah. If you liked this chapter that’s what you have to thank for it. I’ll be maintaining the three week schedule for now. My chapter buffer is actively growing at this rate, so it’s almost certain I’ll move back to a two week schedule eventually. But right now, updates will come every three weeks.
Painful Lessons (Neji)

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Physical child abuse.

This and the next two chapters a bit of an experiment. I’m writing them in third person, from the PoV of Yuki’s family members. Partly I’m doing this because I thought they could use the characterization and the story could use a bit of broadening in perspective, but also it’s because I need the practice. I’ve got a couple very important plot-point interludes I want to do from other character’s perspectives later on, and I want some practice with interludes before I try my hand at them.

So with that in mind I’d especially welcome constructive criticism for these three chapters, even more so than usual. The more feedback I get about these three chapters, the better I'll be able to do in the plot-critical interludes later.

Chapter 13: Painful Lessons (Neji)

Neji was lonely.

Yuki was doing his morning stretchies. Usually during Yuki’s morning stretchies Hinata and Neji would play. Neji even had a really fun game they could play that he’d thought up that morning! It was called bean tag, and it was like tag except instead of tagging someone you threw a beanbag at them! And you couldn’t move while holding the beanbag. And you had to stay within the garden’s ring of bushes, because otherwise you could just run far away from whoever had the beanbag.

It was just like some of the throwing games they played in class, the ones Hinata needed help with. So Hinata could get better with her throwing while playing! And Hinata couldn’t run as fast as Neji so she didn’t really like playing tag with him, but maybe she would like playing bean tag because she wouldn’t have to outrun him.

It was the best game Neji had thought of all week.

Except Hinata wasn’t at morning stretchies. Aunt Yuki said that Hinata’s dad wanted her to do special training in the morning now, so she couldn’t come play with Neji.

Which meant Neji was all alone.

Neji considered bugging Aunt Yuki to tell him about the plants in the special herb garden (which he wasn’t supposed to go into but he could see through the brick wall around it just fine so nyeh). But Aunt Yuki looked sad. She’d looked sad for weeks. Like a droopy plant that hadn’t been watered. She wasn’t much fun to talk to. She tried to be cheerful, but whenever Neji talked to her she looked like she wanted to cry and that made Neji want to cry too.

Neji tossed his beanbag into the air and caught it. It made a dry *paf* sound when it hit his hand.
Neji wasn’t supposed to bother Yuki when he was stretching.

Yuki’s timer ran out. Neji immediately jumped in, “Yuki are you done yet?”
Yuki glanced at Neji, eyes flaring momentarily. “No?” he said, “I’m only halfway done.”
“Oh.” Neji deflated. Yuki entered a new pose.

The timer ran out again. “Hey Yuki do you want to hear about this new game I came up with? It’s called bean tag and-”
Yuki grimaced. “Neji I’m not- I’m stretching right now, okay?”
Neji deflated again. “Okay.”

Neji didn’t wait for the timer to run out this time. “Hey Yuki later could we-”
“Neji!” Yuki interrupted him. “Not now.”
Neji’s face twisted and he opened his mouth to say … something. He wasn’t sure what. But Aunt Yuki swept in before he could speak, her voice soothing and soft. “Hey, Neji, why don’t you come sit with me? I’ll tell you some ninja stories, alright?”
Neji frowned. He wanted Yuki to listen to him! But he also knew he wasn’t supposed to interrupt Yuki’s stretchies. He shouldn’t have done that. So he let Aunt Yuki lift him up and take a seat on the bench with him in her lap.
Nei frowned some more. There was one more thing he needed to ask. “Yuki?”
Yuki shot him a frustrated look and Aunt Yuki gave him a warning glare.
He pressed on anyway. “Yuki, I- um-, after you’re done can I be Nurse Neji? And rub your burn stuff in?” Neji always played Nurse Neji after Yuki was done with his stretches. But he had broken the rule about interrupting Yuki and he was so lonely, he really needed to make sure he could still be Nurse Neji.

Yuki made a funny expression. The healthy side of his mouth curved upward but his lips frowned, and that caused the burned side of his mouth to jerk and spasm and mess up the whole expression, so Neji couldn’t tell what face Yuki had been trying to make.

“Sure Neji. Of course you can.”

Neji smiled and said, as Mom and Dad and Aunt Yuki had told him to, “Thank you Yuki!” And he was thankful. Yuki wasn’t upset, Neji could still be Nurse Neji, and Aunt Yuki was going to do stuff with him now. This was good, right? But Neji still felt bad. Something was still wrong and it hadn’t been fixed.

Aunt Yuki stroked Neji’s hair and said quietly, “You still want to hear those ninja stories, right?”

Neji nodded. Even if Aunt Yuki wasn’t happy, stories from her were still better than playing catch with himself.

---

It felt like ages until Yuki’s stretches were done. The moment he was finished Neji scrambled to him grinning and asked, “Yuki Yuki can I be Nurse Neji now?”

Yuki took a slow breath. He look tired, like Hinata after a bad row of nightmares. “Sure Neji,” he said, “just let me take my robe off”.

Neji started to grin, but his enthusiasm faltered. Yuki didn’t sound right. Neji pushed the grin back onto his face though. Playing Nurse Neji was fun. This was fun. “Auntie, can I have the burn cream?”

Aunt Yuki had already pulled Yuki’s jar of burn ointment out of a pocket in her robes. “Of course Neji, just give me a moment.” She gave the jar’s lid a sharp twist before handing it over. “There you go.”

“Thank you Auntie.” It was important to always say please and thank you.

Aunt Yuki nodded. “You’re welcome Neji. I’m thirsty after all those stories though. I’m going to get a drink of water while you play nurse, okay?”

“Okay!”

Neji twisted the lid the rest of the way off. He took a deep breath through his nose to smell the off-yellow cream in the jar and smiled. Yuki’s burn cream had a good smell. It smelled just like the oil Mom and Dad used when they cooked meat, like thick nuts.

Except Mom and Dad didn’t cook much anymore. They weren’t gone as much as they had been a few weeks ago, but they were still gone a lot. And they didn’t cook as much as they used to. Sometimes they brought home take-out instead. Which wasn’t bad, the take-out almost always
came with tasty desserts, but …

Dad was supposed to cook breakfast and pack lunches before he left, and Mom was supposed to cook dinner when she got home. That was how things were supposed to be.

Neji’s smile slipped off his face again.

Yuk interrupted Neji’s thoughts. “Neji, I’m ready.” Yuki sat criss-cross facing Neji, sitting on his robe and dressed only in his underwear.

“Okay.” Neji tried to put a grin on his face again, but it wouldn’t stick. He scooped cream out of the jar and smeared it over Yuki’s knee. Doctor Suzuko said it was very important to rub the cream until he couldn’t see it anymore.

Except Doctor Suzuko also told him that putting a seal on his forehead would only hurt a bit. Like a long hard pinch. And that was a lie. Doctor Suzuko had lied. It had hurt so much. Being sealed was the worst pain in the world.

Neji moved on to Yuki’s hand, using his thumbs to rub cream into the raised spots on Yuki’s palm. His stomach twisted as he looked up Yuki’s arm, at the rest of the scars. At the scars which made Yuki look like a whole new person.

- 

_Yuki was screaming. He was thrashing in Dad’s arms and he was on fire. His robe was burning and his hair was burning and his face was burning. The fire was eating Yuki’s face._

_Neji screamed too. Dad had left him on the chair with Hinata and she was screaming as well and they grabbed each other. Neji tried to turn his head away and stop looking. He didn’t want to see the fire eating Yuki. But he couldn’t. His eyes were bright, bright, bright and he couldn’t make them stop being bright and he could see Yuki even through the back of his head and he could see the fire eating his brother it was eating Yuki why wasn’t Dad making it stop?!_

_Yuki’s chest heaved and the fire leapt into his throat and Dad screamed and grabbed a seal out of his desk and put it on Yuki and the fire vanished but Dad didn’t stop screaming._

_“MEDIC!” Dad yelled. “MEDIC!”_

_Yuki was still jerking in Dad’s arms and he wasn’t screaming anymore but that was almost worse because Neji could see all the way into his chest where his vocal chords were spasming and Neji knew that Yuki was still screaming but on the inside now._

_Then Yuki jerked his head against Dad’s burned robes and the skin on his face smeared like goo, pulling off his face and sticking to Dad’s robes. Neji’s stomach lurch and bile filled his mouth-

- 

Neji swallowed the bile in his throat and blinked, moving on to rub cream into Yuki’s arm.

Maybe being sealed wasn’t the worst pain in the world.
Neji’s mind was still back in the office, listening to Yuki scream, so he didn’t even think before asking, “Yuki, which hurt worse, the seal or the burns?”

Instantly Neji knew he had said a bad thing. Yuki’s eyes flared and the muscles in his arms seized up and became hard under Neji’s hands.

Neji flinched. “Sorry. I’m sorry,” he squeaked out. He hadn’t meant to say that. Mom and Dad had told him not to ever ask what being burned felt like, he wasn’t supposed to say that!

Yuki closed his eyes and breathed slowly. He didn’t respond to Neji’s apology. He just sat still, arm rigid and tense and eyes bright.

“Yuki?” Neji carefully said. “Yuki?”

Yuki opened his eyes. He didn’t say anything. He didn’t even turn to look at Neji.

“Yuki I’m sorry.”

There was no response.

Hesitantly, Neji started rubbing burn cream into Yuki’s scars again. As he rubbed and Yuki took slow careful breaths, Yuki’s muscles slowly began to relax. They didn’t relax all the way, but by the time Neji was rubbing cream into Yuki’s shoulder they weren’t hard anymore.

Before Neji got to Yuki’s neck he paused. “Yuki?”

Yuki looked at Neji with no expression on his face.

“Is … I … are you okay Yuki? Did … are you okay?” Mom and Dad always said that when something was wrong. ‘Are you okay?’.

Yuki’s mouth moved just a little bit, and the burned corner of his mouth spasmed. A trickle of drool dripped down his scars. Yuki turned away from Neji, tilting his head so Neji could get his neck.

Neji’s face twisted and he felt like crying. He hadn’t meant to hurt Yuki! He was trying to help! It wasn’t fair!

Then Yuki spoke, quietly. “It’s too much. It’s just too much.” His voice lowered even more and Neji could barely hear the last words he said. “I want to not be here.”

Neji finished rubbing cream into Yuki’s wounds and stood up. He wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands and sniffled.

Morning stretches were supposed to be fun. This wasn’t fun. This was awful.

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Hinata was late to sparring class.

Today was the day they started actually practicing with other students and it was supposed to be an exciting day, so where was Hinata? Neji’s stomach twisted into knots while Instructor Tamie
explained the day’s drill to them.

Where is Hinata?

Tamie finished with her explanation and started tapping pairs of kids on the head to set up practice partners. Tamie’s voice wobbled in a funny way and she had a lot of acne on her face and her hair was weirdly curly and Yuki said she was really young for a teacher, but she knew everything and she always had answers to all of Neji’s questions. She had to know why Hinata was late!

When Tamie got to Neji he asked her, “Inst- Intw-” instructor was a hard word and Neji didn’t like it, “Teacher Tamie where is Hinata?”

Tamie flinched, just like Yuki did when Neji asked a question Yuki really didn’t want to answer. She said, “She’s just a little late Neji. I can see her and she’ll be here soon.”

Neji wanted to call her a liar. He didn’t know why but she was lying. Something was wrong and she knew it and she wasn’t telling him. What was wrong? Was Hinata okay?

But Neji couldn’t figure out how to say that and Tamie tapped Neji on the head and paired him with Saburo before he could find the words. And then Tamie was gone and Neji had to ask Saburo what the exercise was because he hadn’t been listening.

The exercise was simple. One student would push their hand at the other, just like the palm strike they’d been practicing all week. And the other student would knock their hand out of the way. They were *not* (Saburo said Tamie said this was very important) sparring. They were not trying to hit one another. If a partner had trouble blocking, it was your job to slow down so they could block. This was training, *not* sparring, and the point was not to hit people it was to learn.

Neji thought this made sense and that Hinata would like those rules. Except Hinata wasn’t here, where was she?

Hinata hadn’t shown up by the time Tamie had paired everyone off and there was an odd number of students. Tamie asked Yuki if he could sit out and help the other students do the exercise right, because Yuki was smart and only ever had trouble at anything when having trouble helped Hinata. (Tamie didn’t actually say that last part but she didn’t have to. Neji’s brother was the bestest at everything). Yuki said yes, he could do that.

Neji brightened his eyes and looked as far as he could for Hinata. But he couldn’t see very far. Sometimes it seemed like everyone could see farther than him and Yuki. It wasn’t fair.

Saburo tapped Neji on the arm. “Um. Could we start?”

Neji blinked, before realizing that everybody else had already started. “Oh! Okay.”

Neji took the stance Tamie had taught them, facing off against Saburo. Neji frowned in concentration as he adjusted his feet. Tamie had said that feet were very important when fighting.

Saburo whined while Neji shifted his stance, “Come onnn, let’s just start.”

“Okay, okay.” Neji finished settling himself in place. “Alright, let’s start.”

Saburo went first, thrusting his palm out at Neji. And missed. Because Neji was too far away. “Oops,” Saburo said.

“Oops,” Neji repeated, and blushed. He probably should have stood closer to Saburo. Neji tried to
scoot closer to Saburo without changing his stance and … mostly succeeded. He had to hop a bit at the end to make it work.

Saburo tried the palm strike again and this time he was close enough. Neji swept his own hand through the air and knocked Saburo’s thrust aside. Neji grinned, really wide. He’d done it! Sure, he’d pushed Saburo’s arm at the elbow rather than the forearm like he was supposed to, but he’d done it!

Neji pushed back at Saburo and Saburo blocked. Saburo grinned wide, just like Neji.

Back and forth Neji and Saburo traded palm strikes and blocks. This was fun! One time Saburo blocked too early and he missed Neji’s arm entirely and they both laughed. Maybe Neji could find a way to turn this into a game. Wouldn’t that be nice? Maybe-

“Hinata!”

Neji’s head snapped around at Yuki’s shout. Hinata?

Hinata was walking towards the class with Hiashi. Except she was walking funny. Why was she-?

Hinata had bruises all over her forearms and shins! Hinata was hurt!

Tamie interrupted the class, which had stopped practicing to stare at late Hinata. “Alright everyone. How about we switch partners now? Find someone new to practice with.” She lowered her voice and said to Hinata, “Come over here Hinata, I’ll tell you what we’re doing today.”

Hinata nodded, head down, and shuffled toward Tamie. Hiashi watched her go. He stayed at the edge of the park, standing perfectly straight.

Neji stared. What was going on? Was this why Hinata was late? Had she fallen down? Why hadn’t Hiashi taken her to a clan medic? Doctor Suzuko never went to the hospital before noon, right? Wouldn’t she be in the compound right now? Should Neji go get her?

“Hey.”

Where was Doctor Suzuko’s house? It was … that direction, right?

“Hey!”

Neji started. He turned to stare at the girl who had yelled. “Huh?”

“Finally,” the girl said. She was half a head taller than Neji and was standing impatiently with her arms crossed. “Well, are we going to start?”

Neji blinked. He looked back at Hinata. She looked like she’d been crying. Neji started walking towards her.

“Hey!” The girl grabbed him by the arm. “Come on, we’re partners, let’s go!”

Neji looked at the girl. He’d met her somewhere before, hadn’t he? She was main family, maybe she was related to Aunt Yuki? Her name was … Himeko, right? Why was she yelling at him?

“Come on!” she said. She planted her feet. “Let’s go!”
Neji didn’t listen to her. “Yuki! Yuki!”

Yuki walked over. “Hey Neji.”

Yuki knew everything, just like Tamie. He’d know why Hinata was hurt. “Yuki, what happened to Hinata? Did she fall down?”

Yuki flinched, just like Tamie had. “Hinata is … Hinata will be … She’ll be coming over for lunch after this. I don’t think she wants to talk right now, I … Give her a big hug after this, okay? A gentle hug.”

That wasn’t good enough. That wasn’t anywhere near good enough. What had happened to Hinata? Why was she hurt? “Yuki!”

“Hey!” Himeko yelled again. “Are we going to spar or not?!?”

Yuki turned to look her in the eyes and for a moment Neji was scared. He looked so angry. His scarred cheek twitched and jumped and his eyes … He almost looked like he hated Himeko.

Then without breaking eye contact, Yuki spat at her, “Your stance is unbalanced. Move your left foot further left, your feet should be part of an L-shape. With your left heel pointed towards your right foot like that anyone could knock you over.”

Neji blinked and stared at Yuki. That wasn’t at all how Yuki helped him and Hinata. That was mean. Why was Yuki being mean to Himeko? And what was wrong with Hinata, why wouldn’t anyone tell him anything?!

Himeko drew in a breath and straightened up. She looked angry. “Yeah. Well, I don’t have to take lessons from you.” She smiled cruelly. “You’re just a broken twig.” She said the last two words triumphantly, as if they meant she won now and forever.

Yuki jerked and took a step back. A tiny noise puffed out of him. The veins in his arms and legs contracted and his chakra rushed into his core. He brought his arms up weakly in front of his chest and staggered back another step.

“Yuki? Are you okay?” Neji grabbed one of Yuki’s hands and gasped. His hand was so cold!

Yuki pulled his hand out of Neji’s and shuffled backwards. “I, um, you should, should-” He didn’t finish the sentence. He just ducked his head and turned away.

Neji stared after him. He couldn’t understand what had just happened. That had been like- that had been like … Neji couldn’t think of anything like what he’d just seen.

Himeko spoke to Neji again, with that awful triumphant gloating in her voice. “Are we going to spar or not?”

Neji turned back to her. What had she called Yuki? A broken twig? What did that mean? Neji didn’t get it, didn’t understand any of this! He didn’t understand what that meant or why Himeko and Yuki fought. He didn’t know why Hinata was hurt or what is was that Tamie and Yuki knew but wouldn’t tell him. He didn’t know why Yuki acted so small now or why Aunt Yuki was so sad, he didn’t know why Mom sometimes yelled at Aunt Yuki at night, and he didn’t know why she hated Aunt Yuki so much now, he didn’t know anything and he hated it!

Himeko settled her feet and Neji shifted his as well. Why wouldn’t anyone tell him anything?! Why, why, why?!
Himeko shoved her palm at Neji, hard. He pushed it aside and, in the same motion, stepped *forward*, swinging his back foot right up in front of Himeko. And then, before she could pull her hand back, he shoveled *her*. He shoved up, smashing his hand into her face with a *thwack*.

The older girl fell over backwards, landing on her butt hard. She flung her hands up to her face and cried out, “Owww! Owie, owie, owie.” She clutched her nose in one hand and rubbed her eyes with the other. She sniffled, and then she started to cry. “Waaaaaaaaa! WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Tamie’s eyes flared and she whirled around. “Himeko? Are you hurt? Oh dear.” She darted over to check on Himeko.

Neji grinned as Tamie knelt next to Himeko. That served Himeko right! She was mean! She hurt Yuki and she was big and stupid and-

Neji screamed. It hurt! It hurt so bad! There was pain and pain and pain and pain and-

The pain stopped. One moment he was filled with so much pain that nothing else existed and the next Neji was lying facedown in the grass. Every part of him twitched and jerked, like that nonsense too-much pain still controlled his limbs. He sniffled. That had *hurt*.

Yuki was crouched over him a moment later, arms and legs on either side of Neji, his body positioned between Neji and the rest of the world. His eyes were bright, bright, bright and he looked like one of the monsters from his scary stories. Like something angry and violent. But he wasn’t looking at Neji. His face with those bright, bright eyes and all their rage was turned towards Hiashi.

Tamie and Hiashi were shouting at one another. Then Hiashi shouted really loud and Tamie stopped talking with a squeak, clasping her hands over her mouth.

Hinata had run away and was hiding behind a bench. She was crying and shaking her head with her hands over her ears. Tears and snot stained her face.

The other children were all talking and some of them were shouting and Neji couldn’t hear what any of them were saying-

Neji didn’t know what was going on. Nothing made sense. Nothing made sense and he had *hurt so much*.

Neji cried.

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Know Your Role (Hizashi/Keiko)

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Familial abuse, torture.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 14: Know Your Role (Hizashi/Keiko)

Hiashi’s office was a masterpiece of inostentatious wealth. Spacious and uncluttered, it bespoke grandeur by what it was, not what was displayed within it. The room was floored with expensive hardwood, bordered by elegantly carved walls, and filled with masterwork cabinets and shelves custom-made to accentuate the desk which served as the room’s centerpiece. Hiashi’s desk itself was a massive affair carved from a single piece of ancient ironwood, and filled the room with its solidity and stability. It was a piece of furniture one would expect a Daimyo to own, not a mere ninja. The office had no need for expensive vases or hangings, the clutter of valuable knick-knacks. By simple virtue of its construction the Hyuuga clan heir’s private office stated “this is wealth, this is power, and the one who sits here will not be moved”.

Which, Hizashi had often thought, was a bit absurd. His brother never took meetings in his private office. The clan had half a dozen similarly impressive meeting rooms for official business. The only people who ever got to see Hiashi’s grand office were other Hyuuga, with their all-seeing eyes, and it wasn’t as if any Hyuuga was unaware of the wealth which belonged to the clan heir.

Hizashi had always meant to ask his brother about that. To ask him why he needed such an expensive room to work in. But the office had been built after Hizashi married Keiko, and the two brothers so rarely spoke after Hizashi’s marriage had seen him branded as part of the branch family. When they did speak it always seemed too much of a shame to mar the occasion with a question that could be interpreted as criticism. So Hizashi had never asked.

Today though, Hizashi couldn’t care less about the expense of Hiashi’s office. Except, perhaps, to wonder how well all that expensive wood would burn.

“HIASHI!” Hizashi slammed open the doors to his brother’s office.

Hiashi looked up from a sheaf of paperwork. He wiped his pen off and set it aside. “Hizashi. We need to talk about your son’s behavior. And yours as well, it seems.”

Hizashi strode up to his brother’s desk, not slowing for a second. “YOU TORTURED MY SON HIASHI!” Did his brother not understand what he had done?!

“He had assaul-”

“HE’S FIVE YEARS OLD HIASHI! FIVE! YEARS! OLD!”

Hiashi’s scowled. He raised his voice, “Discipline must be kept-”

“YOU TORTURED YOUR NEPHEW! MY SON! NEJI! YOU TORTURED NEJI!”
His brother shot to his feet. “Shut up!” he yelled. “Branch members cannot be allowed to assault the main family no matter what age.”

“WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU?!” Hizashi slammed his hand down on his brother’s desk. Was his brother insane?!

Hiashi’s expression changed. His face twisted into a snarl and he bared his teeth. “You-” Hiashi raised his right hand, his front and middle finger pointed straight up and his last two fingers curled to point straight down. Hizashi had a moment to gape at his brother before Hiashi pulsed chakra through his hand and lit up the seal on Hizashi’s forehead.
An eternity later Hiashi let up on the seal. He reached down and grabbed a fistful of Hizashi’s hair, hauling back and yanking his head off the floor. “YOU SHUT UP AND YOU LISTEN TO ME!” he roared.

Hizashi swallowed bile and blood. He struggled to orient himself, pushing weakly on floor to relieve the pressure on his scalp.

“You’re not part of the main family anymore! You gave that up when you married that clanless bitch! You don’t get to talk to me like that! No one gets to talk to me like that! Especially not a branch family nobody!” He released his hold on Hizashi’s hair with a jerk. Hizashi’s arms collapsed beneath him and his head hit the floor with a crack.

Hiashi stood up above Hizashi, panting. “You know, if you really were just some branch family nobody, I could almost understand this. They don’t know any better. They need to be taught respect the hard way. But you? You?! You’re my brother! You should understand better than anyone how important discipline in the branch family is! You’re not really one of them, you should know better!”

Tears streaked down Hizashi’s face.

“Is it because of Keiko? Is it because of that clanless outsider? Is she why you’re trying to undermine my authority?!” Hiashi’s voice rose to a howl.

“Is she also why your stupid child thinks assaulting a main family member is okay?! This is why Hyuuga don’t marry outsiders! They don’t understand our ways! They do everything they can to undermine my authority! If I could I’d have your wife and every other Hyuuga pretender sealed too, so they can learn the same lesson you seem to need!”

Hizashi’s breaths came in shuddering jerks. His chest jerked and quivered with every breath. He didn’t understand. What had Keiko ever done to Hiashi? Why was his brother doing this to him? Why-

Hiashi twisted his hand into a seal again.
Hiashi picked up his rant right as he ended the agony, pacing back and forth. “I may not be a perfect heir, but I do my best! And I’m pretty damn good at it! I keep the clan running while Father’s off at court. I keep the missions in order, I make sure everyone is fed and equipped, and I make sure that the fucking branch family does what it’s told!” 

“And do you know what happens to all that when your son punches Elder Taeko’s granddaughter in the face?! Would you like me to just do nothing?! To stand by and let a stupid branch family child get away with that?! What do you think would happen to the clan after that?! Huh?! Did you ever think of that before you burst in here screaming about how awful I am?! Well?! Did you?!”

Hiashi’s hand curled into the activation handseal again and Hizashi flinched. 

Hiashi snorted. “I don’t know why I expected you to understand the consequences of your actions. You married outside the clan and ... what? Did you expect the seal would never get used on you? Were you really so shortsighted? Well?!” His voice rose again.

He knelt down and shoved a finger in Hizashi’s face. Hizashi jerked back. “That’s your problem Hizashi! You don’t know how to take responsibility for your actions! Me?! I’m responsible for everything here! I need to make sure this entire clan continues to grow and prosper, even after I’m gone! And you! You can’t even raise your child well enough that they don’t punch an elder’s grandchild!”

“Are you listening to me?!”

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An hour later, Hizashi shuffled out of the clan heir’s office. He had entered full of righteous fury. He left hunched over, apologizing to the world for his presence.

It was a long walk home.

His house was blurry in his sight. He could barely muster the effort to look through its walls. When he did though he saw his children, all of them, sleeping upstairs. Hinata and Yuki hugged Neji from both sides, squeezing his sleeping form between them.

Hizashi stopped walking. Tears welled up in his eyes again. Hinata was still home. Neji was hurt and Yuki was scarred but he hadn’t lost Hinata. Hiashi hadn’t - Hizashi’s thoughts stuttered - Hiashi hadn’t taken Hinata away from them.

Tears threatened to overwhelm Hizashi. He almost fell to his knees. But he couldn’t stop. Keiko. He needed to get home to Keiko. Hizashi could see her pacing in the children’s playroom,
convulsively summoning and dismissing her wakizashi. Her hair was a wild cloud around her head, all in disarray. He should- he should brush it smooth again. Her hair … her hair was so beautiful. What had he said when they’d first met? Waterfall? Had he called her hair a waterfall? No .. there was more to it than that, wasn’t there?

His eyes drifted shut and his head tilted. Keiko … he loved … Keiko ...

Hizashi snapped his head upright, suddenly awake. He sucked in a breath of humid afternoon air and righted himself. He’d almost fallen over in the middle of the path. He needed to get home before he collapsed.

Step after leaden step Hizashi dragged himself home. He slid open the front door silently. The children deserved rest after what they’d been through.

“Keiko?” he croaked out.

Keiko blitzed through the house with a pair body flickers, wrapping Hizashi in a hug before he even finished saying her name.


Hizashi opened his mouth but nothing came out.

His wife squeezed him tighter. “Yuki” she flashed the handsign adult behind his back “told me what was happening as soon as-” she faltered, “as soon as it started.” Her voice hitched, “Are- are you okay?”

Hizashi buried his face in her shoulder and gave a jerky shake of his head, no.

Keiko took a deep breath. “Alright. Let’s get you to the couch, okay? You need to lie down.” She slipped out of their hug, shifting so Hizashi’s arm lay across her shoulders and she bore his weight.

Slowly but steadily, Keiko brought him into their house. She maneuvered him in front of the couch and carefully sat him down on it. Then she sat next to him and, still touching him carefully, gently, pulled him down so he lay on his side, head in her lap.

Calloused hands with sharp nails ran through Hizashi’s hair, softly scratching his scalp. Above him Keiko sighed, “Oh love. He hurt you so badly, didn’t he?”

Hizashi nodded shakily. He wanted to say something, anything, but there was so much inside of him and the mess of it caught in his throat.

“What do you want to talk about it?”

A sob ripped its way out of Hizashi’s chest. “He’s my brother! He’s my- he’s my brother!”

“I know love. I know.” Keiko moved one of her hands to Hizashi’s chest, a gentle weight on him as she continued running her other hand through his hair.

Hizashi cried.
Keiko didn’t know how to help her husband. She didn’t know how to protect her children.

This wasn’t an enemy she could fight.

Keiko fought her wars from behind a desk, ferreting out hidden secrets, leveraging political rivalries and bureaucratic flaws. She was good at her job. Even as Hizashi cried and she soothed him, her mind spun with ways to ruin his brother, to cripple Hiashi’s political standing and destroy his reputation. She couldn’t attack one of Konoha’s clan heirs, couldn’t go after him with blades and fire, but she could ruin him nonetheless.

A quiet talk with Yuzo Sarutobi, a plea for help reconciling two at-odds brothers; Yuzo wouldn’t be able to resist getting involved and he’d pull the Sarutobi clan’s attention straight to Hiashi. Then an anonymous report about her husband’s mental status to the Yamanaka’s Internal Affairs department, to trigger an investigation into what had happened to him. Finish it up with a personal request to the Academy to consider assigning observers to Hyuuga training sessions, ostensibly so the Academy could learn from Hyuuga training techniques but with a private plea to her old Academy instructor to assign someone who knew how to deal with abusive authority figures … The rumor mill among Konoha’s ninja would do the rest and in the fallout Hiashi would lose every ounce of respect he had among Konoha’s ruling clans.

But that wouldn’t help.

If Hiashi was hurt he would want to feel strong again. He would hurt the people he had control over. Hizashi would suffer even more, Neji and Yuki would become targets, Hinata could be taken away from them. And as much as Keiko didn’t want to care, her sister-in-law Yuki could also become a target. She wouldn’t put anything past that vile man.

Keiko could hurt Hiashi. She could end his political ambitions in a cold, righteous rage. She could punish him for what he’d done to her love, to her children. (An ugly, vicious part of Keiko snarled. Hiashi had hurt her baby, she needed to make him pay.)

But she couldn’t protect her family from him.

As much as Konoha would spurn Hiashi personally for abusing his power, as much as his behavior would disgust them, no one would risk alienating the Hyuuga clan. No one would for a moment suggest any reforms to protect the branch family, would dare suggest the main family was anything less than noble in their rule. To even try inspiring such reforms could be considered an attempt drive a rift between Konoha and the Hyuuga, could see Keiko charged with treason.

No matter what she did, no matter how much she hurt Hiashi, at the end of the day Keiko’s family would be slaves and they would pay for Hiashi’s pain.

Keiko sniffed.

Her husband turned, looking up at her and meeting her eyes. He always made such an effort to look at her, not past her and through her as it was so easy for Hyuuga to do.

“Keiko,” he said. “You’re crying.”

She took her hand off his chest to wipe away her tears.

“Keiko.” He reached a hand up to her face, but stopped and faltered before his hand touched her. He pulled back just a fraction. His mouth opened a slice and words waited on the tip of his tongue.

“Do you regret marrying me?”
The question pulled air from her lungs as if she had been punched. “What?”

Words kept pouring out of her husband, “Do you think you would have been happier marrying someone else? There’s-” he hiccuped, “-you can’t be happy like this. You can’t be okay with-” he hiccuped again, “-with this. Do you ever- do you ever think you would have been happier marrying somebody else?”

Keiko sucked in a breath, leaned down, and kissed her husband on his forehead. She pressed her forehead to his. “Love. You have just been tortured by your brother, because you decided to marry me. Because you loved me.” She pulled back to look him in the eyes. “And you’re asking if I regret marrying you? If I think I would have been happier marrying someone else?”

She leaned in and kissed him, savoring the feel of his nose next to hers, of his breath catching in his throat. She smiled softly, lips still touching his. “You have lost family today in a way I can hardly imagine. You have been horribly hurt. You’re distraught, you’re confused, and your mind is spitting out the worst thoughts it can because that’s what happens after a worst-case scenario comes true. And the worst thing you can think of is that you might be a burden for me?”

Keiko kissed him again. “No, I don’t think I would have been happier marrying someone else.”

Hiashi teared up again. “Oh.”

Keiko pulled back, sitting up straight and running both of her hands through Hiashi’s hair again. “Now, like I just said, you have been hurt. So this is what is going to happen. I am going to comfort you and help you process this as best I can. You are not,” she gave her husband a mock glare, “going to be concerned about how I feel tonight. You are going to be cared for. Tonight, you’re what’s important. And tomorrow our children will be what’s important. Some time later, after all of this is settled, we can sit down and talk about how this makes me feel. But right now, you’re what matters. Okay?”

“What did I ever do to deserve you?”

“You told me I was the most beautiful person you’d ever met and you meant it. There was some impromptu poetry, if I remember right. It was the dorkiest, silliest thing I’d ever heard and you said it all with a straight face. And when I stopped laughing you said I had a good sense of humor and a lovely laugh and that you’d like to make me laugh more often.”

Hiashi halted through a half remembered memory, smiling. “Your hair is like a waterfall over smooth rocks, your eyes could light a foggy night-”

“Oh gods, no!” Keiko laughed. “I’d forgotten how bad your poetry was as a teenager. You’re lucky you got better at it.”

Hizashi’s smile dropped off his face. “Hiashi helped. He didn’t know the poetry was for you.”

The mood darkened.

“Oh,” Keiko said, “I never knew that.”

“We were brothers.”

“Yes,” Keiko said softly, “you were.”
The gentle thump of tiny feet on the stairs woke Keiko up. She craned her head, trying to peer over her husband’s shoulder as he lay atop her.

She caught a glimpse of Yuki as he came downstairs, dressed in a fuzzy pink nightgown. Keiko smiled a little to herself as she saw his nightgown, dyed the brightest pink she’d been able to find. Her children’s clothes were a little private joke she played on the Hyuuga. Everything in the Hyuuga compound was clean white or dull brown, not a splash of color to be found anywhere. The Hyuuga couldn’t see color after all, so why would they decorate with it? They could distinguish different dyes and paints if they focused intently, but color just wasn’t part of their world.

Well, Keiko objected to a colorless existence. She had filled her and Hizashi’s home with color. She’d painted and dyed and furnished until every room of their house was filled with a riot of brilliant color that only she noticed. And when her children were born (twins, of course they were twins), she’d color-coded them for her convenience. All the prim and proper white garments the Hyuuga had supplied for her, she dyed. She colored Neji a brilliant sky blue and Yuki bright, bright pink, so that her children would always catch her eye.

And when Hinata had entered their lives and become Neji and Yuki’s sister, Keiko had dyed all of Hinata’s clothes emerald green.

Keiko’s pink child padded across the living room until he stood in in front of the couch, next to her and Hizashi’s heads. “Hey Yuki,” Keiko said quietly. She glanced out the living room window, where night had long since fallen. She reached out and took Yuki’s closest hand, the burned one. “What are you doing up this late?”

Yuki opened his mouth and closed it again, the way he did when he was thinking hard about what to say. “You aren’t in your room.”

“No, your father was,” Keiko’s voice only hitched for a moment, “very tired when he came home.” She patted still-sleeping Hizashi with her free hand. “We sat down on the couch to rest and I guess at some point we fell asleep.”

There was no way Yuki had come downstairs just to say that. Keiko knew the value of silence though, knew that if she just waited and let Yuki speak he would eventually find his way to what he wanted to say.

“Did Auntie go home?”

“Mmhm. She left after you three fell asleep. She wanted to,” how to phrase it, “talk to Hiashi as soon as Dad was done talking to him.” She had wanted to make sure her husband didn’t return to an empty house and come to the conclusion that Hizashi had somehow stolen his family away from him. Hiashi might have actually killed Hizashi for such an insult.

Yuki hummed acknowledgment and fell silent. He was quiet for a long time before he spoke again.

This time when he spoke his voice cracked with emotion, “Mom?”

“Yes Yuki?”

He sniffled. “I need a hug.”

Hizashi blinked slowly, barely conscious. “Nnn?”

“Yuki needs a hug. You’re on top of me.”

“Oh.” Hizashi blinked rapidly awake and pushed himself up, resting his weight on his elbows to either side of Keiko. “Hey,” he said to Yuki, voice as soft as he could make it, “hey. Mom says you need a hug?”

Yuki nodded.

“Come here then.” Hizashi gestured to the space between himself and Keiko. “We can both give you a hug.”

Keiko smiled and patted her chest. “Yeah. Come here Yuki.”

With another small nod Yuki pulled himself onto the couch and sandwiched himself between Keiko and Hizashi. Hizashi let himself back down and wrapped his arms around Keiko and Yuki. “I’m not squishing you too badly, am I?”

Their son shook his head softly. “Nn-nn.”

Keiko stroked her son’s face, rubbing her thumb over the smooth skin of his face where he could feel her hand. “Are you okay Yuki? Are you comfy there?”

There was pause before he responded. “Hugs are important.”

Keiko smiled. “Yes they are.” She looked up at Hizashi, who had already fallen back asleep. “They are very important.”

Yuki drifted slowly off to sleep, sandwiched between his parents.

And Keiko smiled. She couldn’t protect the people important to her. She couldn’t hurt the people who had hurt them. But she could be there for them.

Hopefully that would be enough.

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Chapter End Notes

Canon Terms:

-Body Flicker
-Sarutobi Clan
-Yamanaka Clan

Author’s Ramblings: Hizashi and Keiko have an official song now and it is Hazy by Rosi Golan.
I have a weakness for people sleeping in piles which I am going to shamelessly indulge as I write this story.

*stares intently at kudos counter* One more. Just one more to 100.

On a more serious note, I feel like I succeeded in giving Keiko more characterization, but not so much with Hizashi. And while I can think of any number of scenes I could write in the future to give Hizashi more screentime, I’m struggling to come up with any which would add to his characterization.
Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Graphic depiction of depressed and suicidal thoughts, considered suicide, and domestic abuse / child abuse. Some of the child abuse, while not sexual in nature, parallels a scenario common in sexual abuse and might be triggering to survivors of childhood sexual abuse in particular.

After this chapter we’ll get back to the younger Yuki’s perspective and the story will start getting brighter, I promise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 15: Dark Waters (Hinata/Aunt Yuki)

(1 day later)

“Mommy why do we have to go?”

“Hiashi is leaving to visit grandpa at court tomorrow, so this will be our last chance to have dinner with him for a while.”

Hinata pouted. “Auntie Keiko was g’nna teach us to fold bao.” Auntie Keiko folded bao so fast! Hinata wanted to be that fast!

Mommy smiled funny. “I know sweetie. But you can do that some other time. And this is just one night. Tomorrow Hiashi will be on his trip and you can have dinner here every night of the week.”

Hinata pouted more. It wasn’t fair. Daddy made her do that awful training with him that hurt! Daddy made Neji hurt! He yelled at Teacher Tamie! Auntie Keiko made bao! Really fluffy bao! Why would dinner with Daddy ever be better than dinner with Auntie Keiko?

“It’s only one night sweetie. You can sleep one night at home, right?”

Hinata gasped. “I can’t sleep with Neji ‘n Yuki?!” She had not been told about this!

Mommy pressed a hand to her forehead. “I- yes, I mean no, I-” Mommy’s voice became pleading. “Hinata I told you we were spending the night at home.”

“Spending the night doesn’t mean sleeping!” Hinata was appalled. Mommy had lied to her!

“Hinata just go say goodbye to everyone. We’ll see them again in the morning.”

“No!” You didn’t have to do what liars said. That was a rule.

Mommy knelt down. “I know you like it here Hinata. But it’s just one night, okay? I promise you everything will be fine in the morning.” Mommy pulled her into a hug. “You’re a brave girl right?
You can sleep in your room for just one night, can’t you?”

Hinata squirmed out of the hug. “Nnnno!”

“Wait, Hinata wait just one moment.”

“NO!” Hinata ran. She tore out of the playroom as fast as she could. She could see Auntie Keiko in the kitchen, kneading dough. If she could just get to Auntie Keiko she wouldn’t have to go. Auntie Keiko was a safe zone.

“Hinata!”

Hinata ducked under the dining room table as she ran, narrowly avoiding Yuki’s feet. Yuki looked up from his papers as she passed him. “Hinata? What are you doing?”

“Safe!” she yelled back. She was going to the safe zone.

Except all of a sudden she was not going to the safe zone. Mommy’s hands flickered and her chakra twisted really strange. The chakra in one of the table chairs twisted really strange too. And then Mommy was standing next to the table and the chair was in the living room and Mommy grabbed Hinata and lifted her into the air and it wasn’t fair! She had been so close to the safe zone! How did Mommy even do that?

Auntie poked her head out of the kitchen. “Is everything alright?”

“NO! I don’t wanna!”

Auntie came out of the kitchen, brushing her hands off on her cooking apron. She turned her head towards Mommy when she spoke to her, which was a weird thing Auntie did. “Is she alright?”

No! Mommy was taking her away from bao! She was not alright! Hinata wailed her discomfort.

“Yes. She’s just throwing a tantrum. We’ll be fine.”

Auntie signed something at Mommy and Hinata gasped. Adults only did that when they wanted to hide things from her! But Auntie was supposed to be on her side!

Mommy shook her head as she shifted Hinata to balance better on her hip. “No. I … thank you Keiko but no. Hinata needs to come with me. It’ll be best if we have some family time with Hiashi before he leaves.”

“No. I … thank you Keiko but no. Hinata needs to come with me. It’ll be best if we have some family time with Hiashi before he leaves.”

“Auntie’s words seemed like maybe she wanted Hinata to stay. But Hinata didn’t like the way she said them, all angry.

“I- Keiko- please. You know Hiashi. We can’t reject him right before he leaves. That would hurt him the whole time he’s gone and you know how he’d be when he got back.”

Auntie didn’t say anything for a long moment. “Fine. Do what you have to do.” She turned around in a huff and strode back into the kitchen. Mommy slumped as Auntie walked away.

Hinata stared worriedly at Mommy and then at Auntie through the wall. She … maybe didn’t want to stay here tonight. She didn’t like it when Auntie and Mommy fought.

Mommy took a deep breath, and then another, before saying, “Alright. Let’s go home, then.”
Of course that didn’t mean Hinata wanted to go home either. “I don’t wanna!”

“Hinata … please …”

“DON’T WANNA!”

---

Hinata sat in her chair at the dining room table obediently and sniffled. She’d screamed and yelled the whole way over, but she seemed to have finally tired herself out. Now she just hiccuped and cried.

Yuki kept finding her focus drawn back to her daughter as she did her best to cook dinner for Hiashi. She didn’t need the distraction. She was already such a terrible cook, so prone to missing cues while cooking, and dinner needed to be perfect. Tonight would already be such a delicate balancing act, she couldn’t afford to ruin Hiashi’s dinner too.

But Hinata was crying. And it was her fault. How could she just ignore that?

*There’s nothing I can do,* Yuki told herself, *things would only be worse if Hinata wasn’t here tonight. I can’t try to comfort her right now. That would just get her riled up again and there’s no time to deal with that. I need to have dinner done before Hiashi gets home.*

But her excuses rang hollow to herself even as she made them. What kind of monster let her daughter cry when she could be comforting her? When she could have just left Hinata with Keiko like Keiko had offered?

What kind of monster did what she had done to Keiko’s children?

She’d just handed them over without making a fuss. She hadn’t done anything to protect them. Keiko and Hizashi had trusted her with their children and look what had happened.

She couldn’t protect anyone. Why did she even try? She hadn’t been able to talk Hiashi out of ‘sparring’ with Hinata. How stupid was she if she couldn’t convince her husband that sparring with their four year old daughter wouldn’t teach her how to fight? Hinata was still covered in bruises from yesterday. But Yuki wasn’t going to bring that up with Hiashi tonight. She was too much of a coward to try again. Too much of a coward to stand up to him when he was already so upset.

She didn’t deserve to be a mother. She didn’t deserve to have such a beautiful child. She didn’t deserve to be in her nephew’s lives. Gods, she certainly didn’t deserve to have her brother-in-law’s child *named* after her. She was such an awful person. Hinata would probably be better off if she just died.

*Ding!*

The timer for the boiling rice noodles went off, startling Yuki back to awareness. Her heart beat fast and fear made her hands shake. Mechanically she took the pot off the heat and put a colander in the sink.

*I thought I was done with those thoughts. I thought I was getting better.*
Yuki drained the noodles. Then she remembered the shrimp and panicked. She’d been spacing out for way too long if the noodles were already done!

*Oh please don’t let the shrimp be burned, please please please …*

The shrimp were … not burned. She’d probably overcooked them. But they weren’t burned. She let out a breath. Dinner wasn’t ruined.

Not that she had anything to do with that though. She’d been saved by sheer dumb luck. She was such a screw up, couldn’t even cook shrimp in a pan. Who couldn’t cook shrimp? How pathetic could she get?

*No, don’t think like that.* Yuki took a deep breath.

The dark thoughts had started a few weeks after she’d given birth to Hinata. She had just been so tired all the time. Taking care of Hinata had drained her so much. She’d almost started to resent Hinata. Then the self-recrimination had started. What kind of mother resented her child? She’d started to feel so worthless. And she’d been so tired. It took so much energy to fight those feelings. To try and feel good about anything she did. It’d taken more energy than she had.

Then Hinata had started having trouble sleeping. And then Hinata had started refusing her milk. She hadn’t been able to get her own child to nurse! It’d become harder and harder to convince herself that she had anything to offer anyone. Her career as a combat ninja had failed. Her marriage had been a failure from the start, she’d never been good enough for Hiashi. And then she’d failed as a mother on the most fundamental level.

She’d started wondering if anyone would actually miss her if she was gone. If people might actually be relieved if she died.

The first time she’d seriously thought about killing herself had been terrifying.

The rush of fear when she’d realized what she’d been thinking, what she’d almost done, had sent her into a nervous panic. She’d checked out another half a dozen parenting books from the library and read through them in a rush, trying to fix herself and become the mother Hinata needed. She’d bought a dozen types of baby formula and tried feeding them to Hinata, in case there was something wrong with her milk. She’d even tried to seduce Hiashi and bring some romance into their marriage, which was insane in retrospect. But she’d wanted to fix *something* in her life so badly. To prove to herself that she wasn’t a complete failure. That some part of her life was worth living.

None of it had worked. She’d run out of energy. The despair returned. The suicidal thoughts came again, worse. She hadn’t been capable of fixing it on her own.

So she’d gone to her sister-in-law for help, who’d recently become a mother herself. She knew it would make Hiashi mad (and it did, oh it did), but she also knew that she wasn’t strong enough to keep herself alive. She knew if she didn’t get help from somewhere she was going to die.

And it had worked! The more time Hinata spent out of the house with her cousins, the more she slept and the more she nursed. And the more time Yuki spent out of the house, the less she had to deal with Hiashi and his impossible standards.

Things had started to get better, slowly. The more time she spent with her other family (as she tentatively began to think of them) the less she felt like everybody else would be better off if she died. She started to feel like maybe somebody would miss her if she died. Slowly, oh so slowly,
she stopped feeling guilty about wanting to live. Eventually, the suicidal thoughts went away entirely. She still struggled with bouts of despair and worthlessness. But she was getting better!

Yuki folded the shrimp, noodles, and minced vegetables into rice wrappers. They were lumpy and uneven, not the perfect neat rolls Hizashi could make. They probably wouldn’t taste as good as Hizashi’s either.

Yuki looked at the the work still left to do. It wasn’t much. Just some stir fry and a few bok choy to steam. She’d seen Hizashi casually whip up more complicated meals for for breakfast. But right now it seemed like more than she could possibly muster the energy to do.

And Hinata was still crying.

Yuki had been getting better.

Now she wasn’t.

---

Dinner was chicken stir fry with chopped vegetables, shrimp and noodle rice rolls, and layers of steamed bok choy coated in a thick garlic oyster sauce. Yuki didn’t even like garlic, she hated the thought of how it made her breath smell, but Hiashi liked it so that’s what she’d cooked.

Hiashi barely even looked at the food on his plate when he showed up for dinner. He came home, gave Yuki a perfunctory hello, ignored Hinata, and started eating. He ate in silence, without any indication of enjoyment or disgust. The whole process took maybe ten minutes.

When his plates were clear Hiashi wiped his mouth and turned to puffy-eyed Hinata, who had hardly picked at her food all dinner.

Hinata looked up at him nervously, before ducking her head and dimming her eyes.

“So,” he began.

Hinata flinched.

“What was that shameful display yesterday?”

Hinata ducked her head further and clutched her hands together under the table. Yuki tensed.

“Well?” Hiashi’s voice carried an edge.

“I … uh,” Hinata whispered.

Her father blew a hard breath out through his nose. “What was that at class yesterday? You ran away and cried? In front of all of the other children? In front of your teacher?”

Yuki started to reach out to him before stopping. What would she say to him? That Hinata hadn’t been the only child crying? That is was perfectly reasonable for their daughter to cry while seeing her cousin get tortured? Gods no. If the problem wasn’t Hinata then that would mean the problem was what Hiashi had done, and no good would come of blaming him for anything.
Hiashi continued, building up steam, “You’re a ninja and you need to act like it. You can’t run away just because someone gets hurt! You need thicker skin, Hinata.”

His daughter nodded miserably.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you!”

Hinata flinched again and brightened her eyes, just enough to see through her forehead. She didn’t raise her head though.

“This is what I’m talking about! You can’t jump every time someone raises their voice. You’re a ninja. You’re going to be in battles, people are going to yell.” Her father shook his head in disgust. “Your academy teachers are going to yell too, you know that? During drills, when reprimanding stupid students. What are they going to think of a Hyuuga who can’t deal with that?”

Hinata made a tiny sound in her throat and wrung her hands.

“Good gods this is pathetic.”

Yuki drew in a breath. That was- he couldn’t say that to their daughter. Her heart began to race and she readied herself to interrupt him.

Then, without warning, the violence vanished from his voice. His face smoothed and he sighed. “Hinata when I get back we’re going to continue our sparring lessons in the morning. When we do we’ll be working on your attitude as well, is that understood?”

Hinata nodded, two quick shaky jerks of her head.

Hiashi raised an eyebrow a fraction but didn’t raise his voice. “Hinata. We talked about this.”

“Yes sir.”

“Better.” Hiashi yawned and covered his mouth. He shook his head slightly and blinked tiredly. “It’s been a long couple days. Yuki, can you clean up here? I’ll put Hinata to bed and then get to bed myself. I need to leave early in the morning so I don’t have the time to stay up and help you with the dishes.”

Yuki nodded, heart still racing and adrenaline flowing through her. Was he done? Was that all?

Hiashi got up and led Hinata upstairs. Yuki stayed seated at the table for a long moment, tentatively prodding at the feeling of relief inside herself. That- that could have been much worse.

She pushed herself upright, sucking in a pair of deep breaths as her body protested the sudden movement and the edges of her vision darkened. She pressed one hand to the table to keep herself upright and her other hand to her ribs. Even years after getting her lung scarred, sometimes she still forgot and stood up too fast.

After she caught her breath Yuki pushed herself fully upright and started picking up plates from the table. She paused at Hinata’s largely untouched plates and made a mental note to feed her extra in the morning, and to set out a few snacks in case Hinata got hungry during the night. What was that breakfast dish Hizashi made which Hinata liked so much? The one where he coated rice with eggs and cooked it? She’d have to make that in the morning.

The plates clattered as she set them down on the kitchen counter. She looked at them and her heart sank. It wasn’t that much work to do was it? She just had to box the leftovers, scrub the dishes and
set them out to dry. And scrub the pots and pans too. And wipe down the counters. That wasn’t that much to do was it?

Why did simple things feel so heavy?

*I managed to finish dinner. That felt like too much and I finished that. I can do this. Right?*

How pathetic. Once she’d been a ninja. She’d fought in a war. Now making dinner was an accomplishment for her. What had she been thinking, imagining that things might ‘get better’? She felt bad because she was too pathetic to do dishes, that’s why she felt awful. There wasn’t anything to fix or improve, because she was the problem.

*I can at least put the leftovers in the fridge, right? And leave the plates to soak in the sink? Can’t I do that much?*

Yuki was still staring at the dishes, motionless, when Hiashi started shouting.

---

Hinata grinned when she was done brushing her teeth, giving Daddy a wide open mouthed smile. She was really good at brushing her teeth, Uncle Hizashi said so! Keeping her eyes bright enough to see inside her mouth while moving her toothbrush felt weird, kinda like patting her head and rubbing her tummy at the same time. But she could do it!

Daddy nodded at her and smiled, patting her on the head. “Alright Hinata, it’s time for bed. Let’s move.”

Hinata grinned again, this time with relief. She was glad Daddy wasn’t mad anymore.

Daddy brought her to the room she was supposed to sleep in, covering his mouth and yawning as they walked. “Get undressed, put your nightgown on, and I’ll tuck you in,” he said.

That brought Hinata to a halt. She tilted her head to the side and blinked at Daddy. “Ummm … Daddy?”

“What?”

“Ummmmmm,” she needed Mommy to help her undress. Maybe Daddy was being silly and not paying attention, like Yuki did sometimes when he was busy.

Daddy blew a breath out of his nose. “Hinata, I don’t have time for twenty questions. What is it? Do you need to go to the bathroom again, do I need to read you a story, what is it?”

He was being silly. “Daddy~” Hinata said, in the tone of voice reserved for silly people, “Mommy needs to help me be undressed.”

“Oh. Okay. Let me help you then.” Daddy knelt down in front of her and reached for her robe.

Hinata backed away. What? No! “Daddy, *Mommy* needs to help me be undressed.”

Daddy took a deep breath. “Hinata, it will be fine. I can help you just as well as Mommy can. Come over here.”
“No! You can’t!”

Daddy’s chakra surged, shining bright in his hands and his face. “Hinata. Come over here.”

Hinata shook her head hard, sending hair flying around her face. “No! I want Mommy!”

“Hinata! Come over here now!” When Hinata shook her head again Daddy stood up and stomped over to her. “Hinata! I’m not going to say it again!”

“No!”

“HINATA! DO WHAT I SAY!” Daddy reached for her robe, grabbing her sleeves.

“Nnoooo! I want Mommy! I want Mommy, I want Mommy, I want Mommy!”

---

Yuki ran upstairs as soon as her husband started shouting, fighting the emptiness in her bad lung as she darted up the stairs.

No, no, no, no. Why does he have to blow up now?

She jerked to a stop in the doorway to Hinata’s bedroom, clutching the doorframe with one hand. Inside Hiashi was fighting with Hinata, pushing and pulling at her arms and robe as she wailed.

“Hinata! Just! Go! To! Bed!”

“Noooooo! I want Mommy! Mommy, Mommy, Mommyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy.”

Yuki’s breaths came faster and she gripped the doorframe harder, clenching until her hand hurt. She shouldn’t interfere. If she stepped in Hiashi would only get angrier. The best thing for Hinata would be for her to not intervene. Anything she did would just make the situation worse.

“Mommmmyyyyyy!”

“SHUT UP!”

She could only make things worse.

“Mommmmmmmyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!”

Minutes passed as Hiashi struggled to yank the robe off of Hinata’s flailing arms. Hinata screamed. Hiashi shouted. Hinata cried. Hiashi shouted louder.

By the time Hiashi finally tried to put the nightgown on Hinata, her protests had been muted to weakly trying to hold her arms around her head and small whimpers of “no, no, don’t”. He jerked her around with bruising force, pulled the nightgown down around her, and manhandled her arms through the holes.

He stood up, face convulsing with rage, and spat, “Now. Go. To. Bed.”

Hinata leapt onto the bed and scrambled under the covers, clutching a pillow to her chest and
heaving with sobs.

Hiashi strode towards the door, showing no signs of stopping where Yuki was standing. She stumbled back out of his way as he exited the room, wincing as he *slammed* the door behind him. He glared at her, face twisted with disgust, and told her, “Leave Hinata be. She needs to learn that there are consequences for being difficult.”

He turned away from her and strode down the hall to his room.

Silently, Yuki touched the tears streaming down her face. She should go to Hinata. Rush into her room and scoop her up and hold her and tell her that everything would be alright. But if she did, Hiashi would come back. He would start screaming again. And the whole ordeal would start all over. There was nothing Yuki could do.

*There’s nothing I can do.*

The thought repeated in Yuki’s mind as she turned away from her daughter’s room, turning in her head over and over. She drifted downstairs on autopilot, back into the kitchen. She stood in front of the dishes without seeing them, the whole of her vision dedicated to her sobbing daughter.

*I can’t do anything.*

What was the point in living if she couldn’t do anything about this? Hinata didn’t need a mother like her. Hinata would be better off with Keiko and Hizashi. They would care for her and love her better than Yuki ever could. Hizashi had at least tried to stand up to Hiashi. He had to have known how that would turn out. Yuki couldn’t imagine anyone not knowing how Hiashi would react to having his power challenged. But Hizashi had done it anyway for his son.

*I should just die.*

The first time that thought had come to her it had been so scary. But right now it felt almost like a relief. She could just die. Then no one would have to deal with her anymore. Hinata wouldn’t be burdened with her as a mother, Keiko wouldn’t have to suffer her presence, Neji and little Yuki could just forget she ever existed. Even Hizashi, who said he didn’t blame her for what happened to his children, he could stop pretending that he liked her. Everyone would be better off if she died.

Yuki turned her right hand palm up. Most of her attention was still focused on Hinata, but a small part of her idly noticed the main chakra pathways flowing through her hand and the primary tenketsu in her palm.

The Gentle Fist style of the Hyuuga could create turbulent blasts of chakra which would inflict devastating internal damage to an enemy ninja. A palm strike from a Hyuuga could liquify organs. A strike to the brain would kill instantly. Just a touch, a pulse of chakra, and then the brain would be mush and a living person would be dead.

It would be painless. Easy. Yuki could just rest her head in her palm and everything would be over.

But if she died, Hinata wouldn’t actually end up with Keiko and Hizashi. The only reason Hinata had her aunt and uncle in her life was because Yuki lived. If she died, Hinata wouldn’t go live with them, she would just stay with her father. She’d stay with her father and he certainly wouldn’t take her to her relatives’ house. Hinata would never be with her aunt, her uncle, or her cousins ever again.

Killing herself would be so simple. If Yuki could know that Hinata would end up with her extended family, that they would take care of her …
But that wasn’t how things would happen. Hinata could only stay with her family while Yuki remained alive.

Yuki slowly put her hand down on the kitchen counter. She couldn’t die yet. Tomorrow she needed to get up and take Hinata back to Keiko and Hizashi’s.

*I’m so tired.*

Upstairs Hinata cried.

The shadow of a thought brushed Yuki’s mind, a wordless knowledge that she had to help Hinata. She had to.

Slowly, without really feeling what she was doing, Yuki put the leftover food away and cleaned the dishes. When she was done she sharpened her sight and checked on Hiashi. He was in bed, but still awake. Not asleep quite yet. So Yuki cleaned the counters. And when Hiashi was still awake after that, she wiped down the table too.

By the time she was finished with the table Hiashi had finally fallen asleep. Hinata was not. She was still awake, sniffling into the pillow clutched to her chest.

Yuki padded up the stairs, wrapping chakra around her feet to muffle the sound. She opened Hinata’s door with the same care, holding a hand and a foot to the door’s hinges and wrapping them with chakra.

Hinata looked up as the door opened. “Mommy?”

Yuki nodded, holding a finger to her lips. She padded across the room and swept Hinata up into her arms, clutching her close.

“Mommy,” Hinata cried quietly, “Mommy.”

Yuki sat down on the edge of the bed, cradling Hinata. “I’m here Hinata. I’m here.” She spoke quietly to avoid waking Hiashi.

Her daughter pressed her mouth into her robe and Yuki felt her damp breath as she cried, “You didn’t. You were there. And you didn’t-, you didn’t-, Mommy you didn’t-,” Hinata sobbed, “Mommy I was scared.”

Yuki closed her eyes. *You deserve a better mother than me.* She squeezed Hinata. “Tomorrow we’re going home, okay? Things will be better for you tomorrow.”

Hinata made a wordless noise, rubbing her face against Yuki. Yuki rocked her daughter back and forth, back and forth.

Hinata fell asleep slowly, eyes creeping shut by degrees. When she was fast asleep Yuki set her daughter down gently, tucking her in and setting up two pillows for Hinata to cuddle, one in front of her and one behind her.

After putting Hinata to sleep Yuki crept quietly into bed with her husband, slipping onto the opposite side of the wide mattress. Eventually she too fell asleep.

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In the morning the violence had passed from Hiashi. He made a quick breakfast for them (fish and rice, no eggs) and kissed Yuki on the cheek. He told Yuki that he trusted her to make sure Hinata did well in her classes, admonished Hinata to be good, and left.

When he was out the front door Yuki went back into the kitchen and whipped up eggs for Hinata.

When he’d gone past the range of her sight Yuki kissed Hinata on the forehead and told her that they could go home now.

And when they were home and Hinata was welcomed back with hugs and kisses, Yuki tried to feel better. She smiled at Keiko even when it hurt. She accepted Hizashi’s hug and tried not to feel like a parasite when she leaned into his warmth. She ruffled Neji and Yuki’s hair and didn’t fixate guiltily on their branch family seals for too long.

She couldn’t remember why she was trying to feel better. There didn’t seem to be a point when the family around her would clearly be so much more complete without her.

But she had worked so hard on getting better for so long. She had told herself that she would get better, no matter what. That was what she was supposed to do. To work on getting better. Even if there didn’t seem to be a point to it right now, she would keep at it.

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Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: I cannot emphasize this enough, Yuki’s opinion of herself in this chapter is wrong. The thoughts she has about herself are the result of untreated postpartum depression, and are not reflective of the reality of her situation. She doesn’t need to stop being worthless, she needs a therapist to help her see that she’s not worthless. If you have thoughts like this, I highly recommend sharing them with those close to you and seeking a therapist's opinion.

On a lighter note, because I desperately need a lighter note in this: If you’re familiar with Asian food, you’ve probably noticed that I’m mixing and matching dishes from a whole hodge-podge of cultures. This isn’t out of ignorance, it’s because I have a very eclectic cooking education and I mix and match dishes like this in real life. I am the kind of person who will shamelessly serve spicy matzah balls alongside lo bak go, and the food in my stories reflects this.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 16: Little Changes

(6 years)

“Auntie can I have pencils too? Please~?” Hinata was a ruthless master of puppy dog eyes and she turned them on Mom without mercy.

Mom gave Hinata a helpless look. “Hinata, you’re not starting the Academy until next year. Why would you want pencils?” She tossed Neji and I’s pencils in her shopping basket and tried to lead Hinata away from the store’s pencils.

“But Auntie~” she pleaded, “Neji ‘n Yuki are getting pencils. Why can’t I have pencils too?” The look she gave Mom was a perfect combination of longing, hesitant joy, and potential hurt, with just a hint of nascent tears to finish the effect. It was a perfectly executed manipulation.

But Hinata’s puppy dog eyes had evolved to such a perfect form for a reason. The more effective she became at getting our parents to spoil her, the more their wallets demanded they build up a resistance to her charms. Hinata’s pleading may have been art form forged in the fires of a desperate arms race for more sweets and soft things, but so was Mom’s resilience. And at this point in the race, Mom’s will was stronger.

“Hinata, no. We’ll get you pencils next year.” Her voice was firm, declaring an end to the issue.

Neji let out a horrified gasp. “But how will she do homework with us then?” Neji was very excited about the prospect of getting to do homework and absolutely delighted at the thought of playing this new and exciting game with his siblings.

Mom sighed. “Neji,” she explained for the dozenth time, “Hinata will not be doing homework with you. She doesn’t start school this year.”

“That doesn’t mean she can’t do homework with us!”

Not for the first time, I wondered if Neji actually understood what homework was. I mean, I’d tried to explain the concept to him. And I thought he’d understood me. But comments like this made me wonder.

Mom sighed again. She turned to me as a last resort. “Yuki, you have the list. What’s the next thing we’re supposed to get?” I could see the gears turning in her head. If she could just get us moving towards the next part of the store, maybe she could get Hinata and Neji to drop the pencils issue.

I felt the neatly folded school supply list in my pocket. I could help Mom out. That was a thing I could do. But …
I glanced at the rows of pencils next to us. The neat, perfect racks filled with *erasable writing instruments*. Pencils! They existed in this world! Beautiful little sticks which left lines that were uniformly sized and, this could not be emphasized enough, *could be erased*.

I stared up at Mom. With all of the cold betrayal my young voice could muster I asked, “Mom. Why did we learn to write with ink brushes when pencils exist?”

The sudden change of topic made Mom blink. “Huh?”

“Why,” I enunciated slowly, “did you make us learn to write with non-erasable ink brushes when erasable pencils exist?” Words could not fully express the betrayal I felt, but I tried my damndest to pack it all in anyway.

Mom’s brain caught up to the change of topic and she responded, “Uh, well, learning with ink brushes first will help you be better at calligraphy later in life. Learning with pencils is kind of a crutch.”

My working eyelid twitched. I had suffered through ink splotches and lopsided characters and the inability to erase *ruining* my writing’s symmetry for the past four fucking years so I could be better at calligraphy? *Calligraphy*?!

*I will not bite Mom, I will not bite Mom, I will not bite Mom.*

I fixed a rictus grin on my face, taking advantage of the melted side of my face to make it as awful as I could. Without taking my eyes off of Mom I pulled the school supply list out of my pocket and unfolded it. Maintaining my stare I spoke, “Oh. Would you look at that. What a coincidence. The next item on the list is ‘pencils for Hinata too’. It says so right here in those exact words: ‘pencils for Hinata too’. How considerate of the school administrators.”

Hinata squealed. “Yay!”

Neji joined in too, jumping into the air and shouting joyously.

Mom gave me a Look as she took the list from me. “Your list privileges are revoked Yuki.” She looked down at the two delighted children staring up at her, then back at me. “Dammit,” she muttered under her breath. “Alright. We are getting you pencils Hinata. *Just* pencils.”

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We met up with Aunt Yuki in a park set next to the main marketplace. She was sharing a bench with a basket of training kunai, shuriken, ninja wire, tiny fabric mesh vests, and other fake, miniaturized implements of war. She tossed oats to a group of ducks in a pond, which looked like they were considering rushing her to get the oats all at once (Konoha’s duck population is kind of aggressive). We greeted her from across the park, waving and shouting greetings.

She waved back and then blinked, stopping mid-wave. “Keiko. Why do you have three sets of school supplies?”

Mom glowered good-naturedly. “The same reason you’re going to have to go back and grab more training gear.”
Aunt Yuki opened her mouth to inquire further, before noticing the delighted grin on Hinata’s face. “Ah,” she said, and closed her mouth.

I couldn’t resist twisting the knife a bit deeper. “Mom lacks the willpower to resist our pleading,” I piped up. Mom was the weakest of our parents when it came to resisting our whims, and more than a little embarrassed about it.

Mom gave me a flat look. “I could toss you into the pond Yuki. You know that right?”

I stuck my tongue out at Mom and hoisted myself up onto the bench next to Aunt Yuki. I knew Mom wouldn’t actually toss me into the pond, but I made a show of scooching in close to Aunt Yuki and using her as a safe zone anyway.

Mom grinned for a moment before looking back to Aunt Yuki. “Yuki” adult she signed “could you go get that extra set of equipment for Hinata? I don’t want us to be too late getting home for dinner…” she trailed off.

Any hint of a smile which might have been hesitating at the corners of Aunt Yuki’s lips vanished. “Oh. Um. Sure. I can do that.”

*Not this again.* I cringed and shrunk in on myself. I didn’t want to be here for this.

Mom nodded though, pleased with the agreeable response. Aunt Yuki’s hand hovered over the pouch of oats she’d brought with her. Hinata loved feeding animals and I was sure Aunt Yuki had brought the oats along for the express purpose of spending time with her daughter.

And Hinata … Hinata was confused. She looked back and forth between our mothers, unsure what was going on. She asked Neji, “Why is Mommy going?” Neji didn’t answer.

Already I could feel the distance setting in. It was so much easier to be far away from this. It mattered less if Mom pushed Aunt Yuki away when I wasn’t sitting next to her, when I was watching everything from a distance. I tuned my eyes even brighter than their usual brilliance. My eyes were becoming more sensitive as I grew older and now with just a bit of effort the hazy knots of chakra that defined people became crisp wireframes of flowing light that I could see through. And when I became see-through, when my frame of reference stopped depending on what I did with myself, it became so easy to disconnect. To go away.

But.

I didn’t want Aunt Yuki to go away. She was warm and she loved me and she was here. Even if I wasn’t present, she was. Even if I didn’t let my cares about how Mom treated her touch me, Aunt Yuki would still be gone. That wouldn’t be right. Aunt Yuki shouldn’t have to go.

“Mom,” my lips moved and words came out, “why don’t you go get the equipment? You’re faster than Auntie. If you get it we’ll be even less late.”

Mom spoke. There was a reason it would be better for Aunt Yuki to go.

It took me a moment to remember that I was supposed to respond. To say words back. “Please Mom? I want to feed the ducks with Auntie.”

Mom relented. She would go get the equipment. Hinata was happy. Neji still had a hint of a frown. I smiled, and probably meant it.

Mom took the list of equipment from Aunt Yuki and headed off. She asked us to save some oats
for her, so she could feed the ducks too when she got back. We agreed, and waved her off. The distance inside me lessened as the conflict retreated.

Hinata and Neji grabbed handfuls of oats from the bag and rushed down to the pond to throw sprays of oats at the ducks. Aunt Yuki rested a hand on the training kunai, just in case the ducks decided to rush Hinata or Neji (the aggression of Konoha’s ducks really could not be overstated).

I flopped backwards over Aunt Yuki’s lap, with my head and shoulders hanging off the edge of the bench. It was a good thing that I was flexible enough to be comfortable with that position, because I didn’t think I would be able to motivate myself to move if I wasn’t. I was … tired. Distancing myself from things was exhausting. Or maybe standing up for Aunt Yuki while being distant was the tiring thing. Maybe it was the shock of how fast the dissociation had risen up inside of me.

Maybe I was just tired. I was tired a lot nowadays.

It was a warm day. I let my eyes close, enjoying the lack of tension and asymmetry that came with keeping my functioning eyelid open. It wasn’t like closing my eyes prevented me from seeing my little lights playing, or seeing Aunt Yuki looking down at me.

* Auntie is warm.

I mulled the thought over from the far-away vantage point I had wrapped myself up in. Auntie was warm. I liked it when she was around. She was … important.

I drifted for long minutes, watching my little lights play and enjoying the feeling of being warm. Auntie was important. What was I going to do about that?

The bag of oats for the ducks was almost empty by the time I felt like speaking.

“Hey Auntie?” I said. With my head flopped off the end of the bench, speaking tugged at my throat and made speaking an effort. I was intimately aware of every movement of my jaw.

“Hmm?”

“I’m glad you’re here. It’s nice when you’re around.”

Auntie paused, holding back her response as long as she could. “Oh.”

I pulled myself up from the odd position I was laying in, working a crick out of my neck as I did. I leaned into Auntie’s chest and let myself relax against her. “Can I have a hug?”

Auntie smiled and a flush of warm blood washed through her extremities, showing her joy in a way I could never have seen with my old eyes. She wrapped her arms gently around me and rested her cheek atop my head.

I was warm.

By the time Mom returned the distance inside of me had faded away completely. She came back to find me happily wrapped in Auntie’s lap, with my arms around her ribs and her arms around my shoulders.

Mom waited a long time before interrupting us. She seemed hesitant to intrude at first, shifting without knowing what to do with herself. But she let the moment last as long as it could. And when we walked home she set a slow pace, and never once mentioned that we were late.
Auntie breathed easy the whole way home.

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Preparing for school also included a talk with Dad about operational security. Information about the Byakugan was something that Konoha’s enemies would cheerfully kill to get their hands on, and specifics about how it worked were accordingly classified to the moon and back.

Of course six year olds are not known for their tight lips. So the talk with Dad wasn’t just a talk. It was several talks. A day. For weeks.

The first and most important thing Dad drilled into us was that Hyuuga did not have difficulty seeing color. No siree, we saw perfectly ordinary light like everybody else. Just like Mom. But also with the ability to see through stuff.

At this point I interrupted Dad and asked him how in the world anyone thought that actually worked, on a mechanical level, and he told me that most people didn’t think of that stuff. When I wouldn’t let that drop and starting ranting about the penetration depth of visible light, he simply held a cookie out to me and let me pick between sugar and speech.

Konoha, he continued once my mouth was full, suspected that the other major villages suspected that the Byakugan had difficulty identifying colors. They encoded too many high-security documents with color-dependent ciphers for it to be a coincidence. But they almost certainly did not know the specifics of the Byakugan’s color insensitivity. And so we were not going to tell them. And even if Kumo, Kiri, Suna, and Iwa did know, that wasn’t a reason to broadcast our vulnerabilities to all the merchants and nobles in the world.

Dad gave Neji his own cookie before moving on, so he wouldn’t feel left out.

So. Konoha didn’t want anyone to think that Hyuuga couldn’t see colors. Which is why we were going to carefully memorize the colors of all kinds of things. With rhymes. Lots and lots of rhymes. ‘Green is growing grass, blue is burning gas’, those kinds of rhymes. Dad pushed a jar of cookies in front of us and informed us that we would in fact get cookies for memorizing rhymes.

At the look of delight on my face and despair on Neji’s face he corrected himself and informed us that Neji would get cookies for memorizing rhymes, and I would get cookies for helping Neji memorize rhymes. And yes, he told Hinata with a fond tousle of her hair, she would get cookies too. He had made extra just for her.

In addition to the color rhymes we had talks about how much range the Byakugan had and how much detail it could see. Or rather, talks about not talking about that stuff. We were not to ever talk about our range limits or the limit of what fine detail we could see. Not unless we were inside the Hyuuga compound accompanied by a Hyuuga chunin or jounin who said it was okay.

We were definitely not to ever talk about how much focus it took for us to see ink on paper. Our first few years of classes would be taught with chakra infused ink and chakra infused chalk which no one else, not even our teachers, would be aware of. If our teachers used normal ink or chalk they brought in themselves and we couldn’t read it (not that this would be a problem for me and Neji’s eyes, but maybe it would be for Hinata next year), we were not to complain about it. We were to fake it as best we could and then to tell Dad when we got home, who would tell the elders, who
would handle it.

Similarly Dad impressed on us the importance of owning up to mistakes. If we slipped up, he said, and said something we shouldn’t, that was okay. We just needed to tell Dad about the mistake as soon as possible, so he could tell the elders. The Hyuuga elders weren’t stupid after all, they knew very well that six year olds couldn’t actually be trusted to keep secrets. There were going to be slip-ups as surely as water flowing downhill. The elders just wanted to be kept aware of what slip-ups did occur, so they could act on the more serious ones, and to instill in us the sense that operational security was something to be taken very seriously as we grew up.

Lastly we had practice sessions with Mom, where Dad showed us how to do ‘eye-contact’ with a non-Hyuuga. Hyuuga can’t really make eye-contact, because on top of not having directional vision our eyes have no pupils and off-white irises. But meeting somebody’s gaze is about more than just lining up pupils. There’s all kinds of body language and facial tics that go into it, and we had to learn all of it. Even me. I was surprised to find that meeting somebody’s eyes was no longer something which came naturally to me.

Dad was very clingy with Mom during the practice sessions. I mean, a certain level of cheesy romance, soulful eye-contact, and gentle kisses was to be expected. This was Hizashi after all, he wasn’t going to pass up an opportunity to love Keiko. But lately he reacted more to Mom’s reactions. Normally Dad romanced Mom to show that he cared about her. Now he seemed to need her to react, so he could see that she cared about him.

And Mom definitely noticed. Normally she was perfectly happy to let Dad’s compliments wash over her, to reciprocate by smiling and leaning into Dad. Now she responded with her own compliments and her own flattery, her own gestures.

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Our family shifted in a lot of little ways as Neji and I prepared for the Academy. Mom and Dad settled into their new dynamic. Aunt Yuki stopped just spending most of her time at our house and practically moved in, even sleeping over on the couch some nights. Hinata became more clingy as it settled in that we really wouldn’t be together at the Academy.

Things changed and life moved on.

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Chapter End Notes

Canon Terms:

-Chunin
-Jounin
Author’s Note: Nothing breaks you out of the mindset for writing a dissociative state quite like realizing you mistyped and wrote “I want to feed the fucks with Auntie”.

Also, if you like a chapter or have some constructive criticism, please leave a comment. It means the world to me to hear back from you all.

Next, my previous beta vanished and while I’m kind of worried about them (I hope they’re okay) I do need to get a new beta. If you’re interested just poke me. I’d really appreciate the help. (And Scouter, if you’re still reading this, poke me and let me know if you’re okay will you?)

And lastly, I posted a little vignette from another fanfic I want to write but sadly don’t have the time for right now. But sometimes scenes just demand to be written anyway. The story is / would be a Fallout fanfic called Lonely Wasteland, about a sociopathic sniper figuring out why death matters, how affection works, and what the hell love is. The vignette is called Stained Glass Heart. Check it out. :)}
Chapter 17: Beginning

Having been raised in a metropolis in my past life, Konoha’s Ninja Academy messed with my head. It just didn’t fit.

The Academy building itself wasn’t the problem. It didn’t impinge on my sensibilities. It was a simple three story building built from concrete with wooden styling and expansive windows. Scattered around it were a couple dozen smaller circular buildings of the same style serving as gyms, training halls, equipments storage, everything a military training school could need. Beyond the ancillary buildings were expansive training fields that mimicked every environment possible. Fields of every kind of grass, a jutting miniature mountain of bare rock, rolling dunes of sand, a small lake fed by and feeding two small rivers, a marsh, a small forest with hundred foot trees, a small forest with ten foot trees, a savannah, everything but snow and ice (which Konoha’s subtropic climate made an impossibility). There were even two separate blocks of mock urban housing, and no less than a hundred artificial obstacle courses woven among the training fields.

The training fields themselves weren’t what bothered me either. They were impressive, certainly, the full extent of the Academy grounds extending far beyond the limits of my eyesight. I could barely see from one end of the main Academy building to the other with any detail, so the terrain beyond was nothing but vague blurry shapes, but I could see enough to understand that they were big. And I could understand the need for such environments to train ninja in.

What turned my mind inside out was that the Academy and its massive training fields were dead-center in the middle of Konoha.

For all that Konoha was a ninja village, the term ‘village’ only loosely applied. Konoha was a city. Exact numbers were classified, but Konoha was home to some two thousand ninja and over one hundred thousand civilians. Konoha had a bustling urban center crowded with buildings a dozen stories tall, interspersed with equally tall trees supporting networks of suspended bridges which were crowded with thousands of people every day. The squat Hokage’s tower and the needle-thin ninja administration buildings (where Mom worked) were each fifteen stories tall and formed a pulsing city heart. And in the middle of all that dense urban planning, pushing right up next to the Hokage’s tower: sprawling tracts of undeveloped Academy land.

It seemed almost silly to admit to myself, but that was what made me understand the reality of Konoha as a military state. More than Kumo’s attempt to kidnap Hinata, more than Mom’s dinner-table talk about operations planning, more than Dad’s operational security lectures, even more than Aunt Yuki’s crippling scars, the placement of the Academy is what drove it home for me.

The Academy was set in the center of Konoha because the Academy was a target. Konoha needed to forge children into soldiers to fuel its war machine, and Konoha’s enemies would not hesitate to slaughter those children to bring that war machine to a halt. That reality superseded everything else. Economic concerns, civilian concerns, all of it was secondary to military realities. The vulnerable children at the Academy, especially the bloodline inheritors, were a soft target which needed to be protected at all costs. So Konoha buried the Academy as deep as possible within its
heart, ensuring that an enemy force could only reach it if it cut a path through the whole rest of Konoha first. And then Konoha set the workplaces of a few hundred ninja right next to it, just for good measure.

I couldn’t fathom the economic cost the Academy grounds represented. The amount of money civilian developers would pay to get access to so much land in the heart of a city. I tried to wrap my head around the losses and inefficiencies involved and just. Couldn’t.

*This* was the nature of Konoha. All else sacrificed to the war machine. Land, civilian interests, economy, children.

It was a hell of a thought to have as I took my first step into the Academy.

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School began with a meet and greet. Our class of thirty young students and our fifty-odd parents were herded into an empty sparring hall, likely picked for its squishy floors and padded surfaces by someone who had extensive experience working with large groups of small children. The result was a rather predictable cushioned chaos.

Children clumped together in groups and ran shrieking between chatting parents. The noise of exuberant new friendships bounced around the room and filled the air. Children chased one another and fell, only to spring back up off the soft floors and keep running.

Neji gleefully threw himself into the chaos with barely a glance to Mom or Dad for permission. He paired up with another branch family child we’d met a few times and the two of them immediately set about challenging other kids to a game of tag. Neji had an unholy love of tag, and Hinata and I would only play so many games of tag with him, so I didn’t exactly begrudge him for seizing the opportunity to acquire new victims. But I felt a twinge, seeing my little light run off. I’d kind of assumed we would stick together.

As Neji ran off Dad stroked the back of my head, over the bindings each branch Hyuuga in the Academy was supposed to wrap over seals, and asked, “Are you nervous Yuki? It’s okay if you are, there are a lot of new kids here after all.”

I raised my eyebrow. “Noooooo,” I drew out, “I’m fine.”

“Why don’t you go talk to someone then? Meet somebody new?”

As much I loved Neji and Hinata, and as much as I’d settled into the role of my parents’ young child, I was not actually six years old. I adored children, and I suspected I would end up growing very fond of the rambunctious little munchkins running around the room, but I was not particularly interested in having them as friends. I was just fine watching the melee from the sidelines. “Really Dad, I’m fine.”

My parents exchanged a meaningful look over my head. “Oh hey look,” Dad said, “there’s Hiashi’s old genin teammate, Bunta. Why don’t we go talk to him?”

“Oh I haven’t seen him in years, I’d love to catch up. Come on Yuki, let’s go.” Mom took my hand and pulled me along to meet a man who I’m sure was just coincidentally standing in a corner with his also solitary child.
From across the room, I could recognize Bunta as an Inuzuka. I mean he had a wolf standing next to him, a meter tall at the shoulder and at least eighty kilograms. That was kind of a dead giveaway. He also had Inuzuka clan markings tattooed on his cheeks, a pair of upside-down triangles I just now realized must be seals. They were filled with chakra and his wolf had its own pair of clan markings hidden under its fur, and the chakra in their tattoos pulsed in steady unison.

Bunta was a large man, with a stature accentuated by a heavy jacket and enormous mane of hair. He had presence, and between the size of him and his wolf I would never have noticed the child hovering behind them if I didn’t habitually keep my eyes bright with chakra.

Dad greeted Bunta enthusiastically with a hug. “Bunta! How are you doing?”

Bunta returned the hug just as enthusiastically, absolutely engulfing Dad’s narrower frame. “Fantastic! How about you two?” Then his eyes flicked down to me and he pulled back from the hug. “Wait wait wait, we can catch up in a moment. This is about the little ones after all!”

Bunta grinned broadly at me and stepped out from between his me and his kid, clasping his hand on their back. “This is Miyuki, my daughter. Miyuki this is …” he stared blankly at me for a moment. “Shit you have two of them don’t you.”

Mom snorted, barely containing her laughter. “Yes, we have two of them. This one is Yuki.”

“Ah. Good. Miyuki this is Yuki.” Miyuki stared curiously at me. She didn’t seem at all shy, making eye contact with me without any hesitation (I had to remind myself to make eye contact in return). But she didn’t say anything upon being introduced to me, just stared.

I waved at her, not quite sure what to make of this small, silent child.

Mom spoke up, a note of embarrassment coloring her voice. “Umm, forgive me Bunta, but I was sure you had a son and now I’m wondering if I somehow missed you having twins as well…”

Dad nudged Mom with his elbow as Bunta was opening his mouth to respond. “Love, she’s trans.”

“Oh. Oops.” If Mom had been embarrassed before she was positively blushing now.

Bunta clasped his daughter’s shoulder and laughed. “Yeah it was kind of a recent development. But that’s parenting, huh? You don’t always get what you expect.”

Dad took a deep breath. “Hooooooo boy is that true. Did we ever tell you about the time we caught Yuki teaching himself to pick locks?”

The adults launched into an exchange of anecdotes overhead as Miyuki and I stared at one another. Miyuki patted the wolf next to her, “This is Sho. He is a puppy.” Sho, who easily came up to my shoulder, flicked an ear and glanced at me, before returning his attention to the room full of loud children.

“Hi Sho,” I said. Miyuki and I returned to staring at one another. A long moment passed with nothing said.

Miyuki was a bit of a contradiction. She was tall for our age, taking after her father. And like him she wore a thick jacket and had an enormous mane of hair. But where those things enhanced Bunta’s presence, they diminished Miyuki’s. Her hair and jacket swallowed her, and her height only accentuated how skinny she was. From that, and the way she was sequestered in the corner of the room behind her father, I would have assumed she was shy. But … I didn’t think she was shy. She wasn’t exactly talking much, but she also seemed completely unselfconscious about staring at
It made me kind of uncomfortable. Neji and Hinata wore their hearts on their sleeves. That made it easy to deal with them. I … wasn’t quite so sure what this girl wanted.

I cleared my throat. “So. Ahhh, your dad has Inuzuka tattoos. And you don’t. Is there a reason for that?”

Miyuki nodded. “I don’t have a puppy yet. I get a puppy when I’m…” she held up her hands with all of her fingers extended, before furrowing her brow. “Six…” she drew out the word, holding it without completing it.

“Sixteen?” I asked.

She stared at her hands for a moment longer before nodding. “Yes.” She returned to staring at me.

Okay, how the hell does one make small talk with a six year old? I knew how to play with little kids, how to teach them, how to tell stories to them, and how to be a brother to them, but small talk was a bit outside my area of expertise.

“Oh,” Miyuki said suddenly, and looked away from me. She fiddled with her hair with one hand and took ahold of Sho’s fur with the other. “Sorry.”

Okay, what is up with her?

“Uh … what’s wrong Miyuki?”

“Daddy said not to stare at people who’re like Grandpa Sada”.

Oh. She wasn’t making eye contact.

Miyuki couldn’t have blown the air out of my lungs more effectively if she’d punched me.

The skin on my shoulder turned into a vice, and I could feel the tingles of not-right-not-even-not-balanced crawling across the burned side of my face. I jerked my right hand into a claw and scratched at the air. I ran my left hand through the right side of my hair, to make the scarred bald side itch less and I waved my fingers at the left side of my face when that didn’t help. I tried not to let the ruined corner of my mouth twitch.

Mom and Dad went on swapping stories with Bunta over our heads.

My eyes brightened until they throbbed, pulsing with enough light that I could see through the back of my head and on through the entire mass of bodies behind me. None of them were looking at me. But every time their eyes swept past me I could feel their vision on my skin. Their gazes had direction and I could feel it.

Miyuki had settled her gaze back on me too. She tried to keep her eyes centered on the right side of my face but they twitched, and kept flitting to the ruined side of my face.

I wanted the moment to end.

I took a deep breath, trying to focus on the feeling of breath inside me pushing out rather than eyes pressing in on my skin. I started to smile, aborted the expression when it pulled at the melted corner of my mouth, and then went through with the smile anyway when that felt even more unnatural.
“Thank you Miyuki,” I pushed myself to say. I wanted to go away, wanted to leave my body and have it speak without me, but the pressure on my scars was too much. It kept me locked inside my skin and so I had to push my body to do what I wanted, rather than letting it float along beside me.

“Who’s your Grandpa Sada?” I pushed the conversation forward.

Grandpa Sada, as it turned out, was a retired ninja who knew a great deal about puppy health, and had five metal teeth and a line of melted flesh which traced from his collarbone over his chin and behind one ear. Miyuki talked enthusiastically about how he liked to waggle his fingers and bounce his leg in time, how he clacked his teeth on his pipe, and a dozen other tiny habits he had. Miyuki went from silent to gushing in an instant with the change in topic. After exhausting all of Grandpa Sada’s tics and quirks she moved on to describing her cousin’s, and then her aunt’s without stopping.

I could barely pay attention to her though. Pressure squeezed my scars, as bad as it had ever been in the hospital. My OCD howled through me so loudly I could barely hear my own thoughts. I couldn’t suppress the chakra flooding through my eyes, which was so intense it hurt.

My skin prickled and I ran my hands over each arm in turn to compensate. It didn’t work. I just felt the need to do it again. And again. And again. I tried scratching the insides of my elbows instead, trying to avoid getting into a loop I couldn’t break.

Nothing worked though. Nothing alleviated the pressure. There were so many people, with so many eyes, and every time one of them looked my way I could feel it on my scars. My fidgeting wasn’t enough. The feeling renewed itself as quickly as I could deal with it.

What could I do though? I couldn’t run away from this. From the other kids’ eyes and their pressure. I needed to go to the Academy. Even if I wanted to flee, there was no way “I don’t like people seeing my scars” would possibly cut it as a reason for me not to attend the Academy. Hyuuga children didn’t not attend the Academy. It just didn’t happen.

I needed to deal with this. I needed to be able to function.

*So what am I going to do about it?*

I stilled my fingers.

My body itched. Everything about me needed to be fixed, to be balanced.

I straightened my spine and took another deep breath, filling myself with pressure on the inside to make up for the pressure on my skin.

The itching remained and the ceaseless compulsion howling in my head wasn’t getting any quieter. But I wasn’t going to let that matter. I’d pushed myself through physical therapy. I’d learned that sometimes you couldn’t fix things, but you pushed through anyways, because there was nothing else to do. My fidgeting wasn’t helping, wasn’t making my compulsions any better. So I’d just have to push through without it.

I returned my attention to the conversation, only to realize Miyuki had stopped talking some time ago and was staring at me again. As I watched she twitched one of her hands in an imitation of how I’d just been twitching my fingers. Something inside me rebelled viscerally at the sight.

“Miyuki,” I said, “how about we go find some other kids to talk to?”

She blinked at me before hesitantly responding, “Okay?"
I held out a hand to her, “Let’s go then.” I looked up at our parents, “Mom, Dad, Miyuki and I are going to go, okay?”

We got a chorus of affirmatives from our parents and a woof from Sho, which I had not been expecting. With their blessing we headed off along the edge of the sparring hall.

I needed to keep moving. So long as I kept moving, I could deal with the pressure.

I found us a shy pair of civilian children to talk to. Well, for Miyuki to talk to. I still didn’t have the focus to split between keeping a grip on my OCD and maintaining a conversation, even a conversation with six year olds. Which wasn’t helped by the way they kept glancing away from Miyuki to steal glances at me.

But I smiled, nodded at appropriate moments, and didn’t claw my skin off. That was enough for me to feel proud.

As the minutes ticked by I even wrested control of enough of my focus to pay attention to the conversation. Well. ‘Conversation’. Miyuki was just regurgitating the same descriptions of people’s behavioral tics that she’d recited to me. I wasn’t bored though. Miyuki painted amazingly vivid pictures of people’s body language. Just from listening to her speak I knew how her grandfather’s finger-tapping would hold a presence within my OCD, could feel how her aunt’s wet lip smacks would crawl down my spine, and see how Sho held his tail when it was wet from the rain. It was riveting.

Well. Riveting to me. The civilian kids were clearly bored out of their skulls. Fortunately for them, Miyuki was interrupted by our teacher calling the room to order.

I hadn’t met our teacher face to face yet, but she was impossible to miss. She towered head and shoulders above all the other adults in the room, and outmassed them by an even greater margin. Her hair was bound in a topknot, lending her the appearance of extra height to her already giant stature. She wore a cloth overcoat which looked heavy enough to function as armor and had a large swathe of cloth draped over her shoulder with the Akimichi clan symbol and the Academy symbol stitched into it, though I would have been able to tell she was an Akimichi regardless. Her size gave that away readily enough but even more obvious to my eyes was the thick yang chakra settled inside of her, a vast reservoir of physically-natured chakra bound to her fat. Her chakra beat slow and steady and she wore an effortlessly serene smile on her face which seemed perfectly matched to its calm rhythm.

She called the room to order with a trio of thudding claps that sounded like heavy drums. “Hello children. My name is Misao. I will be your teacher during your time at the Academy. I hope we get along well.”

The room calmed in an instant. Something about Misao made the whole room feel more peaceful and stable, just by virtue of her having spoken.

“The room calmed in an instant. Something about Misao made the whole room feel more peaceful and stable, just by virtue of her having spoken.

_“Now for our first class, we’ll be going outside for a tour of the Academy training fields.”_ A clamor started up at this, only to be quelled a moment later by Misao gently raising her hands. _“But first, we’ll be having our first lesson: how to make a line.”_

Misao, with the help of the parents present, slowly herded the students into a pair of ragged lines in front of the sparring hall door. When she was done she walked between the lines, clasping each student on the shoulder and telling them how they’d done a good job. I shivered when she touched my burned shoulder, skin writhing with the asymmetry of the gesture.
When she was done she stood at the front of the lines, still smiling serenely. “Alright children, we’re going to take a quick walk outside and then come back. Now your parents are going to stay here while we go, they’ll be having a talk with Kazue, our class teaching assistant.” I blinked. I hadn’t noticed a teaching assistant. “Don’t get too used to being away from your parents though,” she said with a hint of a laugh in her voice, “we’ll be back before you know it.”

A quiet but steady voice came from the back of the room. “Parents, if you could gather over by me please.” The voice came from who I assumed must be Kazue, our teaching assistant. She was tiny, not even a foot taller than some of the students. No wonder I hadn’t noticed her before. Now that I had noticed though, she was easy enough to pick out. She was an Aburame, and each of her major chakra coils was paralleled by a hollow tunnel filled with tiny shifting constellations of light that I assumed were her kikaichu.

Some of the young students shifted in place as their parents gave parting waves and moved to cluster around Kazue. But the students were already lined up and it didn’t look like any of them had the initiative to break ranks alone and run to their parents. Misao threw open the doors and ushered us outside without a single child panicking and running back to their parents.

Wow. This has to be the smoothest parent/child separation I have ever heard seen. The Academy has this routine on lock.

Somewhere in the back of my head I’d vaguely assumed that the Academy environment would fit some stereotype of impersonal authoritarian education. I’d expected barked orders and teary eyed six year olds being told to stiffen up and stop bringing shame to Konoha. And to be honest I still had no doubt that we would see some kind of boot-camp style conditioning when we were older. But I hadn’t expected the Academy to treat its prospective child soldiers as … well as children. For the second time today I found my understanding of Konoha shifting beneath me.

The tour of the grounds Misao gave was clearly designed to inspire wonder and excitement. She showed us sprawling jungle gyms and leaned down to tell us some of the games previous generations of students had invented on them. She took us by older students running drills, leaping through clustered trees without any respect for gravity and hurling blunted kunai at one another. Misao shushed the class and had us to comically tiptoe by a group of younger meditating students as she whispered to us that they were learning to use their chakra.

I forced my hands into stillness as we passed each group of students and they looked us over. Part of me wished that Dad hadn’t re-taught me how to track where ordinary people were looking, because I could see how their gazes lingered on my scars and the attention dug into me as an itch I couldn’t scratch.

As promised, our walk through the nearer training fields was over quickly. We were returned to our parents quickly and in good order, with far more children rushing to tell their parents about how wonderful the Academy is than rushing to them for comfort.

Neji certainly gushed to our parents enough for both of us.

Misao made one more round before we left, kneeling in front each student and telling us how excited she was to see us in class tomorrow. I thought it was a nice touch.
As soon as we got home I rushed upstairs, pushing past Hinata and Auntie with only the briefest pleasantries, and leapt into the shower. I thrust myself under the hottest water I could stand and then turned it up another notch, until it was so hot it burned me if I let any part of myself linger in the stream for too long. I scrubbed myself down roughly, going over every part of myself multiple times. I scrubbed until the pressure came off and the intact parts of me itched as badly as my scars.

I winced toweling off after the shower. I was raw, and every bit of contact hurt. But the pressure was gone.

*Day 1 down. Only eleven more years to go.*

Chapter End Notes

**Canon Terms:**

-Inuzuka
-Akimichi
-Aburame

**Author’s Note:** It didn’t occur to me that Miyuki’s name has, you know, a ‘Yuki’ in it until well after I’d chosen it for her and now it’s too late and I can’t think of her as anything else. I have doomed myself. Hizashi and Hiashi, Aunt Yuki, Yuki, and Miyuki, it is only a matter of time before I switch somebodies’ names and don’t catch it before posting.

Also this is alluded to with the last line, but I want to make it clear so no one’s confused. In my fic the graduation age is 17. The 12 year old graduation age just never made sense to me, either in terms of in-universe logic or how the characters behaved, so I’m pushing it back.
Backsliding

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a getting posted a day late because I had an international flight today (which I had planned ahead of time obviously) and then also got horrifically sick the day before and continue to be horrifically sick (which I did not have planned ahead of time). Because sometimes life sucks like that.

EDIT: ... I just realized that this is not, as a matter of fact, late. My sense of time has just been completely fucked by time zones and illness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 18: Backsliding

We had a new routine now, my little lights and I. First thing each morning Mom would gently shake us awake and we would yawn and grumble and squirm back under the covers.

After that she would go downstairs to put on a pot of coffee, before coming back upstairs to brush her teeth. Aunt Yuki always showed up before Mom was finished brushing her teeth. She didn’t sleep in our house, but she only ever left after Hinata had been put to bed and always returned before breakfast every morning, so really it was her home as much as ours.

Aunt Yuki would come upstairs and finish the job of waking us up, gently cajoling us out of bed. Neji and I would dress ourselves -with the new wardrobe addition of forehead bindings to cover our branch seals- while Aunt Yuki helped Hinata into her robes. I was pretty sure Hinata could actually see clothing and dress herself by now, but neither she nor her mom seemed in any hurry to give up the routine.

By the time we were finished dressing, Dad had usually been woken up by the smell of coffee and made his way downstairs. He would start breakfast and Aunt Yuki would join him, helping out where she could and taking cooking tips as they worked. Dad drank the coffee Mom made while he cooked, while Aunt Yuki made herself tea.

Neji and Hinata and I would shuffle into the bathroom after getting dressed, joining Mom. We would brush our teeth and she would brush our hair. After that, mostly awake and mostly conscious, Mom would take us to the living room to run and play until breakfast was ready. Most mornings we played ninja, at Hinata’s insistence. Which was a bit of a hectic way to start the day, but always worth the smile on her face.

After morning playtime and after breakfast, Aunt Yuki would take us to the compound’s gardens so I could stretch and Neji and Hinata could play some more. And — given the looks Mom and Dad gave one another before we left — so Mom and Dad could have some time alone with each other before work.

Once I finished stretching, Neji and I would part from Hinata and Mom would walk us to school. On good days this involved lots of threeway hugs for Hinata and cheek kisses accompanied
by promises that we’d be home soon. On bad days, when Hiashi scheduled morning sparring
sessions with her, Hinata would cry and plead to go to school with us and try to hold us tight so we
couldn’t leave.

I’d thought I’d hated Hiashi as much as I humanly could. But as it turns out, hating someone is a
skill which can be polished like any other. On the days when she saw her father, when Hinata cried
for us not to go, I honed my hatred. And on the days when she didn’t see him, when I could still see
the tension in her frame regardless because the tension never truly left her anymore, I honed my
hatred on those days too.

That too, became part of my routine. Get up. Get dressed. Play. Eat breakfast. Stretch. And learn to
hate Hiashi a little bit more.

It gave me something to dwell on as we walked to school each morning.

---

Misao explained to the class why three was closer to five than nine for the third time, and I silently
lost another shred of my sanity.

The Academy’s classroom lessons were simple. Except simple was the wrong word. I’d gotten a
master’s in civil engineering in my past life, I’d expected first ring education to be simple by my
standards. Obviously. But this was … this was something else. The concepts Misao and Kazue
were teaching us were so basic I’d forgotten they even had to be taught. Yesterday we had spent a
full hour doing activities and learning rhymes designed to help us remember the difference between
right and left. The day before that our big lesson had been practicing how to follow two
consecutive directions.

I’d thought I was overprepared for the Academy. I was wrong. I could not have been less
prepared. Every day was a fight against boredom and I was losing badly.

As Misao answered a student’s question, telling her that yes four was also closer to five than nine
and wasn’t she a smart cookie for figuring that out, I started to nod off. I’d learned quickly that I
couldn’t get away with napping in class, but my understimulated and exhausted brain didn’t care.
Maybe this time I could escape into sleep. Maybe this time. Maybe … this … ti…

I jolted awake as Kazue patted me on the back. “Are you tired Yuki?” she asked quietly.

“Mm,” I gave her a noncommittal hum and nodded.

“Recess is soon. Just stay awake a little longer, okay?” She gave me a well worn smile that
reminded me this wasn’t the first time she’d caught me trying to nap.

“Mm.”

Sleeping in class wasn’t an option. Each morning Kazue planted a kikaichu on each of our heads,
which sent her little pulses of chakra whenever a student’s head started to bob. It was pretty neat
system actually. Though I’d probably appreciate it more if it wasn’t contributing to my ever-
growing boredom.

Two weeks into the Academy I’d pulled Mom aside and begged her to help me skip a few years. I
knew that would see me pushed into combat early, I knew it would separate me from Neji, but all that seemed more distant than the promise of yet another day listening to the sound of my brain dribbling out my ears.

Mom had shot me down though. Hard. She’d actually gone so far as to pull Dad and Aunt Yuki in, not just to tell me no, but to tell me that I was to never, ever talk about skipping grades with the Academy instructors. Prodigies, they told me, got special treatment in Konoha. They skipped grades, got special tutors, graduated early, and rose through the ranks quickly. But for all that they got special treatment, they were not treated gently.

And my parents didn’t want me to die.

So when Misao asked the class if anyone knew just how far nine was from five, I didn’t answer. I didn’t stand up and start rattling off multiplication tables, I didn’t ask if she wanted the positive or negative difference, or anything like that. I did the smart thing and stayed quiet.

I still whined melodramatically to myself though.

*How bad could being shoehorned into special ops really be? It couldn’t be worse than this, could it?*

I huffed out a sigh. Well. I could always stare at the clock. There was something ineffably *right* about watching the second hand hit right angles about the clock face. *60  ... 15  ... 30  ... 45  ... 60.*

Best of all, I could always see the clock. No matter where I sat and no matter where I looked, it was always in my field of view. All day, every day, I could watch the clock tick.

*Yay.*

---

I sheathed my practice kunai flawlessly. Next to me, with ease born of long practice, Neji sheathed his smoothly as well. Today’s lesson was the same one we’d been drilling at the Hyuuga compound for two years now, how to draw and sheath kunai safely.

Misao warmly complimented us on our form and Neji glowed. Literally. His cheeks and fingers flooded with extra blood and chakra and glowed. I cracked a grin. Neji was adorably sensitive to compliments.

Looking over the rest of the class though, my grin took on a bit of a cynical tilt. All across the grassy training field students were practicing. And it was probably not a coincidence that all of the clan kids were doing exceptionally well. Almost like they too had prior practice before coming to the Academy. For all that the clans boasted that their members were simply better suited to be ninja than civilians by virtue of their blood and breeding, that certainly didn’t stop them from stacking the deck with a little extra training.

Actually, come to think of it, Hinata might be practicing the exact same thing right now. The Hyuuga pre-Academy practices were around the same time of day. I’d have to mention that to her. She’d get a kick out of that.

Across the field Misao paused in front of Miyuki and an Aburame child, Tomomi. Tomomi was intersex, something that was apparently fairly common in the Aburame clan because of how
kikaichu hives influenced pregnancies. Miyuki and Tomomi had become fast friends as soon as they’d met, bonding over their mutual gender ‘stuff’. Also over a shared love of overlarge jackets and staring at people without speaking, like creepy fae children.

The two of them were, as was typical for them, more interested in staring at the other students performing the exercise than in actually doing it themselves. Misao gave them a bit of a talking to before suggesting that they should practice with some of the other students, so they didn’t get distracted again.

Miyuki promptly hooked Tomomi by the collar of their Aburame-standard trench coat and started leading them over to me. She had a tendency to do that with Tomomi. It didn’t seem to bother them and it didn’t seem like Miyuki was being pushy (well, pull-y) about it. Miyuki had more energy than Tomomi (juvenile Kikaichu hives apparently consume a lot of calories) and a tendency to suddenly hare off without telling Tomomi where she was going, so she often ended up leaving them behind. And the two of them apparently decided that the solution to this problem was just Miyuki dragging Tomomi everywhere. It seemed to work well enough for them.

Privately I thought the whole thing was adorable and that Miyuki was getting in some solid puppy-leading practice for when she got her own wolf puppy.

I was less enthused that Miyuki was leading Tomomi over to me though. All the kids stared at my face to some extent, but the two of them were especially bad. Miyuki typically remembered that she wasn’t supposed to stare eventually, but wasn’t very good at actually not staring even once she remembered. And Tomomi was even worse. Their eyes were always covered by sunglasses so maybe they thought I couldn’t notice, but they stared at me constantly. They were so bad my skin tingled just watching them come over.

Miyuki stopped and planted herself in front of me, Tomomi drifting to a halt behind her. She paused, like she wasn’t sure what to say.

“Uhh, hey Miyuki.”

Neji chimed in next to me, “Hey Mimi.” Neji refused to call Miyuki by her proper name, on the grounds that she ‘wasn’t a Yuki’. Which I thought was kind of silly, but it made sense to Neji and didn’t bother Miyuki, so the nickname stuck.

Miyuki didn’t respond when we said hello though. She fiddled with her hair and rocked back and forth slightly, looking vaguely uncomfortable. She did that sometimes. I still didn’t think she was shy, but sometimes she just … had trouble talking.

Tomomi, though they were typically content to let Miyuki lead them around, was also plenty willing to step in for Miyuki when her voice locked up. “Misao told us that we should work with other students, and Miyuki wants us to work with you.”

Neji grinned widely. My little light loved teaching. “Of course!” he exclaimed enthusiastically, “Let me show you-”. He immediately launched into a kunai-sheathing demonstration.

I huffed out a breath. Neji may love teaching, but he still had a lot to learn about doing it well. “Tomomi, Miyuki, how about you show us how you do it, and we’ll go from there. Okay?”

Tomomi agreed and Miyuki nodded. Mercifully Tomomi looked away from me to focus on their sheathing and drawing. Miyuki … didn’t. Oh she looked down to focus on her practice kunai. But every time she finished sheathing her kunai she looked up at me, eyes tracking to the burned side of my face.
I could feel the phantom movements of the gestures which would fix the imbalance in me, crawling over my skin. I twitched a finger and bit down on the urge to do more. I focused outwards instead, on Tomomi and Miyuki’s knifework.

Tomomi wasn’t bad. For a six year old they were downright great. The product of clan training like all the other clan kids no doubt. They’d do just fine as the class progressed.

Miyuki was having trouble though. She didn’t always grip her kunai at the midpoint of its handle, and seemed unable to correct or compensate for her bad grip when she did. She’d move through the motions of drawing and then sheathing her kunai exactly as she was supposed to, but with her grip too close to the blade or too close to the ring pommel, and the misplacement would mess up her sheathing. She clearly needed help more than Tomomi.

I told Neji to work with Tomomi while I worked with Miyuki and Neji cheerfully agreed.

I watched Miyuki flub a draw. This time she grabbed the kunai right over the ring and it slipped out of her hand. “Hey Miyuki, you need to hold the kunai here. Like this.” I showed her a proper grip.

Miyuki frowned. She tried again. Two successful attempts and then another failure. She made a noise of frustration.

“Like this Miyuki.” I demonstrated.

She made another noise of frustration. She reached down and slowly paced her hand over her kunai’s handle. This time though, moving slowly, her hand jerked and trembled. When she finally clenched her fist the movement was spastic, as if she hadn’t had full control of the motion. And when she drew the kunai, slowly, it trembled. She barely managed to sheath it with the way her hand jerked.

Huh.

Miyuki looked visibly frustrated so I did my best to soothe her. “Hmm. Alright, I think I need to know where we should go from here. Thank you very much for showing me that Miyuki.” I continued, “It looks like you know just where you’re supposed to grab the kunai. You’re just having a little trouble doing it, is that right?” I kept my tone as cheerful and soothing as I could. I didn’t want to hurt Miyuki’s feelings by being too blunt about her problems.

Though uncharitably I thought: *I am not in the mood for a tantrum right now.* And I wasn’t. The Academy classes had worn away at my temper.

Miyuki nodded. She knew where to grab the kunai.

“Alright, how about we practice just grabbing the kunai then?”

Several dozen attempts later and Miyuki had made very little progress. She scowled, tears forming at the edge of her eyes.

*Oh dear.*

“Hey Miyuki, how about we try something different? I think I had the wrong idea earlier. I’m sorry about that, can you forgive me?”

Miyuki sniffled and nodded. “Mhmm”.

I smiled in relief. Sad and unhappy I could work with in a kid. Sad and unhappy was far and away
a safer state of mind than grumpy and frustrated.

“How about we work on adjusting our grips? Sometimes I grab my kunai weird when I draw them too and I need to correct my grip. Let me show you how I do it.” That was a dirty lie which hadn’t been true for almost two years now. After so much practice I could draw kunai from anywhere on my body with less thought than it took to adjust my robes. Which … come to think of it was all kinds of creepy and unsettling.

I showed Miyuki a botched draw and then rolled my fingers to shift my grip while I held the kunai out in front of me, exaggerating the motion as much as I could. “See? Like that.”

Miyuki looked up at my face quizzically. I winced as she did and quickly redirected her attention. “Now you try. Try gripping your kunai until you get a bad grip, and then do what I did.”

Miyuki did so, but she was far worse at adjusting her grip than she had been at gripping her kunai properly. She just … didn’t do it right. The adjustments she made looked like the right kind of motion, but didn’t actually do anything to fix her grip. Half of the time she dropped her kunai.

_Huh._

“Hey Miyuki catch.” I lobbed my practice kunai to her underhand, gripping it by the point so the handle was extended towards her. Without batting an eye she grabbed it out of the air, as adroitly as any child could hope to be.

“Huh?” she asked.

“Try mine Miyuki. If your palms are sweaty then your kunai might be slippery.” That was another lie, but ‘I chucked my kunai at you to see if you’d fumble it’ probably wouldn’t go over to well with Miyuki right now. Inwardly I slapped a big question mark over the whole thing. The whole thing was odd. Miyuki clearly wasn’t clumsy. Or at least, not clumsy in a way that made sense to me.

Fortunately practice ended and our morning break started a few minutes later, before Miyuki could frustrate herself into a proper tantrum. Misao and Kazue released us to run around an obstacle course which served double-duty as a playground for the younger Academy students and the class gleefully swarmed it.

I grabbed Neji’s arm before he could run off on me. “Hey Neji, would you mind telling Kazue something for me?” Misao had much more presence than Kazue, so it was easy to think of her first whenever a teacher was needed. But Kazue was just as responsible for us as Misao. And in this case I had a suspicion that going to Kazue might be the more direct route. When she wasn’t directly needed for something she tended to lurk in the background, jotting down notes about student performance and behavior. If Miyuki needed special help with her motor control, Kazue was probably the one in charge of making sure she got it.

“Tell Kazue that Miyuki’s having some unusual problems.” I described the clumsy not-clumsy weirdness I’d just witnessed. “Tell her about that, okay? You and I are pretty good teachers-” Neji giggled, “-but just this once how about we get an actual teacher to help out, okay?”

Neji agreed, happy as ever to be helping, and ran off to Kazue. I would have told Kazue myself, but ehhhh, it was probably best if I didn’t draw unnecessary attention to myself.

After he left I yawned loudly, covering my mouth with my right hand (and shifting my left to compensate). Jeez. I was tired. You’d think half-dozing all day would leave me with an abundance
of energy but instead it left me exhausted.

I flopped down on the grass, closing my eyes and inhaling the fresh smell of grass and loam. I stretched and squirmed, settling into a loose sprawl. Naptime.

Well. Official naptime came later actually. But I could nap twice.

---

After morning break we went for a half hour run through the training fields, with Misao leading us and Kazue trailing behind to pick up stragglers. They set a very gentle pace, at our age they weren’t pushing us to gain muscle or stamina, they just wanted to instill the habit of daily exercise in us. But even at a gentle pace a half hour of running still drained the heck out of us. By the end we were all ravenous.

So after our morning run we settled down for lunch, which by all rights ought to have been a welcome time of day for everybody. Unfortunately however, this was not the case. Konoha’s bureaucracy had seen to that.

See, during the Third Shinobi War a lot of ninja had complained about the quality of Konoha’s official field rations. During peacetime missions most ninja prepared their own field rations, foraged for food, or purchased supplies from locals wherever they were deployed. But during long wartime deployments those weren’t necessarily options. So Konoha’s ninja were forced to eat the official rations distributed through Konoha’s supply chain.

Which were awful. There was some variety in what constituted Konoha field rations, with everything from canned fruit to dried omelettes to meal bars making an appearance, but somehow Konoha’s suppliers managed to make it all taste like old chickpeas and smell like dry oats. The unrelenting sameness of it all had actually done a number on morale during the Third Shinobi War, and Konoha’s bureaucracy had been forced to make changes.

Of course those changes didn’t consist of actually, y’know, changing the official field rations in any way. No instead the powers that be had decided to just feed all of Konoha’s Academy students official field rations on a regular basis so we would be desensitized to their awfulness come the next war.

And the officials who made that decision certainly weren’t the ones who had to make a bunch of tired six year olds to eat those disgusting field rations every day. No, that was Misao and Kazue’s job.

Lunchtime was never a fun experience for anyone.

After lunchtime was naptime though, which was good. I think all of us, teachers and students alike, appreciated a bit of a break after that misery.

---
After naptime Misao squeezed what little more lecture time she could out of us. Which, mercifully, wasn’t much. The attention spans of six year olds could only be stretched so far.

So following a brief discussion about how numbers can also describe distances as well as objects - *dear gods how are we not done with this?* - we moved onto everyone else’s favorite part of the day: social games.

Social skills were as much part of a ninja’s arsenal as any weapon or jutsu. For some ninja even more so. And even for frontline ninja who never did a day of infiltration or lying in their life, a solid grasp on social skills was still considered to be deeply important to Konoha ninja. Mismanaged personal issues and poorly resolved conflicts could be disastrous within Konoha’s tightly knit teams. And while not everybody learned (more than a few misanthropic or eccentric figures I remembered came to mind) Konoha did *try* to teach everyone.

So we played games. Most of it was play-pretend. We’d be given roles: haughty noble, sympathetic farmer, proud Konoha ninja, cowardly rogue ninja, and told to play out specific scenarios amongst ourselves as them. We’d suck up to nobles, haggle with farmers, congratulate and console our fellow ninja, and lambast filthy rogue ninja. As we did, just like during weapons training, Misao and Kazue circled the room, giving advice and praise.

While pretending to be other people we learned to apologize (with honesty to our comrades and with flattery to our noble superiors), to resolve conflict, to offer sympathy, and how to express sufficient loathing for foreign and rogue ninja. (Misao favored full-throated excoriations of their villainy, Kazue tended to suggest simple statements of contempt). It worked well too. It gave the kids a social script to follow and clearly demarcated what was and was not acceptable behavior via positive reinforcement. On an objective level I thought it was brilliant, aside from the jingoistic propaganda.

But on a personal level …

Everybody stared. I mean, I knew on some level that all the Hyuuga children at the compound also stared at me. But I couldn’t *see* them staring. At the Academy though, when we did our play-acting, I could *see* all of the other children staring at me. Their gazes had direction and that direction was always me and my melted flesh.

It itched at me. Every single day. It sunk under my skin and I spent the latter half of every school day trying not to dig my fingers under my flesh so I could pry it out. I tried not to focus on it as much as I could. But that was the problem with OCD. I couldn’t. Nothing imbalanced could ever be tuned out. The gazes of the other students had direction and that direction was oriented towards me, therefore I would not notice their gazes. No matter. What. I. Did.

I could compensate for it. Twitches and gestures and rituals could relieve the pressure most of the time. And I could ignore it, if I had to. But I could never tune it out. Their stares never became background noise. Would never become background noise.

And it just … it ate at me a little each day. As tired as I always was nowadays, as frayed as my focus had become, it was just a little too much to deal with. I always went home with a sour taste in my mouth and an itch under my skin.
There was one last element to our new routine. Each day after school Aunt Yuki and Hinata would meet us outside the Academy and walk us home. Hinata would rush us and glomp us in a fierce hug the moment she saw us, eagerly demanding to hear everything we did that day. Aunt Yuki would follow after her at a more sedate pace, enveloping all three of us in a soft hug when she reached us.

Neji always did most of the talking on the way home. He was happy to regale Hinata with all of the exciting things we did and learned each day and I was equally happy not to. Most of the time Aunt Yuki and I just stayed quiet and listened on the way home, soaking in the fringes of their excited babble. Sometimes Aunt Yuki and I would have more subdued conversations while trailing behind them though. I’d ask her questions about whatever subject she was reading about that month and she’d feed me tidbits of esoterica, on subjects ranging from pharmaceutical processing to Konoha’s textile economy. (She’d long since learned to stop worrying about whether such things might go over a six year old’s head).

And the moment we got home, every day, I would bolt inside and race for the shower. Dive under the searing water and drown out the itch in my mind with pressure and heat and pain. It gave me my mind back at the end of each day, woke me up and cleared the compulsive cobwebs from my mind.

And yeah, sometimes Aunt Yuki would make soft, probing comments about how long I buried myself under the water. And sure, Mom pulled me aside for a concerned talk after Kazue approached her about my sleeping habits. And maybe Dad gently worried over the dinner table about how much twitchier I was these days.

But I was doing alright. I could push through the mind-numbing lectures and the endless staring. If I needed some hot showers to do it, so what? Who cared if I nodded off in class so long as I could answer Misao’s questions and made it through each day?

I functioned. I kind of made friends. I didn’t have a breakdown. That should be good enough.

---

I didn’t admit I was struggling until I almost got my classmates killed.

Chapter End Notes

Canon Terms

-Missing-nin

Author’s Note: First things first, Wecantgiggleitsacrimescene is Better's new beta and deserves all of your thanks and applause. They've been a huge help. Really, I can't express enough how awesome it's been to have them helping me out. They deserve to be showered with praise.
They've been an especially huge help when it comes to sensory descriptions of taste/smell. I can barely taste or smell because of an old head injury, so I rely almost entirely on other people for such descriptions. Any such descriptions in this chapter (and likely in upcoming chapters) are either 100% Giggle's invention or heavily vetted by them. They deserve all the credit for that stuff.

World-building side note: While Yuki doesn’t attend them and so they probably won’t have much (if any) focus in the story, in my fanon ‘kunoichi’ classes are simply supplementary classes with a special focus on social skills and infiltration, available for children of all genders. I just can’t imagine any possible reason for infiltration skills to only be taught to women, beyond Kishimoto being blinded by his own sexism. I mean, even back in the rigidly sexist social systems of feudal Japan, actual historical ninja learned infiltration skills (and seduction skills) without being divided by gender. Because, y’know, of fucking course they did. It’s not like the gay nobleman commanding the opposing army or the supply clerk with her abusive husband were non-viable targets for seduction because of their sexual preferences. So I’m just chucking the canon out with the bathwater on this one.

(Hyuuga generally don’t attend these classes by the way, unless they’re in line for some official clan position and need to learn politics. Their eyes are too much of an infiltration giveaway unless they maintain a transformation 24/7, and their bloodline makes them more valuable in other roles regardless).
Chapter Notes

This chapter is dedicated to my fifth grade teacher, who put up with a lot of really trying stuff from me but especially that time I tried to dig pebbles out of a floor outlet with a paperclip. I really should have known better.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 19: Underwater

It started with burning myself in the shower.

I was rooted under the showerhead, scorching water pounding down on my head and pouring down my neck and over my shoulders. I’d been scrubbing myself down, trying to peel off the memory of stares and asymmetry and everything that was wrong with me. But then I’d stopped.

Today there had been this one kid. Ichiro. A Sarutobi. Polite kid, most of the time. We’d been playing out a scene, me a ninja who had just fought off bandits, and him a merchant expressing his gratitude. He’d tried to say “Thank you very much, I was so scared!” But he hadn’t said that. He’d said scarred. “I was so scarred.” And he’d frozen and I’d frozen and neither of us had spoken. And then he’d stammered out the rest of the scene and moved on and I … hadn’t.

I was still fixated on the moment three hours later in the shower, remembering how his cheek had twitched and how the left sleeve of my robe had been bunched up oddly against my skin and how I’d been turned skew to the walls of the room and the screaming, howling compulsion that had torn through me with no focus and no outlet. I kept on looping through the moment over and over again, not thinking about it or experiencing it or feeling it, just … knowing it happened. That it was a moment which existed.

The moment grew inside me and became a sensation and the world lurched. The sensation started at my feet and travelled up, wrapping around my skin. Something both unreal and too real, with more feeling in it than I should be able to experience. The feeling replaced the sensation of my skin and as it did I became aware of everything. I could feel every drop of water hitting my skin and running down my body and I could count them. Every drop of water became a number in my head rising higher and higher, too fast for me to internalize the number or experience it as anything other than a sensation, but somewhere inside I knew how many drops of water were hitting my skin. I knew their number even as it ticked higher so fast it blurred.

The number split in two, one count for each side of my body, left and right. I knew exactly how many drops of water were hitting each side of me, each moment, in total, and the difference between the two. And as I became aware of the separate counts on each side of me I realized that they were different. The count on my right side was rocketing up faster than the left.

Oh.

There was a hole in me. In the sensation that had replaced my skin. Any water that hit my deeper
scars just … vanished. It didn’t exist. It wasn’t part of the count. It made me imbalanced. It made the count imbalanced. The difference was too much. It paralyzed me, froze me in place with the scalding water pouring down on me.

The moment continued on and on with the count growing larger and larger and more difficult to bear. It just didn’t end.

I didn’t move until the hot water was long gone and I started to shiver in place, the involuntary motion bringing me back to myself. I got out of the shower slowly, unsure of my footing and whether my body would do what I told it to. I slung my towel across my back, wincing preemptively in preparation for the sting of it touching my skin.

The wince turned into a full body jerk and I cried out. My knees cracked against the bathroom floor as a shock ran through me and my legs gave out.

W-what? What was that?

Gently, oh so gently, I pulled the towel across my back and gasped at the pain. That was not normal. That wasn’t just the sting of heavy fabric on some raw skin. I let go of the towel, hissing at the pain of it scraping over my skin as I did. That was- that was not normal. Something was wrong.

I looked into the flesh on my back, fumbling with the flow of chakra in my eyes until it shifted and smaller details came more readily into focus.

Oh.

My skin was wet. Not water-wet but sticky-wet, coated in a thin sheen of chakra-bright fluid that clung to my skin too evenly to be water. It wasn’t blood, it wasn’t that bright and didn’t shine quite like blood did. But there was too much chakra in it for it to be anything other bodily fluid.

I could see more fluid moving beneath my skin, pooling beneath my skin, seeping out from between swollen layers of my flesh. Hesitantly, hand shaking, I reached up and pressed down on part of my skin where the liquid was pooling the most.

Pain. Hurts.

I gasped and snatched my hand back, stomach churning at the feeling of my sticky skin sucking at my fingers as I pulled them away. Bile rose in my throat and I did my best not to vomit.

This is wrong. Something is wrong. I need help. Help.

I shifted my vision again, moving smaller details out of focus until they vanished and peering through the hazy wireframe of our house’s walls. Aunt Yuki was downstairs helping Neji (and Hinata) with today’s homework: drawing stick-figure pictures of our families. Mom was laid out on the couch, eyes closed, an egg timer ticking away next to her and a pot of soup simmering in the kitchen.

“Mom,” I croaked out, “Auntie.”

Then again, louder. “Moooooom. Auuuuuuntiiiiiiieeeeee.”

“Moooooooooom!”

The light in Aunt Yuki’s eyes flickered and then snapped into full brilliance so fast the burst of chakra flooded burst a blood vessel in her left eye. “Keiko! Get a medic, now!”
Mom leapt off the couch, her heart rate thundering straight past scared and into panicked faster than she could find her feet. Her right hand flashed in a one-handed sign. Status report?

Aunt Yuki barked a terse, “Stay here!” at Neji and Hinata before bolting to the stairs with one handed pressed to her ribs and the other signing to Mom. Yuki is burned. Hot water damage, moderate.

Mom didn’t wait to hear any more. She blitzed out of the house with a burst of superhuman speed and vanished beyond my sight a second later.

Aunt Yuki burst into the bathroom a moment later -the locked door didn’t even slow her, she snapped it open with a flood of chakra and dropped to her knees beside me. “It’s going to be okay,” she said, “you’re going to be okay.”

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And half an hour later, in the burn ward with Doctor Suzuko standing over me, I was okay. Chakra healing isn’t a magical “regenerate this” tool but for some injuries it can work miracles nonetheless. Recent surface level skin damage is one of those injuries. My burns -my stomach clenched with nausea at the thought that I’d been burned - my burns healed even as I watched, the damage vanishing under the steady glow of Doctor Suzuko’s hands. I’d get out of this without even a blister.

Honestly the hospital didn’t even need a burn specialist like Doctor Suzuko to treat me. Every chakra healer in the building could probably fix this. But her expertise wasn’t why she was here. She was here so she could ask me a question.

Suzuko finished her healing and straightened up, letting out a heavy huff of air. Lines stood out on her brow and around her eyes as she pulled off her seal-inscribed gloves. “Yuki…”

“Why?”

I didn’t have an answer for her.

When my parents asked I didn’t have an answer for them.

My little lights didn’t ask the question. But Neji cried and Hinata screamed that I wasn’t allowed to get hurt anymore and I didn’t know how to answer that any better.

Aunt Yuki moved like she was about to break and asked why she hadn’t seen something was wrong sooner and that wasn’t something I could answer for her at all.

The next day after school I went straight to the shower again and turned the heat up, only to find that the water no longer went past pleasantly warm. My parents had turned the water heater down. Under the warm water my skin crawled and I cried. The scalding water which pounded the itch from my body was gone. I needed it and I was so relieved it wasn’t there and I cried.

I tried to understand why I was crying and why I felt like there was a lopsided, broken crack running through the center of me and I couldn’t answer that either.
Dad showed up at school to talk to Kazue during naptime one day. He told her about my compulsions as best he understood and told her that sometimes patterns and straight lines helped me. She said she could give me a stack of a paper, a pen and pencil, a ruler, and a protractor during class, and she and Misao would let me do whatever I needed with them. So long as I still paid attention in class and didn’t fall behind.

Dad assured her that I wouldn’t fall behind.

I revived half-remembered origami patterns from my past life. I folded rectangular sheets of paper triangularly against themselves and creased the excess paper, folding it back and forth until it came off and left only square sheets behind. I folded them carefully, precisely, with perfect corners and sharply creased lines.

I drew perfect circles and filled them with geometric patterns. Squares and pentagrams and the star of David, nested over and over and over again, and their empty spaces split with lines from corner to edge and corner to corner. I pulled my pencil against the edge of my ruler and made patterns from empty space.

They they gave me something to do in class, when I wasn’t falling asleep, and they were better than nothing. I had an affinity for these kinds of patterns. They were balanced, and working on them was an act of balance. But they were never quite enough. They never balanced me.

After that, the sense of being off grew. It grew and grew and grew inside me, until there wasn’t room for anything else. I felt floaty and unreal, like everything I saw and heard and felt came through a hazy mist.

It grew every afternoon when the other students spoke to me but stared at my scars. It grew when I lay on the couch after school, listening to the buzz under my skin rather than playing with Neji and Hinata. It grew every morning when I stretched for the day, timing stretches to the second to try and make the flexibility of my scars match the rest of me.

It grew and grew and grew and I never noticed. It swallowed me up from the inside out, coming on so slow and so fast I never felt it. I only saw the edges of it in missing time. Realizing Hinata was going to school now and wondering when that had started. Cutting my finger on a sharpened kunai and staring at it blank-faced until I remembered we’d started practicing with those. Seeing our couch replaced with a foldout and assuming that must have happened a year ago, when it had happened last week.

I was fuzzy. I spent time outside myself. Sometimes I remembered to come back and sometimes I was present but other times I just … forgot. Neji and Hinata and Yuki would spend an afternoon playing cards and then Mom would tap Yuki on the shoulder and my world would lurch as I realized the third kid playing cards was me and that was my body which had been touched. And I wouldn’t know when the disconnect had happened.

I spent a lot of time not thinking at all.
One day I doodled a spiral in class.

In the background Misao was telling the class about the existence of chakra coils. A breeze blew over me from the open window, thick with the smell of fading autumn heat. Neji was signing under the desk to another branch family kid, the two of them also bored with the lecture on a topic every Hyuuga child already understood. Miyuki was running one thumb through a thick patch of fur she kept in her pocket, staring intently at Misao. Tomomi, having carefully fed Kazue’s kikaichu on their head something soporific, was leaning heavily on their hands, eyes shut behind their dark sunglasses.

I drew the spiral with pencil. There was almost no chakra in it. Sometimes I still overlooked pencils marks when I wasn’t specifically looking for them, they had so little chakra. This spiral wouldn’t hold any chakra at all. I looped my pencil around and there was a spiral on my paper. As harmless as the paper it was drawn on.

It was lopsided though. So I erased it and tried again. And again. And again. Until the paper was about to tear and too smudged with erase marks to ever hold something balanced anyway. Pencils just were not made for drawing spirals by hand.

I stared at the smudge marks.

I didn’t think.

I uncapped my inkpot and drew a spiral on a new sheet of paper. Perfect and balanced on the first try, four large lazy loops around a tight twirl in the center. I stared at it and felt settled.

The spiral glowed.

The fear pounded into me like a waterfall so fast and so sudden I thought I would burst. I pulled in breath to scream and my throat caught on the memory of *choking on fire wanting to scream* and I-

I grabbed the paper, shot to the open window in a single step, and threw the spiral out.

My throat opened and I heaved gulps of air in. Sweat sprung out on every unscarred inch of my skin and my legs trembled. I swallowed convulsively.

The whole class was looking at me. Misao spoke up first, voice soft and concerned. “Yuki, what’s wrong…?"

Outside the spiral-inscribed page drifted to the ground two stories below. It generally came to rest on the grass below, stiff blades of grass holding it off the ground. The faint chakra in the grass leached into the blood ink, which glowed just a tiny bit brighter. The chakra in the air whirled, pulled into the twirl in the center of the spiral as a diffuse ball. It whirled faster, and faster, and then-

**Bang!**

It was a tiny explosion. The fireball was no bigger than my head. I still jumped. The whole class jumped. The teacher in the room below us pulled a kunai and conjured a bunshin on reflex.
Misao’s jaw dropped. I saw the realization in her eyes, followed by panic as she glanced around me to all the children in her class. That fear turned to resolve and then anger as her jaw closed and clenched. “Yuki!” she bellowed, “What did you do?!”

A moment later Kazue’s kikaichu swarm hit me like a wave, sweeping over my body, my paper, and my ink, and draining everything of chakra. Where the bugs latched on to me they consumed chakra without reservation, eating through my meagre reserves in seconds. The loss swept through me with a profound blur of disorientation, and then I was falling, and then I knew no more.

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Chapter End Notes

Canon Terms:

-Bunshin (see: Clone Technique)

Author’s Note: I feed on comments. Appreciation, constructive criticism, speculation, all of it is wonderful. Audience interaction is what makes me feel like a story is actually alive, and it’s a huge help when it comes to motivation.
Chapter 20: Insight

I woke up in an unfamiliar room, in a fluffy bed piled high with blankets and pillows. A ceiling fan rotated lazily overhead. There was only one other piece of furniture in the room, a table with three chairs built into it, two on the opposite side from me and one on the side closest to me. The chairs were mounted on swivels and well padded.

And, seated in the chairs, were a pair of unfamiliar ninja playing cards.

One of the ninja was an older man wearing a chunin flak jacket, his headband pulled down to cover an empty eye socket. He laid a card down on the table, wrapping a thin sheath of chakra around it that I was pretty sure was genjutsu as he did. His partner, a much younger woman with pudgy cheeks and a constellation of piercings, swore.

The older man turned towards me as she did. “Ah, none of that Aki, the kid is awake.” He swept up the cards and looked at me, sending out a faint pulse of chakra which washed through the room and tingled against my eyes. “So, how are you feeling?”

I’d made a spiral. I’d put brush to paper and created fire. Just like when I was three, a brush and some ink and a glowing dot in front of my face and then- *fire*. I was horrified. I was terrified. Some part of my mind was screaming that I wasn’t safe, could never be safe, not ever again. I couldn’t ever be trusted with blood ink again not even ordinary ink. I needed to be safe, I needed to be safe, how could I ever be safe if I would do something like that-

*Terror.*

I’d made a spiral. And I wasn’t burned. I’d moved swiftly and decisively and thrown the spiral out the window. The fireball hadn’t even been that large. Wouldn’t have scarred me again even if it had touched me. In my past life I’d seen my uncle do no worse than burn off his eyebrows with a flash of flame the same size, cooking with alcohol while drunk. And heck, I only had the one eyebrow anyway.

*Relief. Humor.*

I’d made a spiral. In class. With Neji sitting not three meters away. With Miyuki and Tomomi and Tenten and Lee and Ichiro and Sei and Izumi and Ikue and two dozen other children. Children whom I loved, whom I knew in passing, whom I tolerated, whose names I couldn’t remember. Children who could have been disfigured, maimed, and killed. Children who would have screamed and screamed and filled the room with the greasy taste of burnt skin, even as Misao and Kazue bellowed for medics.

*Cold horror.*

“Yuki?” the older man asked again, “how are you feeling?”

“I don’t know.”
The one-eyed man’s face softened into a sympathetic smile, eyes creasing easily into the expression. “Well that’s quite alright. Here,” he patted the table in front of the empty seat, “come have a seat and we can talk.”

I shuffled out from under the mound of blankets and stood up, keeping a hand on the bed for support. I was horribly tired. Not the kind of tired that made my legs wobble, but the kind that made standing a draining exercise. I was reminded of my first few weeks out of the hospital, when I was healed but not hale and my body ate every spare sliver of energy to fuel its recovery. I padded over to the chair and let myself down in it, arms dangling at my side. I looked at the older ninja expectantly.

His sympathetic smile shifted into something warmer. He gestured to a small plastic rectangle on his flak jacket and then at an identical rectangle on his younger pierced colleague, “I’m Shigeo. And this is Aki.” Both of them smelled faintly of cigarettes and coffee. Aki gave me a tiny wave and a cheery hello.

I was briefly confused by the rectangles before realizing they must be nametags. Frowning inwardly I tried to focus my eyesight on their text, only to come up short. My head dipped as I pulled from my chakra reserves and I for a brief moment I almost fell asleep. I took stock of my chakra with a start, gazing inwards and finding that Kazue’s kikaichu had left me with nothing but wispy twists of glowing chakra where there should have been glowing rivers.

“Yuki,” Shigeo called to me again, “you with us?”

I took a deep breath and raised my head. “Mm. Mmhmm. I am.”

“Good. As I’m sure you already realized, what happened back in that classroom was very scary. You certainly gave Misao quite a scare.” His voice lilting on the last sentence and the corner of his mouth pricked up, an invitation to chuckle and alleviate tension. I stayed quiet though. He was right. What had happened was fucking terrifying.

Shigeo continued on. “Now it’s my experience that understanding something makes it less scary. Which is where Aki and I come in. When something scary happens in the village it’s our job to ask people about it and learn as much about it as we can, so that we can make it less scary and ensure it never happens again.”

The older ninja shifted his body minutely, opening the conversation to include the younger pudgy-cheeked ninja. Aki picked up smoothly from where he left off, smilingly sunnily at me, “That’s right Yuki. We’re here to help. And to do that we’re going to ask you some questions about what happened in your classroom. Is that alright with you?” She pushed emotion into her question, cheer and concern at once.

I considered asking where my parents were. If they knew what had happened. Where Misao and Kazue were. If they knew where I was. If anyone knew where I was.

I looked at the door to the room. Shigeo and Aki had left it open, held so with a doorstop. It was easy to see why. The door had only one handle, on the outside.

I met my interrogators’ eyes and answered them, “Yeah. That’s alright with me.”

“Great!” Aki chirped, “Let’s start from the end then. What’s the last thing you remember before waking up here?”

Step by step they walked me through my story in reverse. Kazue used her kikaichu swarm to drain
my chakra (to make sure I couldn’t set off any more explosive seals, they told me). Misao yelled … something at me, I couldn’t remember what. The seal detonated. After it absorbed chakra from the grass. Where it had landed because I’d thrown the seal out the window. Step by step by step, all the way back to the moment where I drew the seal without thinking.

The process was more than a little odd. Going through my memories backwards felt like trying to get my arms all the way around a very large and particularly slippery fish. But my interrogators were both very helpful, helping me keep a hold on the thread of my story with the detailed notes they took, acting as consummate professionals in how patiently they listened to me stumbling through it all.

When I was finished Aki gave me a smile, a warm and happy thing accented by the piercings in her cheeks and lips, and thanked me. “That was really helpful Yuki, thank you. Now we do need to clarify some things again, so we’re going to run through your memories a few more times. But for now I think you’ve earned a break, so let’s take a few minutes before we start up again, yeah?”

Shigeo gave me a smile too, fond and endlessly patient. “You’ve been doing good kid. And … let’s see …” he rummaged around in his flak jacket, eventually pulling out a small scroll glowing with knots of blood ink. I tensed at the sight of it, eyes brightening for a moment before my depleted chakra gave out.

Shigeo caught my reaction. “There’s no need to worry Yuki,” he reassured me. “These are storage seals. There’s no safer seals in the world; storage seals can’t affect anything with chakra in it, including you.”

Aki interjected, “He literally couldn’t hurt you with them if he wanted to. Which is really saying something, when you’re talking about a chunin.”

Shigeo dipped his head and frowned apologetically. “I’m sorry I scared you Yuki. I can put the scroll away again if you want.” His voice turned up into a question at the end.

I shook my head. “No it’s-” They were wrong. They didn’t know why I’d flinched. It wasn’t been the memory of fire. It was-

The last time I saw a friendly authority figure take out a sealing scroll it was used to burn a slave brand into my skull and bind a death jutsu to my brain.

But I didn’t want to say that, so I didn’t. “It’s fine,” I said. “Really”.

“If you say so,” Shigeo said. “Here, I’ve got some snacks sealed in this, do you want some?”

Now that he mentioned it … My stomach didn’t quite growl in response, but it did cough up a low gurgle. Shigeo chuckled, painting fondness across his face, “That’s a yes. Okay, tell me if you see anything you like.” He unrolled the scroll, revealing a long row of circular storage seals which his ran his fingers down. Small packages of food popped into existence as he touched them. “Just pick whichever one you want, Yuki.”

I ended up grabbing a box of red bean paste mochi, while Aki leaned over and snagged a bag of dense dough balls I couldn’t identify. Shigeo himself selected a long strand of licorice to chew that made my mouth pucker just looking at it. The two of them continued asking me questions as we ate but nothing serious, just small talk to fill the void. What do you do for fun? Do you have any siblings? Do you get along with them?

I talked about myself and my lights for quite a while, before Aki pointed out that I wasn’t getting
to eat my mochi and she took over the conversation to let me eat. She had two sisters, one of which
had a daughter who was my age, whom Aki had all sorts of stories to tell about. Aki’s niece was
apparently quite the troublemaker, a habit Aki delighted in indulging, much to her sister’s despair.
The conversation turned to Shigeo and his apparently impressive collection of potted plants when
he noted that Aki wasn’t getting a chance to eat either, before gradually morphing into a lazy free
for all. Our snacks found their way down our gullets slowly, in bits and pieces that we didn’t pay
attention to.

We finished our food almost half an hour later, at which point I was feeling remarkably better. I
hadn’t even realized I’d been in a grey mood until it was lifted by a full stomach and comfortable
conversation.

After the snack break Shigeo and Aki returned our focus to the questioning. They had me run
through what had happened in reverse again, and then again. And then once in proper
chronological order. Then it was time for another snack break.

I declined to enter the conversation this time, instead nibbling contentedly on a sweet bun while
Shigeo and Aki comfortably chatted with one another about the latest ninja gossip.

Most of which I already knew. I mean, I could read lips through walls and lived in a compound
inhabited by the most effective surveillance ninjas in the world. I was aware of all the latest village
scandals whether I was interested in them or not.

I finished my sweet bun and we settled in for the next round. This time though, they didn’t want
me to recount what had happened. This time they had questions.

Shigeo started in, “Yuki, you said that your seal absorbed chakra from the grass, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah. That made its pull,” I used my index fingers to make a swirly inspiraling gesture,
“stronger, so it could trap more chakra from the air, until it trapped so much it- ah- so much that it
detonated.”

Shigeo put on a grandfatherly face. “Uhuh. You know, Yuki, if for any reason you were telling us
something untrue, we wouldn’t be mad. We’re not going to punish you if you did anything
wrong, we just want to know what happened so that we can keep everyone safe.”

Huh?

“Uh, Shigeo,” I said, “and, uh, you too Aki. I didn’t lie. That’s what happened. The spiral fell on
the grass, took chakra from the grass, and that was the catalyst for it exploding. I don’t know why
you think I might be lying but I’m not. That’s just,” I gave a helpless shrug, “that’s just what
happened.”

“Really Yuki,” Shigeo persisted, “it’s okay. You’re not in trouble. We just need to know where you
got the explosive tag from and why it went off. Did you make it for a reason you think we’ll be
upset about? Did someone give it to you? Did you find it somewhere?”

I cut him off before he could continue. “I told you, I made it. Not like, on purpose on purpose, but
yeah, I made it.”

The older ninja released a soft huff of breath and crossed his elbows on the table, leaning in closer
while pulling his head down so he didn’t tower over me. Up close I could smell the cigarette
smoke on his breath more intensely, along with the burnt anise smell of the licorice he’d eaten
earlier. “Yuki, it’s understandable you’d make something up like that, because no one has ever
taught you about seals. But you can’t make seals like that. It’s not possible. We know you’re not
telling the truth. But Yuki, that’s okay. You won’t be in trouble for lying. We just want to know
why you’re lying and what the truth is.”

Aki leaned in beside him, round cheeks dimpling with a soft smile. “Yuki, if you’re trying to
protect someone that’s very noble. But what happened today, in class? That could have hurt your
classmates very badly. Don’t you want to protect them?”

I blinked slowly. Okay … what the fuck?

“Or did you want it to explode? Did you trigger it on purpose?” Aki continued. “Are you worried
you’ll get in trouble for that?”

I blinked more rapidly, now utterly lost and confused. “What? I … I thought you just said I
couldn’t have made the seal? And don’t you guys have a file on me somewhere which says I made
another seal like this when I was three?” I raised my right eyebrow, turning my head to emphasize
the fact that I didn’t have a left eyebrow.

Shigeo put his hand on Aki’s arm. “I think we may just be confusing the poor boy. Aki, why don’t
you go get Akito to help us explain this? I can feel his chakra on the floor right above us, I think
he’s doing paperwork in the filing room.”

The younger ninja winced as if she’d been chastised, before getting up and slipping out the open
door. She gave me a quick wave as she left. “I’ll be back soon Yuki.”

When Aki was gone Shigeo explained to me, “Akito is something of a sealing expert. He’ll be able
to clear up any confusion you’re having.”

I sure hope so because I don’t have the slightest idea why you think I’m lying.

Aki came back a minute later with a tall lanky Inuzuka in tow, his wolf padding alongside him. Aki
ushered the pair in, introducing us. “Yuki this is Akito Inuzuka, Akito this is Yuki Hyuuga.” The
wolf immediately plodded across the room and dropped their head in my lap. Aki laughed. “And
that’s Yuuna. She’s a sweetheart.”

Akito waved cheerfully at me. He was tall and lanky for an Inuzuka, not quite so tall that he had to
duck under the doorway but tall enough that he self-consciously jerked his head down anyway. His
hair was kept in a series of long thin intricately woven braids that were half-way undone and
coming loose. In addition to the Inuzuka clan tattoos on his cheeks he had a forest of spindly,
angular tattoos covering his arms and the right side of his chest and neck.

His wolf, Yuuna, was large and chubby and had an unfairly fluffy halo of soft fur. She was also
very insistent about wiggling her head into my lap, tongue lolled out. On reflex I dropped my hand
to her head and started scratching. She huffed her approval and stopped wiggling her head, her tail
taking up the slack instead.

Akito grinned as I scratched Yuuna, thrusting his hand out to me. “Hey Yuki. Nice to meet you.” I
shook his hand with my free one, catching a strong whiff of medical soap from him as he reached
out. “So. You’re the twitchy Hyuuga boy with the interesting scars. You wouldn’t happen to have
an Inzukua named Miyuki in your class would you?”

The non-sequitur threw me and I stammered out, “Uh, yes?”

Akito smiled again. He had a wonderfully sunny smile. “I knew it! Miyuki is my half-niece, I’m
her father Bunta’s half-brother. Miyuki talks about you a lot. If I’m being honest I feel like I know
you already. She says you’ve been a really big help to her in class. And also that you twitch your hands a lot, which is like catnip to her. I’m not sure which she likes about you more.”

I blinked and scratched Yuuna’s head, a bit stunned by the way words flowed out of Akito like a river.

“So yeah. I’m glad to finally meet you Yuki, even if these might not be the best circumstances. But that’s why I’m here. I think.” Akito leaned forward, crossing his arms on the table. “I’m a sealing, well, specialist. I’m not quite a proper sealing master yet. But I do a lot of sealing work. I tattoo some of the Inuzuka clan tattoos,” he waved at his face, “I help non-specialists tattoo seals on themselves, I do some binding work for T&I, I make a bunch of little seals for the supply department, all kinds of stuff.”

He whirled around to face Aki, braids spinning out behind him. “What exactly did you want me to explain to the kid again?”

Shigeo gestured for the sealer to sit down in the seat Aki had vacated and showed him the notes they’d taken, explaining to Akito what I’d told them. Aki, deprived of a seat, leaned in over their shoulders and occasionally gave commentary to my written account.

While the three of them talked I just … sat there. And petted Yuuna. There wasn’t much else for me to do.

When they finished Akito leaned back in his seat and sighed. “Huh. Well, I think I understand what they want me to explain to you.” He turned to Shigeo and Aki, “This is pretty simple stuff though, are you sure you two couldn’t have done this without me?”

Shigeo spoke dryly, “All I know of sealing is the Academy basics, and a one hour introductory lecture by Jiraiya I attended twenty years ago. And all I remember from that lecture was him telling us - ‘Gods willing you all know enough not to get yourselves killed now. But, and listen closely, that is not enough to prevent other people from killing themselves. If anyone else ever has a question about sealing you will. not. answer. them. You will send them to an actual sealing expert. Because otherwise you will both die horrible, agonizing deaths and the Hokage will yell at me.’”

“End quote,” he finished.

“Huh.” Akito said. “Alright. Guess I can’t fault an overabundance of caution with this stuff.” He gave me a once over, looking me up and down. “Heeeeyyyyyy, wait a minute. Are you also that Hyuuga kid who made an explosive tag and ended up in the hospital when he was just three? Is that where the scars are from?”

“Um,” I stammered, less because I was uncomfortable with the bluntness of the question than because I felt like I ought to be uncomfortable with it, “yes that was me.”

“Whoa! You set a record, did you know that? Youngest seal instantiation ever! I mean I know it must have been awful for you but that’s kind of something to be proud of if you become a seal master when you’re older. Which, I mean, I’m sure you will.”

Shigeo coughed.

“Aaaaand now I see why you wanted a professional to explain this stuff to our famous little ‘I don’t need any formal education to make explosive seals’ genius over here. Right. Good call.”

At a loss for what to say to any of that, I scratched Yuuna’s head some more. Her tail wagged.
“Right. Okay. So Yuki, I’m going to explain some stuff to you about how sealing works, and why what you said happened,” he waved at Shigeo and Aki’s notes, “couldn’t have actually happened.”

“Sure,” I said. *I mean, it actually did happen so …*

“Alright,” he said, “the first thing is that you can’t make seals on accident. Seals absolutely require intent. I mean, it’s kind of what seals are. They’re … okay it’s a bit complicated and I’m pretty sure Shigeo would kill me if I actually gave you the ‘how-to’ talk about seal crafting. But these are the basics. Your chakra can carry your thoughts, your intent. And if you manipulate it right it can do stuff with that intent. But chakra isn’t stable. You have to be constantly focusing on it to keep its … its shape, for lack of a better word.”

Akito rushed on, “And this is where seals come in. If you make a seal right the blood ink acts as a receptacle -a container- for your chakra, which you can imprint your chakra -with your intent in it- on. It keeps your intent stable and then does … uh, stuff, with that intent. Not always the stuff you want it to though, if you mess up. So like, in Shigeo’s notes it said when you were three you wanted your spirals to be ‘really bright’? I can see how that would make it explode. You wanted your spiral to be bright, and it did that, but like, not in the way you wanted it to.”

*Is that right?* I thought back, trying to remember the moments before the burning. Before the memory of the too-bright point of light which made my heart beat faster and before the memory of Dad yelling. It was hard, the memories didn’t feel like they were in chronological order and trying to remember what had happened ‘before’ felt like feeding my brain the wrong question. *That … that doesn’t seem quite right though.* I’d been trying to make my seals brighter, sure, but not … not like that. I’d been changing the shapes and seeing what gathered chakra the best, and sure in that sense I’d been trying to make them brighter. But …

But.

“So yeah,” Akito continued, “you couldn’t have made an explosive seal ‘without thinking about it’. That’s just not how it works. You had to have meant for it to do something or nothing would have happened at all. So um, yeah. That’s how Shigeo and Aki know you’re not telling the truth about this.”

*Except I am.*

“And there’s one more thing too. One of the most useful things about seals is that they can safely access something called ‘natural chakra’. It’s super dangerous for people to use, but seals can’t be hurt by it -because they’re not alive- so seals often use it as a power source. Now if someone told you that, that seals use natural chakra, well, I can see why you might think it’s plausible for a seal to take chakra from grass. But natural chakra isn’t just ‘plant chakra’. It’s specifically unowned chakra, wasted chakra which escapes from living creatures and chakra released when stuff dies, chakra which belongs to nobody. And because it belongs to nobody, anybody can -at least in theory- use it. Seals can definitely use it.”

“But-” here Akito hesitated, stumbling over his words and pausing, a thoughtful look in his eyes, “you … you can’t use the chakra from, ah, from …” he shook himself, “from grass. Because grass ‘owns’ its own chakra. And while your seal can use natural chakra because no one owns it, and use your chakra because the seal has your intent and therefore it kind of has ‘ownership’ over your chakra too, it can’t use, ah. It can’t use chakra from grass. Because the grass owns its own chakra. And seals can’t use chakra that’s owned by anything which isn’t,” he stumbled again, a faraway look in his eyes, “which isn’t you.”

The tattooed sealer stopped talking entirely. He dragged the silence out for several long moments,
until I was sure Shigeo or Aki were going to cough, or prod him, or something.

“Except,” he restarted slowly, “except for the seals made by the seal-masters of Uzushio. The whirlpool village. I remember reading about that in a old ward analysis once. They had these perimeter ward seals, these massive six meter wide blood-soaked wooden tangles of spirals laid into the ground. And when they were powered up, all the grass around them would die, for hundreds of meters. Ninja who were near them said they could feel the seals tearing at their chakra, like they were standing at the edge of whirlpool and their chakra might be sucked away from them. No one ever could figure out how Uzushio did that.”

Shigeo and Aki were now both staring at Akito, the entirety of their attention riveted on him.

“And … oh gods. And there was this quirk about their seals. The Uchiha could never get a read off of them. Typically they can just look at simple seals and get at least a general idea of the intent bound inside them. And they’re pretty handy to have around when dissecting more complicated seals too. But the Uzushio seals … I remember thinking it was so weird when I was reading up on their seal-work, I couldn’t find any field records of Uchihas’ impressions of their work. I thought maybe it was because we were allies before Uzushio was destroyed, that we’d kept the records somewhere other than our jutsu theft records. But when I petitioned the Uchiha clan about it they said that there just weren’t any. Because the Uchiha could never get a read off of the Uzushio seals. They thought Uzushio must have figured out some way to cloak the intent in their seals because it was like-”

Akito stared right at me.

“Like there wasn’t any intent in them at all.”

Shigeo kept his gaze on Akito, while Aki flicked her eyes between me and Akito.

“Hey Yuki,” Akito said, “how would you feel about making another one of those spirals?”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is a monument to the notion that your first draft doesn’t have to be good - it can even be awful- you just need to write down something so you can get started on an actually decent second draft.

And as always, comments are cherished and much appreciated. The warm fuzzies I get from reading your messages are the best part of writing this story.

P.S. Giggle is still an amazing beta and a fantastic help. Thank you Giggle!
Chapter Notes

Sorry this is a day late. I was moving yesterday and my new landlord made a mistake with the wi-fi so I couldn’t upload. On the plus side, that gave me another day to come up with a title for this chapter, which recontextualized this chapter for me and made me go from being unhappy with most of this chapter to really liking it and giving me some ideas for how to improve the next couple chapters. :p

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 21: The Eye Of The Storm

The moment after Akito suggested I make another spiral Shigeo, Aki, and I all shouted at once.

“Absolutely not! Why would-”

“Akito what the fu-”

“Are you insane?! ”

Aki turned to me and reassured me, “Yuki you don’t have to do that,” as Shigeo upbraided Akito, “Of all the stupid ideas I’ve ever heard-”

Akito tried to defend himself, “Wait look I know how it sounds-” and promptly got run over by Shigeo and Aki. “-this one takes the cake. What part of mixing children and explosives-”. “Seriously Akito what the fuck? ”

I plunged my hands in Yuuna’s ruff and bore down with my grip. The chubby wolf gave me a gently reproachful whine, but then turned her head and directed a much more forcefully disapproving yip at her partner.

The shouting started to escalate into chaos, the three adults shouting over one another back and forth. Heart pounding and hoping to head this off as quickly as I could I yelled, “Hey!” The three of them turned to look at me, pausing their argument.

“Maybe we should ask my parents,” my voice cracked - what if they don’t care what if it doesn’t matter they didn’t bring my parents here for this- “before having me build a bomb?”

Akito flushed and scratched the back of his neck. Aki crossed her arms at him and huffed and Shigeo grinned wryly.

“That,” Shigeo said, “is a very reasonable idea.”

I breathed.

“Besides,” he continued, “I think this investigation has reached a point where it can’t be wrapped up in an evening. We need to kick Akito’s Uzushio idea up the chain of command and discuss how
security clearances will be handled before continuing at all, let alone doing anything,” he shot Akito a baleful look, “drastic. We’ll give Yuki back to his family, who I’m sure is eager to have him back, and let our bosses decide when to call him back in.”

The older one-eyed ninja looked about the room. “Does anyone have any objections?”

Aki and Akito shook their heads no. Yuuna did wriggle her head about in my lap and let out a tiny rebellious whine though, so I loosened my grip and gave her some extra good ‘sorry for hurting you’ scratchies.

Shigeo pushed himself up from the table and clapped his hands together. “Good. Aki, I need you to grab the paperwork to classify this session’s report as verbal-only. This is going to be a headache for the people upstairs and having some of the paperwork done before we talk to them will be a great way to get on their good side.”

Aki nodded, asking for clarification about which forms they needed and writing the form numbers down in her notebook.

“Yuuna,” he said, looking at Akito’s wolf, “I need you to take Yuki back to his family. I assume they’ve got someone waiting in the lobby upstairs, but if not just take him back to the Hyuuga compound.”

Yuuna woofed, which I was pretty sure meant she understood Shigeo. I wasn’t clear on how intelligent Inuzuka wolves were, but stuff like this made me pretty sure they could understand speech at the very least.

“Yuki, we’ll get in contact with your parents some time in the next couple of days. And we’ll clear you to back to school tomorrow, so long as you keep the blood ink at home.”

I nodded. I didn’t actually have a choice about the blood ink, the school provided it for Hyuuga children, but I could bring some normal ink from home. Which was something I definitely would have done without prompting, to be honest.

“And you,” Shigeo said, turning to face Akito head on, “you and I need to have a talk about boundaries in an interrogation session. And common sense in general.”

Akito winced and hissed in a breath through his teeth. “Yeah I … probably deserve that.” He looked down at me and ran a hand through his braids. “Hey, Yuki, I’m sorry that I didn’t think through how saying that would make you feel. When I asked you about making another spiral I had every intention of keeping you safe and secure during the process, but you couldn’t have known that. All I did was say a very scary, very stupid thing to you and it’s perfectly reasonable if you’re upset about that. I’m sorry.” He bowed his head, braids falling about his face, and he looked genuinely contrite.

I scratched Yuuna some more before responding. “Thank you,” I said. “I think that was, um, a really stupid idea. Like, really stupid. But it’s nice to hear you weren’t planning to just have me draw a spiral on this desk or something.”

Aki grinned broadly, dimples showing. “Aww.” She shouldered Akito. “That was a good apology Akito. I’m glad, for a moment I thought you’d gone full dumbass on me.”

Akito shoved her away gently. “Yeah, yeah.”

“We’re still having that talk,” Shigeo said.
I left a few minutes later, after Shigeo made it clear to me that I was not to talk about the Uzushio stuff with anybody who didn’t already know. Which, he conceded, probably meant every ninja in the Hyuuga clan was safe to talk to, or would be by this time tomorrow. But I was definitely not allowed to talk about it with anyone else, and definitely not my siblings.

We’d apparently been in a basement floor, as Yuuna guided me up two flights of stairs to the ground floor lobby. I followed the fluffy chubby wolf up the stairs with my hand in her fur. In the lobby we came across a tired-looking Aunt Yuki levering herself out of a chair and smiling at me.

“Yuki,” she exclaimed, “come over here!” She extended her arms for a hug.

I threw myself at her, letting her pull me off the ground into her arms. I buried my head against her and breathed deep, smelling the lilacs that surrounded her favorite garden bench.

She clutched me to her chest and told me, voice soft and full of love, “You are grounded for ever.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed.

Aunt Yuki nuzzled my hair with her cheek. “I’m not joking Yuki. We were so worried! Your dad almost had a heart-attack when he heard what had happened!”

I nodded in her arms, head pressed against her. “Mmhmm.”

She continued in a lower voice, “You could have really hurt a lot of people Yuki.” Her voice wavered and almost broke, “We could have lost you.”

“I know,” I said quietly, squirming so I could snuggle more securely in her arms.

Aunt Yuki shifted to support me with one arm, running the other through my hair. My sense of self itched where her hand brushed over the hairless melted flesh on the left side of my scalp, but I leaned into her touch anyway.

Yuuna gently huffed, satisfied she’d done her job, and padded away, leaving the two of us alone in the lobby. We stayed there for a long time, holding one another close to reassure ourselves that we still could.

Eventually though, Aunt Yuki had to put me down. “Oof,” she said, “you’re getting too heavy for that. How much do you weigh, twenty kilos?”

“Doctor Suzuko said twenty four kilos at my last checkup.”

Aunt Yuki bent back and groaned, hands pressed against her spine. “Yup, I believe that.”

“By the way,” I asked as she straightened up, “where’s Mom and Dad? And Neji ‘n Hinata?”

“Mm,” she said with a grimace, “we’ll talk about that on the way home. It’s,” she bit off her last word like she intended to do violence to someone, “complicated”.

My aunt ushered me outside, pushing the heavy wooden door of the building open ahead of me. I walked outside and started as I breathed in a shock of cold air, pulling my robes tightly around me.
to ward off the sudden change in temperature. “Whoa. How late is it?”

“Getting close to midnight,” Aunt Yuki answered. “You were asleep for a long time. That’s why Neji and Hinata aren’t here, they wanted to stay but they really needed to go to bed. And that’s why your Mom isn’t here too, she had to take them home.”

“And Dad?” I asked.

Aunt Yuki sighed. She ushered me down the street, setting a slow pace alongside me. “The elders wanted you brought to talk to them as soon as possible, regardless of your condition. And they were,” she chewed the word around in her mouth, “concerned, about the possibility that your father may not do his best to make that happen. So he was advised to stay home.”

A shiver went through me. Oh. What did I say to that? Except-

Wait. Why are we walking down the street?

The building I had been in was one of the several office towers at the edge of the Academy’s training field, with the Hyuuga compound set a mile or so on the other side of the Academy. The compound wasn’t quite opposite the office towers, but the fastest route to it definitely should have been to cut across the Academy grounds.

“Umm, Auntie? Aren’t we going the wrong direction?”

“Well,” she said, “unfortunately it’s quite late. And I have a weak constitution, on account of the injury I received in service of Konoha. So I probably won’t be able to wake up early tomorrow morning. Certainly not early enough to make breakfast for my husband, who is so busy with his work as clan heir, and our daughter, who gets up so early to train with him to better serve in her capacity as heir-in-line.” Her voice took on a bitter tone as she talked, though her face remained perfectly untouched by it and the muscles of her jaw didn’t clench.

“So I’m taking a bit of a detour to pick up some breakfast food for them on the way home. The Elders’ directives are important of course, but I just feel like I’d be betraying my obligations to the clan by interfering with the schedules of our next two leaders-to-be. And, well,” she slid an abashed smile into her face which didn’t touch her voice at all, “this is my husband and my daughter we’re talking about. I’m sure the elders will understand some sentimentality for my loved ones.” The utter poison in that last phrase threw me for a loop, so completely disconnected from the abashed, loving expression she wore.

Not knowing how else to respond to this I asked, “But aren’t there some food places on the way home?”

“Mm. Yes,” she replied. “But none which are open this late. We’ll have to swing closer to the center of the market district to find anywhere open this time of night.”

I looked around us. My vision didn’t have enough range to give me good context for our surroundings, but I was pretty sure we were heading at a right angle to the compound. Walking at Aunt Yuki’s slow pace it’d be well over an hour before we got home.

“I know it’s late for the elders to be up,” she continued, “and some of the older ones may have to go to sleep before we get back. But,” and the last of her spiel she spoke with true warmth, “I just couldn’t not care for my child.” She looked down at me. “I’m a mother after all.”

Looking up at her my heart grew three sizes, and every part of me felt soft and warm despite the cold night air. I slipped my hand in hers and told her with all the sincerity I could muster, “I think
you’re a wonderful mother. And you’re doing a great job handling conflicting obligations.” Loyalties, was the word I actually wanted to say, but with the possibility of other Hyuuga observing our return that would be pushing our luck.

My aunt squeezed my hand and smiled. “Thank you Yuki. Sometimes that’s a hard thing for me to believe. But I definitely try to make it true. I always try.”

Hand in hand Aunt Yuki led me through Konoha. Not away from the elders, she couldn’t do that. But neither did she take me to them. Not for as long as she possibly could.

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Aunt Yuki was not allowed to accompany me when I was brought before the elders.

A branch family attendant brought me to a richly furnished room and directed me to kneel on the floor with my back straight and my head inclined, before bowing deeply and backing out of the room. I swallowed bile and nervousness as the attendant left.

The floor was hardwood, made from a kind of wood I’d never seen before which was shot through with filaments of frozen chakra. It gave the floor a marbled appearance visible only to Hyuuga. The rest of the room was decorated likewise. Ceramic plates painted with glimmering columns of seals and metal disks that burned with internal chakra hung on the walls. Vases placed on pedestals lined the walls, filled with brightly shimmering water and flowers whose petals were lined with chakra. Dominating the center of the room was a massive oval table surrounded by some twenty-odd seats, all built to convey power and grandeur. It rose before me and above me, forcing me to strain my chakra to look through it and see those who sat behind it.

For all the power and wealth the room represented however, it only held a small fraction of the people who wielded it. Two men and two women sat in chairs on the side of the table opposite from me, leaving almost all of the seats empty. One of the men looked tired but the other three were more alert and had slightly weaker bones that I’d learned to associate with nightwatch ninja. All four were bored, and made no attempt to hide it.

I didn’t recognize any of them.

The tired elder spoke first, not to me but to his peers. “Wonderful, the twig’s finally here. Let’s activate its seal and go home.”

My heart leapt into my throat at a million miles an hour, rocketing straight past nervous to terrified. I remembered Neji twitching on the training field as the swastika-shaped seal on his forehead blazed with light, as he screamed and-

The oldest woman, an almost entirely unscarred ninja with eerily placid chakra, interjected. “If I may, I thought we had agreed that triggering the child’s seal could send a detrimental message regarding seal experimentation. After all, it would be enormously beneficial if the Hyuuga clan was responsible for rediscovering a lost sealing art, and it would be terrible to see that jeopardized in any way.”

The slightly younger woman seated next to her and the tired man both let out exasperated sighs. The younger elder spoke up, “Yes, we did. But for the last time Mineko, the point was overruled. Caution must be taught. There’s no point in the twig having a knack for sealing if the damn twig
also ends up maiming students from half the clans in Konoha."

Mineko smiled thinly. “But nothing of the sort did happen. And besides, a twig may be a twig, but each twig makes up a branch of the noble house of Hyuuga.” She gestured at me, the first time any of them had acknowledged my presence, “The child is young, not stupid.” She turned her head a sliver to make it clear she was addressing me. “Are you?”

I swallowed more bile and struggled to not let panic own my words. “I have made stupid mistakes Elder. I will endeavor not to in the future.”

That comment earned me a vulpine smile from Mineko, the hungry triumphant expression of someone who has been given what they want.

The tired man spoke up. “Does it matter? As Taeko said, a seal activation is the best lesson we can teach a careless twig.”

Mineko pressed her point, “Oh but if Taeko truly cared so much about this she would have stayed to carry it out, wouldn’t she? She did not even stay up to see the child, but here we are, with the child in front of us. Should we not trust the judgement of our own eyes over her absent ones?”

The other woman breathed in sharply through her nose and spoke to defend Taeko’s judgement. Their argument continued without me. It was, after all, not about me at all.

Mineko didn’t care about me. Or the children in my class who could have been hurt. Or even my spirals. This was a political point to be earned. Elder Taeko and Elder Mineko clearly stood opposed to one another. Undercutting Elder Taeko’s decision to have me tortured was just an easy, casual way for Elder Mineko to undermine her rival’s authority.

The elders spoke, and I trembled.

Every time the tired man interjected I flinched, forehead pounding from the pressure in my clenched jaw. He wanted to go home, he wanted to go to sleep. And he could get that by torturing me. All he’d have to do is make a one-handed handseal, channel a little chakra, and then he could go home. The other elders’ argument would be moot if I’d already been tortured.

So he spoke and I flinched.

Mineko insisted softly and assuredly that it was unnecessary it was for them to torture me. She argued forbearance for me. She terrified me anyway. Maybe she just wanted to undercut Elder Taeko. But she could also just be seeking some small concession. A gain for no cost. And if that were the case then she’d gladly trigger my seal herself the moment she got what she wanted.

She spoke and my breath quickened.

One of the men still hadn’t spoken. He shifted in his seat and I almost panicked, irrationally sure he was about to speak out against Mineko. I knew nothing about him. He could hurt me at any moment and I would have no way to see it coming.

He scared me the most.

It was the woman arguing for my torture who I was least scared of. I knew she would hurt me. But pain didn’t make me afraid. It was waiting for the pain that reached inside of me and grabbed my lungs, twisted my stomach, dragged a fingernail up the back of my throat. Hope was terrifying and awful and heavy and I didn’t want it. I just needed them to get it over with.
Mineko spoke to me. “Child.”

Panic filled me. *Oh gods I wasn’t listening I wasn’t listening I wasn’t listening what do they want oh gods nonononononono-*

“Yes Elder?” *Please don’t hurt me, please gods no, please.*

“When you return to class you will apologize to your teachers, in public before the rest of your class. You will apologize to them for endangering your classmates and say that your actions were unbecoming of the Hyuuga clan. You will vow to remove this stain on the Hyuuga name and then you will do everything in your power to do so. Make it clear to your teachers that you are available to them for any task or duty they need performed.”

“Yes Elder.”

“Repeat that back to me.”

I did.

“Good. You will also be taking additional lessons on sealing. Though it’s not yet clear what the spirals you have made have in common with conventional sealing, if anything, it would be foolish to ignore the possible rewards of a new discovery. And given that Elder Taeko was so concerned about your safe practice of the sealing arts, it seems reasonable that she be the one to educate you in these matters. While she is busy,” Mineko’s smile was a glinting razor blade, “it would be unthinkable for Elder Taeko to pass up the opportunity to train the first successor to the long-dead Uzushio arts.”

Mineko leaned back. “A runner will be sent to your father as soon as details are finalized. You may go now.”

The suddenness of the dismissal hit me like a punch to the gut.

*What?*

Relief flooded me in a wave, sweeping from my chest out to my fingers and toes. I wanted to cry. I wanted to vomit. The relief filled me but it did nothing to unravel the knot of terror and anticipation in my chest. I couldn’t stop feeling afraid.

The conflicted feelings whirled inside of me and I almost forgot to move. But I did. I got my hands beneath me, pushed down the churning in my stomach, and stood up. I bowed to the elders and left the room. Once the door closed behind me though, my steps faltered.

As I came to a stop a warm hand clasped me on the shoulder. The branch family attendant who had ushered me in was standing next to the door, waiting for me. He looked at me, and I saw recognition in his face. He knew what I was feeling. I didn’t have to find words for the tangled, messy, awful ball of relief and fear inside of me. Because he knew. He understood.

He squeezed my shoulder and said in a low quiet voice, “Let’s get you home, yeah? You’ve had a long day.”

Something swelled up inside my chest and swept all the other emotions away. It swelled and swelled until there was no room inside me left and it filled my ears with tears. I had never met this man before. I didn’t know his name or anything about him. But in that moment, he was my brother.
Dad had fresh bread ready for me when I got home. He slathered it with butter and honey, and eating it felt like being loved.

Mom ran her fingers through my hair as she told me the same things Aunt Yuki had. I was grounded forever, I had worried them sick, and they didn’t know what they’d do if they lost me.

Both of their hands trembled.

When I was fed, and my presence had bled some of the nervous energy out of them, they hugged me close and sent me off to bed. The two of them didn’t follow me upstairs. I didn’t think either of them would be getting any sleep tonight.

Upstairs Neji and Hinata slept uneasily in our bed. The two of them twitched and turned in their sleep. Looking down at Neji I felt twinges of guilt snaking up inside me. I could have hurt him. He could have been scarred just like me.

But I was tired. Too much had happened today and I was running on emotional fumes, not enough left inside of me to deal with this. So with a practiced twist of thought I pulled away from the guilt, putting distance between it and myself until I was just an exhausted body.

I shucked my robe and donned my nightgown, slipping into bed between Neji and Hinata. Neji grumped about the intrusion in his sleep and pushed against me, while Hinata rolled on top of me and ended up with a mouthful of my hair.

I held my lights close and tried not to think of tomorrow.

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Chapter End Notes

As always, comments are cherished. I’m constantly astounded by how much feedback all of you give me, and how powerful of a motivator it is. All of you who leave comments, thank you very much, it means so much to me. <3

Fun Ninja Fact: Nightwatch ninja have slightly weaker bones because of a vitamin D deficiency.
Aunt Yuki brought me the news three days later as I left school. Konoha’s Research and Development group had a setup prepared to test my spirals in the R&D tower. I was to be escorted straight there and participate in their experiments.

“Of course,” Aunt Yuki told me, “they can’t expect you to help them with their research on an empty stomach now can they?” She pressed a warm bread bun the size of my head and filled with flaky meat into my hands. “There. Now eat quick, R&D’s tower isn’t far.”

I blinked and automatically placed the end of the bun in my mouth. “Mmrm?”

“Talk with your hands while you’re eating,” Aunt Yuki admonished me. She handed Neji and Hinata their own buns as quickly as possible, heading off an envious insurrection.

I signed to Aunt Yuki in the colloquial version of Konoha sign, “Now? We’re going right now?”

“Yes we are,” she said, signing a quick mission-form affirmative at the same time. “I’ve got good news though. Keiko managed to get herself appointed as an interdepartmental liaison in charge of recording the official results of the tests. Somehow. Your mother is some kind of bureaucratic wizard, I swear. So she’ll be there with you the whole time. And Hinata and Neji and I,” Hinata perked up at the mention of her name whilst Neji remained engrossed with his bun, “will play at a park nearby until you’re finished, so we can pick you up afterwards.”

“Okay Auntie,” I signed, holding the the bun with my mouth.

“Yes we are,” she said, signing a quick mission-form affirmative at the same time. “I’ve got good news though. Keiko managed to get herself appointed as an interdepartmental liaison in charge of recording the official results of the tests. Somehow. Your mother is some kind of bureaucratic wizard, I swear. So she’ll be there with you the whole time. And Hinata and Neji and I,” Hinata perked up at the mention of her name whilst Neji remained engrossed with his bun, “will play at a park nearby until you’re finished, so we can pick you up afterwards.”

“Good.” She rubbed my head. “You’ll do just fine. And Yuki? I know this whole thing is scary and unsettling but we’re proud of you. Keiko, Hizashi, and I, we’re all really proud of you. Being able to make seals at your age is amazing, especially if they really are some unusual type of seal. It might be a while before we can be more proud than we are worried, but we are proud.”

I hummed fondly and pressed myself up against her leg, giving her a half hug. I signed with my free hand, “Love you Auntie.”


Oops. I winced. “Yes?”

Aunt Yuki sighed. “Go get it then. I’ll hold your bun. Quickly now, run.”
I did as I was told and ran back inside. Sure enough, lying on my desk where I had left it was *Ninja Tools and How To Use Them Safely: Volume 1 of 4, The Basics*. I raced into the room under Kazue’s watchful eye—she was still cleaning up the classroom—and grabbed it. Oof. It was a heavy book. I felt the weight of it in my biceps as I picked it up.

Kazue raised an eyebrow at me. “If you hadn’t come back for that in another five minutes I was going to send my bugs after you,” she said drily.

“So sorry, I’ll try to remember better next time.”

“Do,” she said, a small curve of a smile playing about her lips.

This was Misao and Kazue’s response to what I’d done. They’d given me this book, a tome describing every single possible way handling ninja tools could go wrong (or at least a fourth of them), and told me that I was to carry it with me everywhere I went. I was also supposed to read parts of it whenever I got the chance, but really I think they just wanted me to carry around a massive physical reminder to not act so thoughtlessly.

I raced back outside, this time carrying my book, and retrieved my bun from Aunt Yuki. “I’m ready,” I signed to her.

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Given what Shigeo had said about keeping the whole Uzushio thing under wraps, I’d expected my spiral crafting to be tested in some tiny windowless ward-covered cell where no one could see what I was doing. I was not quite right about that.

The R&D high security testing room was very spacious, some twenty meters on each side with a five meter ceiling. I was, however, right in guessing that it would be windowless. The whole room was simply an empty concrete block buried beneath the R&D tower. And I was also right in guessing that it would be warded. Every surface was painted with so many seals I could barely see the concrete beneath them. The air twisted and writhed with their distortions of the room’s natural chakra so much it turned my recently filled stomach.

What I had absolutely not seen coming though, was the audience. The room was *filled* with ninja. Literally every available space was used. Ninja clustered together on the walls and the ceiling, casually ignoring gravity to make more room. There were apparently a *lot* of ninja with the security clearance and the interest to be here.

I saw at least two ninja representing every major clan, Aburame, Inuzuka (I waved to Akito and Yuuna), Nara, Yamanaka, Akimichi, Sarutobi, Hoki, Shimura, Uchiha, and Hyuuga. The Uchiha and Hyuuga were here in force, presenting at least a dozen ninja each. Each of the Uchiha had massive chakra vessels beside their optic nerves which I assumed signified awakened Sharingan, and each of the Hyuuga bared a blank forehead.

The rest of the ninja, I assumed, were there representing various departments and organizations. There were plenty of clan ninja among them but they downplayed their clan affiliations, eschewing clan symbols in favor of department symbols and name tags (half of which I would bet were covers). There were also a dozen ninja in masks and head-to-toe coverings, but to Hyuuga eyes that was just a different type of organizational identifier.
Mom dropped from the ceiling the moment I entered the room, landing next to me. She immediately hoisted me up onto her hip. “Oof,” she said, “you’re getting too heavy for that.”

“Nuh-uh,” I insisted, “it’s the book. It adds ten kilos.”

Mom side-eyed the book like she was trying not to laugh. “Remind me to buy your teachers something nice. I think you’re going to get a lot of use out of that book.”

“Mo~om,” I whined.

Mom chuckled. “You know your dad was really upset when they got you that book. Said we should have thought of it years ago.”

“Moooo~ooooom.”

She continued in a playful tone of voice, “The funny thing is that you think I’m teasing, but we really should have thought of this. Neji has a good head on his shoulders and Hinata’s an angel, but we’ve always known your curiosity was going to get you into-” her throat shaped an ‘h’ sound -hot water- before she changed her word choice “-trouble.”

I grinned cheekily, because I was supposed to and smiling was easier than feeling whatever I was supposed to feel about that reminder.

Mom apparently decided that banter-time was over anyway, and shifted to a low serious tone. “Hey though, Yuki, you know what you’re going to be asked to do right?”

I nodded.

“They’re going to ask you to draw some more of those exploding spirals. But you know what Yuki?” She waited for my response.

“What?”

“You don’t have to do it if you don’t want to.”

From the way some of the Hyuuga’s heads snapped around, making it clear they were looking at her, that was very much not the case.

“Even if they say you have to, you don’t. Because I say you don’t. And I will fight every ninja in this room if that’s what I have to do to make that so.”

Those Hyuuga were not the only ninja looking at Mom now.

“All of them.” She gave me a little bounce on her hip to let me know she meant it.

Which of course was when the Hokage strode into the room. He swept in flanked by two masked guards who eyed everyone around him and four more masked guards who were wrapped in thin coats of chakra which, based on how Mom’s eyes slid right over them, I’m pretty sure rendered them invisible. The Hokage walked straight up to my mother and I and said, “I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

Mom smiled, straightened her spine, and said right back. “Not at all. I was just telling my son what he would and would not have to do here today.”

At least one ninja in the crowd choked on their own saliva. I almost choked. If I’d heard her right my mother had just stated her willingness to throw down with the supreme leader of Konoha over
my treatment, in front of dozens of witnesses no less.

“Of course,” the Hokage replied smoothly, “your care for your son does you credit Keiko.” He inclined his head to look at me. “And hello Yuki. I’ve read a couple reports with you in them, but I believe this is the first time we’ve ever met.”

The Hokage was ... not what I expected. I’d known that he had once been called the God of Shinobi, one of the most feared warriors in the world. But somehow I hadn’t realized that he was a warrior, in the present tense. I’d expected an aging grandfather, a hunched figure a couple decades past retirement. And yes, he was old. His face was lined by age and sun, and his scalp was mostly bare. But the man in front of me was anything but frail.

The Hokage was short. If he’d ever been anything approaching average height then age had taken that from him. He stood at eye level with me where I was balanced on Mom’s hip. But he stood straight, feet planted and chin up. Age had stretched his skin thin, but beneath that thin skin was corded muscle and sinew, layer after layer of bone calluses, and shining chakra coils filled to bursting. And his eyes. His eyes were sharp and left absolutely no doubt in my mind: this man had killed people.

Oh I could see why Naruto would view him as a grandfather figure. Between his large veiled hat and his enveloping robes, he probably just looked like an ordinary old man to ordinary eyes. His wrinkles probably crinkled warmly when he smiled and the sharpness in his eyes could probably be a humorous glint when he felt like it. And his long fuzzy goatee probably looked very grandfatherly when he stroked it.

But viewing him with the all-seeing eyes of the Hyuuga clan? There was no mistaking him for anything but what he was. A weapon.

I smiled tentatively at the Hokage and said, “It’s nice to meet you Lord Hokage.” Fuck. I loved my mother. I knew she really would go to bat for me, fight for my right to be a safe and secure child who didn’t have to experiment with bombs for the sake of a junta’s technological supremacy. But looking at the Hokage? Seeing him? I knew that she would lose.

The Hokage smiled back, and his wrinkles did crinkle warmly, “Likewise young Yuki. I look forward to great things from you.”

He turned to face the rest of the room. “Clear a space. Let us begin.”

An instant after he spoke there were no ninja occupying the center of the floor, and someone had popped a short card-table and a footstool out of a storage seal. A moment later the card-table was topped by square sheets of parchment, a faintly shimmering inkwell, and a small brush. One of the main family Hyuuga took up a position next to the setup and called out to me, “Yuki Hyuuga. Come over here.”

Mom squeezed me once. She set me down gently, rubbing my back. “You’ll be fine Yuki. Just call for me if you don’t feel comfortable, okay?”


The main family Hyuuga waiting for me at the card table was a short woman whose robe was filled with shining scrolls and slips of sealed paper tucked into hidden pockets. She spoke to me as I approached, “I am Elder Taeko. Sit child, and we will begin.”
Oh. So this was the woman who thought a quick torture session would do me good and who would be teaching me sealing in the future. I did as she told me to and sat, placing my book on the ground next to me.

Elder Taeko spoke quickly and tersely. “Before we begin you should be aware of the safety precautions in place. First, there is a control-field laid over this room. This binds seals and forbids them from pulling chakra from beyond their immediate surroundings. Your seals will not be able to pull enough chakra to produce more than minor effects. Should that fail however, and the room’s wards detect a significant release of chakra—"

The elder pricked me with a needle faster than I could blink. “Ow!”

“—there is a replacement jutsu array which will pull you out of harm’s way.” She handed the needle off to another ninja. “Your blood and chakra will allow the array to trigger a replacement as if you yourself performed it, so your chakra won’t resist the translocation.” She barreled on before I could ask what that meant. “There are also a number of forcefields which will be triggered and physical barriers which can be summoned if anything goes truly awry. In the worst case scenario a dimensional rift will open and remove the offending seal. Do you understand?”

“Er, why does the replacement array need my blood again?”

“Arcane chakra possesses subjective spatial inertia which resists action by external forces.”


I can already tell that my sealing lessons with you are going to be fantastic. Just great.

Elder Taeko picked up the brush and placed it in my hand. “Your first task is to, as best you are able, replicate the seal you produced three days ago during your Academy class. When you are finished, do not touch the seal. Do you understand?”

“Yes, elder.”

“Then begin.”

I took a deep breath. I could do this. I’d literally done this without thinking, it was not that hard. And for what little it mattered to my too-quick heartbeat, I trusted their security precautions. If the Hokage’s person was judged safe in this enclosed space with experimental explosives, then their wards must be pretty solid.

I dipped the brush in the inkwell and- I stopped. Huh? I focused on the brush and dipped it in the inkwell again. Ah dammit. The ink was blood-ink, technically, but whoever had mixed it hadn’t used much blood. I could barely see the extra light of the blood against the light running through the brush’s bristles. I frowned and concentrated on my eyes, shoving chakra into them until the world’s chakra shone in crisp neat lines. The individual bristles of the brush stood out cleanly in my vision, surrounding by the glimmering glow of the faint blood-ink clinging to them.

I started again. What had the last spiral looked like? Four large loops around a tight twirl? I took another deep breath. My hands didn’t shake. Sometimes when I was afraid my capillaries would shrink and my hands grow cold, but they never shook.

Loop and loop and loop and loop and twist.

Done.

The spiral wasn’t lopsided or misproportioned. But it didn’t seem quite right. I’d swear it was the
same exact shape as the last one, but it wasn’t balanced. And it didn’t glow brighter when I finished it. Or did it? If I looked closely there was a faint unsteady flutter of extra light shimmering over the spiral, so faint I never would have noticed it without the full focus my eyes could bring to bear.

Elder Taeko interrupted my thoughts. “If it is finished then back away.”

I did as I was told, standing up and walking away. I didn’t rush though. That wasn’t a bomb. It wasn’t even a proper spiral, not really. Spirals were balanced, centered. They had presence and pull . That was just ink on paper.

The Hyuuga and Uchiha clustered around the spiral. The Hyuuga flooded their eyes with chakra until they shone like suns, and the Uchiha did … something with their eyes. Activating their Sharingan? It looked almost like a completely new set of chakra vessels snapped into place. Not at all how the Byakugan worked.

Mom scooped me up again as they examined the seal. I spoke absentmindedly to her, my real focus on the faintly shimmering loops of ink. “It won’t work.”

“Huh?”

“Not a real spiral. Won’t work.”

Mom blinked down at me. “Why not?”

I shrugged, still focusing on the not-spiral. The last spiral hadn’t started pulling at natural chakra until it pulled the grass’ chakra into itself. It hadn’t had a direction and a flow that it could impart into the natural chakra until the grass’ chakra was settled inside of it. But even before then it had affected the chakra in the air. Made it thick and sluggish as it passed through the spiral’s loops, so it settled close to the spiral and made it glow. This not-spiral though …

Oh!

Too faint! The blood-ink was too faint! It didn’t have enough -I struggled to find a word for it-weight? Sure, weight. It didn’t have enough weight to influence the ebb and swirl of the natural chakra in the air.

Right as I came to that conclusion the Hyuuga and Uchiha broke apart and retreated from the card-table, murmuring amongst themselves. One of the Uchiha pulled a spool of metal wire out of an equipment pouch and channeled chakra through it, using the chakra to animate it and send it out to poke the not-spiral. They channeled chakra down the wire into the not-spiral, where it immediately escaped and faded back into the air.

The Uchiha frowned.

“There’s not enough chakra,” I said.

The Uchiha, short and sharp-featured like all the members of their clan, glanced at me and frowned. They pushed more chakra down the wire.

“No, no. Not the wire. The ink. The ink needed more blood. It doesn’t have enough weight.”

Ninja throughout the room exchanged glances. One of the ninja on the ceiling above me, an Aburame with hundreds of seal-carved shuriken secreted about their person, called out. “I made that ink myself young Hyuuga. I can assure you, it held enough blood to retain an imprint.”
I shook my head, ready to argue the point, but before I needed to Akito scooted up right beside Mom. He had an open inkwell in his left hand and a small cut on the side of his pinky finger on the right. “Just tell me how much you need kiddo.”

Mom shot him a Look, clearly unimpressed with this lanky Inuzuka invading our personal space. “And you are?”

“Oh!” He blushed, ducking his head and sending braids cascading about his face. “Akito. Uh, Akito Inuzuka. ‘N this is Yuuna.” He awkwardly gestured with the open inkwell to the chubby, tongue-lolling wolf next to him. She woofed. “I, uh, was there towards the tail of Yuki’s interrogation. We met, talked a bit. Oh and I’m also Miyuki’s half-uncle. So I’d heard all about Yuki even before this. Felt like I already knew him. Oh, uh, Miyuki’s a classmate if you didn’t know. Of Yuki’s. Right.” Akito gave an open-mouthed sheepishly hopeful grin that exposed elongated canines.

Mom maintained the Look for a moment longer before relenting. She shifted us so I was closer to Akito and told him, “Go ahead.”

Akito ducked his head again, muttering thanks, and held the inkwell out closer to me. “Alright Yuki,” he said while shuffling his grip so that he could both hold the inkwell in his left hand and squeeze his left pinky with it at the same time, “I’m gonna squeeze drops of blood into the inkwell and you just tell me when alright?”

I nodded. “Uh-huh.” How much blood did it need? The same amount as the blood-ink they gave us Hyuuga kids for the Academy would probably do, but that had been a very small explosion hadn’t it? Was that because of the shape of the spiral I drew or the chakra content of the ink? Both? Was there a ‘right’ concentration in general or would it depend on the specific spiral being drawn?

“Yuki?” Akito prompted.

“Nn?” Oh. Dear. He’d already squeezed a dozen drops into the ink. “Uh, swirl it around,” I said.

Akito complied and I cringed. That was pretty bright? Brighter than the Academy ink? Probably? But maybe not as bright as the ink Mom and Dad first taught me to write with …


I nodded. “Uh-huh.” How much blood did it need? The same amount as the blood-ink they gave us Hyuuga kids for the Academy would probably do, but that had been a very small explosion hadn’t it? Was that because of the shape of the spiral I drew or the chakra content of the ink? Both? Was there a ‘right’ concentration in general or would it depend on the specific spiral being drawn?

“Thanks Akito,” I said as I scrambled out of Mom’s arms. I squeezed her hand with my free hand when she reached for it, mind spinning around the shining ink. I could make the same spiral again but that didn’t feel right. Not balanced. There would be a- be a … a bend, yes a bend, at the point where the lazy loops became a tight twirl. That bend would be broken, the spiral’s current would have too much force to be turned by its curve and the whole thing would fall apart.

I stepped up to the card-table and grabbed a fresh sheet of paper before Elder Taeko could even say anything.

She spoke as I set my brush to the paper anyway. “We will do the same thing as last time-”

“No, no, no,” I hazily interrupted. I started pulling my brush through the spiral, starting at the outer edges of the sheet of paper. This one needed to be bigger, I needed room. “Won’t work. Too much
force, the ink would pull too hard. Spiral needs to be sturdier.”

Elder Taeko opened her mouth to respond but then an Uchiha said something and she turned her attention to them instead of me. I tuned both of them out. I needed to focus.

This spiral would be big, larger than my head. I used broad lines, pressing down with the brush to lay the ink on thick. Large loops spaced three (child’s) fingers apart, spiraling in evenly and just a bit closer together near the center. I ended the curve before it could reach a proper finish, leaving an open space the width of my palm in the center. Just inside the edges of the open center I drew a dozen steeply sloped fragments of spirals, making a border that would push in around the open space.

The finishing touch. I filled the empty space with ink, a simple solid circle just touching the innermost edges of the hashmark border.

I hummed inside, thinking, feeling. The circle in the center should have more blood. Much more. It would do as it was, but … more. It could use more. And the spiral wasn’t as balanced as it could be, especially where it ended in the center. I should have used a spiral made from three curves. That would allow for steeper curves with the same spacing and besides something about three felt right for this, felt balanced.

My scars didn’t itch at all.

(A tiny part of my brain keened. It had no words to speak, demanded no action of me and drove no thoughts, but so long as I sat in front of the spiral it could not be quiet. It sapped warmth from my hands and caused my pulse to flutter in my neck, my left leg to bounce up and down, but that wasn’t important. The balance was important, the pure perfection of it and the way it gave me a source of symmetry to focus on that wasn’t skew, that wasn’t imbalanced me. So long as I was very far away from myself, out of my body and in the spiral, the scared keening part of my brain could be tiny in the distance and I could be part of something whole.)

“Yuki, move back,” Elder Taeko said again. Huh? “Move back so that we may examine the seal.” I did as bidden.

Mom scooped me up again as I backed away. “I wish you could see it Mom,” I spoke distantly, “it’s beautiful.” She shivered. Or shuddered.

Beside us Akito stared, as if with enough effort his eyes could become stars like mine and see the truth hidden within the ink. I liked that look.

The Uchiha and the Hyuuga looked at my spiral. I don’t think they saw it. They saw ink, and chakra, and the shape of a spiral, but they didn’t see its form. The flow that would pass through the spiral’s arm, that needed perfection to exist, that would find an imperfect home in any subtle deviation of the spiral’s shape.

In a sudden moment I understood what Michelangelo meant when he said that a statue already exists within its block of marble and that a sculptor’s job is to set it free. I had not made the current of chakra that would flow. The potential for that simply existed, out there in the world in some abstract way. There were flows of chakra that could exist, that would spring into being given a shape to inhabit. I didn’t need to shove chakra around, to push it and grasp it and yank it. I just needed to find the right shape, the right spiral, to let a flow which could be, be.

The Uchiha with the metal wire touched the spiral. Chakra vanished from the end of their animated metal, drawn from a pattern imagined in their mind into a truer form, into something that would
hold its shape should every mind in the world fade away.

The Uchiha swore, startling as the draw pulled their chakra all the way down the length of the wire and from the tips of their fingers.

The spiral glowed and the chakra in the air stirred. The spiral shone brighter and brighter as chakra flowed down its length, but true brilliance was in the center. Chakra poured into the center circle, until it glowed as bright as it could … and then brighter still. The chakra in the circle pushed out on the hashmark border, trying to escape the pressure it was under, and found itself bound regardless. It glowed and glowed and glowed.

(And if my breath wouldn’t come and I clutched my mother’s shirt that was a distant thing.)

The other Hyuuga noticed the extent of the draw first, the way natural chakra throughout the room flowed inward to make up for what was lost to the spiral. Elder Taeko cried out, “The control field has failed! Trigger the physical barriers and prepare the rift.”

A half dome of steel thirty centimeters thick and three meters wide appeared from thin air around the spiral. I saw something else too which I couldn’t name, a thinning in the air, as if the space inside the dome rested on a fragile reality.

The spiral continued to glow brighter, massive quantities of chakra piling into the sink in its center. It outshone the hearts of most of the ninja in the room and kept shining brighter, a star being born.

Ten long seconds passed.

And then it exploded. A hollow sphere of pure chakra two meters wide appeared around the spiral even as a fireball ripped free of the paper. In the same moment I felt a wrench inside myself and found myself in a distant corner of the room, a me-sized straw doll taking my place in Mom’s arms. As my perspective shifted the forcefield (I assumed it was a forcefield) contained the awful violence of the explosion, flexing and expanding several centimeters but containing the blast, if not all of its deafening roar.

Mom body flickered over to me and had me back in her arms before the sound of the explosion finished echoing through the chamber. The straw doll lay discarded on the floor behind her.

In the silence the explosion left behind one of the younger Hyuuga whistled lowly, “Hooooly shit. That bent the first forcefield. Is that possible for single explosive seal?” A similarly young Uchiha followed up with, “There wasn’t a shred of intent in that seal, I’d swear it on my eyes.”

Talk erupted in the wake of their comments, speculation and surprise and admiration and a buzz, a buzz of what could and might be.

The nascent talk was silenced a moment later by the Hokage. He clapped, and his chakra fed into the air around his hands to make the enclosed space ring with sound. “First,” he spoke, “before all else, we must address the failure of the control field.” He turned to the Uchiha and Hyuuga as he spoke, but it was not them who responded first.

Tall, lanky Akito spoke with a cheek splitting grin, braids whipping around him as he excitedly twisted his head in an attempt to individually address every ninja in the room at once, “Of course the control field didn’t do anything. This is why Uzushio spirals don’t have intent! Why Yuki needed more blood in his ink! They’re leylines.”

Akito rushed on before the confused looks that earned him could turn into questions. “Normal seals lay claim to chakra, right? They can lay claim to natural chakra because it’s ownerless and
can’t touch other’s chakra because there’s already a claim, right? So you can limit a seal’s function by preempting its claim and laying your own prior claim to the local natural chakra, which is what the control field does. But Yuki’s spiral didn’t have to lay claim to anything at all!” Akito let out a delighted laugh and jittered with the contained energy of his thoughts.

“It’s a leyline! Well, not actually a leyline. But close! Leylines are naturally occurring flows of chakra, giant rivers of natural chakra which run along veins of chakra conductive minerals in the earth, right? But leylines don’t have to lay claim to chakra to make that happen, to make the chakra flow! The chakra just flows like that because, well, because that’s just how chakra moves. It’s like water flowing downstream, but in this case chakra-infused materials pull chakra through them and flowing chakra pulls more nearby chakra into its flow. And that’s what the spiral must have done! It didn’t take control of chakra, it just set up a path for it to flow along! An artificial one, like a miniature manufactured leyline! Except this little artificial leyline wasn’t like a river, it was like a whirlpool! It sucked chakra in until it couldn’t hold any more and then it exploded!”

A moment later Akito seemed to realize he’d just been shouting conjecture at the Hokage and a room full of experts and he swallowed hard, ducking into himself. “I, uh, I think.” He turned to me. “Does that sound about right Yuki?”

I nodded. I’d never heard anything about leylines in this world before and his explanation didn’t seem to quite encompass the just-so balance I felt the spirals needed to have, but it definitely didn’t feel wrong.

The Hokage stroked his beard. “Does anyone disagree with Akito’s assessment?”

The Aburame on the ceiling who had spoken earlier replied, “I don’t believe any of us has enough information to confirm or deny the young Inuzuka’s hypothesis. But I also do not believe we are in any danger. The seal failed to breach the first forcefield and took a great deal of time to activate. Unless the next one draws hundreds of times as much chakra in a hundreth the time, it will not be able to break the wards or outpace the dimensional rift’s trigger time. We can schedule a check of the control field for later and proceed safely with the experimentation as is.”

The Hokage nodded. “Thank you for your input Shigeri. Does anyone disagree with Shigeri’s assessment?” Ninja shook their heads, a few whispered to one another quietly, but none spoke out. “Then we will continue.”

The spiral had incinerated the card-table and the stool, along with the spare paper, the inkbrush, and Akito’s inkwell, so replacements had to be set out. Luckily the ninja who’d brought the card-table and the stool had thought ahead and brought along a sealing scroll filled with cheap replacement furniture. And as for writing instruments, well, there were seal masters in the audience. We had plenty of spares.

The Hokage pulled Akito aside while we set up for round two. He asked Akito why he’d made the analogy to leylines and what his thoughts were on the Uzushio sealing style. The result was adorable to watch. I could see the exact moment Akito forgot he was talking to the Hokage and transitioned from ‘stuttering nervous mess’ to ‘excited rambling mess’. Akito apparently spent a good deal of his spare time trying to dissect foreign sealing styles and he was delighted to have someone to ramble at. And surprisingly the Hokage seemed into it. (Though maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised. Before he’d been the God of Shinobi he’d been known as the Professor.) Between each new test of my spirals the Hokage pulled Akito aside with new questions to ask.

For the next hour I repeated the spiral with small variations in the ink. I remade the seal with different people’s blood, with more and less of their blood, and with different amounts of blood for the spiral’s loops and its central circle. All of it made a difference in the intensity of the explosion
(at least according to the Uchiha watching, I couldn’t always see a difference). Each person’s blood had an optimal amount of blood which made for the biggest explosion and each person’s optimal amount was different. The explosion was strongest when the central circle had three or four times more blood than the surrounding spiral, and the exact ratio might have been dependent on whose blood we used but that would probably take a full day of tests to determine, more time than we had.

The most interesting result was that the spiral functioned minimally, producing at least a tiny fireball, so long as the seal had at least three drops of Akito’s blood. Or five drops of Elder Taeko’s blood. Or six drops of Mom’s. Which was weird because Mom and Akito had basically the same amount of chakra and Elder Taeko easily had more than both of them combined. Even weirder was the fact that doubling the amount of blood used did not create an equivalent increase in explosion intensity for each of them. After an hour of experimentation no one had any idea why this might be, but the general consensus seemed to be “well, at least we can find a ninja’s optimum for a given seal with trial and error”.

(The Akimichi who suggested that optimum blood density might vary from day to day based on how well-rested and well-fed a ninja was met with groans and plenty of swearing, even more so when she suggested that hormonal rhythms might also have an effect.)

We were just getting ready to move onto the interesting part of the testing, changing the design of the spiral, when I made the mistake of yawning. Immediately I found myself lifted up against Mom’s chest, her right hand rubbing circles on my back. “Yuki needs a nap,” she declared, glaring down any ninja who looked like they might disagree with her. “He shouldn’t be messing around with this stuff while he’s tired.” Her tone made it clear that anyone who thought otherwise could go to hell.

The Hokage acquiesced, smiling that warm crinkly smile of his, “Of course. I’d say we’ve all seen quite enough to establish that our young Yuki Hyuga has indeed resurrected the lost sealing arts of Uzushio. This is a proud day for Konoha. It gives me hope to see such talent represented in our newest generation. Everyone,” he said, spreading his arms wide, “let’s give our newest prodigy a hand.”

And then there was applause. Dozens and dozens of ninja clapping and cheering. Even a wolf whistle from Akito (and a literal wolf whistle from Yuuna). I blinked, stunned. I … did not know how to respond to this.

“And a hand for Keiko as well, who has clearly done a wonderful job raising her son.”

The applause redoubled, with a trio of desk-ninja letting loose loud cheers and congratulating Keiko by name. Mom smiled and flushed, heart beating faster and lungs swelling with pride. I smiled to match her. Mom was proud of me. She was proud to have reason to be proud of me. And that, that I knew how to deal with. I wrapped my arms around her neck and squeezed her tight. “He’s right,” I whispered into her ear, “you are a wonderful mom.”

Fun fact: people’s hearts don’t actually swell three sizes when they’re overcome with love. But their lungs sure do. I could see Mom filling up with love, her lungs swelling and capillaries loosening, every part of her flushed with extra oxygen. I could especially tell how much love was filling her up by the way she held my head and placed a big kiss on my left cheek, near my nose where I could feel it best.

“And you Yuki, are a wonderful, wonderful son.”

I giggled. And then, because I had to, “Could I get a kiss on the other cheek too please?”
“Absolutely.” Mom gave me a big kiss on my right cheek, and then dozen small kisses all over my face. Which wasn’t quite as balanced as two big kisses would have been, but was lovely and welcome nonetheless.

By the time Mom was done most of the ninja had cleared out of the room. There was no sealing left to see, and besides, I’m pretty sure ninja are constitutionally incapable of passing up an opportunity to pull a vanishing act while someone is distracted.

Akito did stick around though, presenting himself before Mom once we were done. “Hello Keiko. Yuki.” He nodded to me. He ran his left hand through the braids on the back of his head, smiling nervously. “This, uh, this may be presumptuous of me Keiko, I mean I need to ask the Hokage about this of course, but I thought it would be polite to ask you first, and Yuki too of course—”

Yuuna ambled over and cheerfully plopped down on Mom’s feet. Akito stopped talking and all three of us took a moment to stare at her (me through the back of my head). “Whuuf,” she said. Mom continued to stare. She made no attempt to move her feet though.

Akito did his best to regain her attention and his scattered train of thought, “Uh, right, um, with yours and Yuki’s permission I’d uh, like to, uh …” He shook himself, not unlike a wet dog. “Right. Keiko, I’d like to ask you for permission to work with your son on the Uzushio arts. And you too Yuki, I’d like to ask your permission too. I don’t really know anything about them, obviously, I can’t, uh, can’t teach Yuki how to do this stuff.”

The lanky Inuzuka made a conscious effort to straighten up, adding a couple inches to his already not-inconsiderable height. “But this is a topic I’ve studied. The Uzushio framework of sealing has always fascinated me and I’m familiar with the designs of most of their foundational seals. I know where to find information about their seals in the archives and as a sealing researcher I have the clearance to access most of it. I’m used to picking up different styles of sealing quickly and while this is, uh, very different, I still think I could help.”

He smiled broadly and oh my gods the man had dimples, that was just adorable. “Also, I, um, I really like kids. I don’t have any of my own, I mean, but I babysit my little niblings and cousins all the time. Miyuki especially, I uh, I babysit her a lot. Bunta’s an only father you know and he’s still an active-duty patrol officer and- right well I babysit her a lot. But anyway Miyuki really likes your Yuki and also Neji and uh, Hi…. oh I can’t remember her name, their sister Hi colors…. uh, I think they’ve met after school a few times? Anyway Miyuki loves them and I figured that’d be an added bonus, they could all come over and play and I could take Yuki aside for some sealing study at some point and if ever gets bored Miyuki and his siblings’Il be right there to play with, y’know? And also we’re Inuzuka, y’know, so there’ll always be a couple parents around who’re used to wrangling hordes of little ones and would love to help watch them.”

Akito held his smile and did his best to not let nervousness wipe it off his face. “So, uh, does that sound good? To you? Both of you? I could help teach Yuki some sealing stuff? And babysit? Well jointly babysit, ‘cus I can’t watch all of them and teach at the same time, but yeah?”

Mom liked the guy. She absolutely did not show it on her face, but she couldn’t lie to my eyes. She liked him.

“Well,” Mom said, “what do you think Yuki?”

“Yes.” Akito couldn’t see my face, buried as it was in Mom’s shoulder, so I gave him a thumbs up. There was no hesitation to my answer. I liked Akito a lot, and thought he’d be a wonderful teacher. He also had dimples, loved kids, and lived with a large, chubby canine, which in my books made him an excellent person. Heck if I was twenty years older (or seven years younger I suppose) I
would have asked him out in a heartbeat.

Okay, eugh. That line of thought got a little creepy. Note to self: no thinking about dating until I’m grown up. Nothing good can come of it.

“Yes!” Akito cheered, oblivious to my mild internal discomfort. “Thank you! I guess I still have to ask the Hokage or probably one of his assistants to be honest but—”

“I think it’s an excellent idea,” the Hokage said from right behind him.

“GAH!” Akito cried out, flailing around and almost smacking one of the Hokage’s invisible guards. (They dodged. I’d guess they got a lot of practice at that.)

Both Mom and the Hokage let the smallest of smiles grace their lips. Yuuna huffed.

The Hokage continued, “It’s always good to see collaboration between the clans. I expect great things from both of you.”

Akito stammered out his gratitude and tried (and failed) not to blush bright red at the compliment. Mom thanked the Hokage with much more composure and pulled Akito aside to set up a time to meet with Akito later. With that done we made our exit.

On our way out however, Elder Taeko stopped us. “Yuki,” she stated, “your first lesson on the sealing arts will be with me tomorrow at six hundred sharp, at my house. Don’t be late.”

Oh. Right. Shit. She’d been volunteered by Elder Mineko to teach me sealing, hadn’t she? Fuck I hope I hadn’t stepped on her toes by accepting Akito’s offer. Shiiit.

Well. The Hokage had given his blessing to Akito’s mentorship. So that was going to happen no matter what now.

Fuck.

---

Mom dropped me off with Aunt Yuki in the park. She still had work to do today, so she couldn’t stay.

Aunt Yuki smiled to see me. “Yuki! How did it go? Was—” she paused. “Yuki.” Uh-oh. That was not a good tone of voice. “Where is your book?”

Oh! My book! Where was my book? I thought back. Where could I have left it? I’d had it with my in the testing room. I’d brought it up to the card-table with me for my first seal. And then I’d set it down next to the card-table. And then …

And then I’d turned that table to ash.

I paled. “Oops.”

“Yuki…” Definitely not a good tone of voice. “Where is the book?”

I coughed. “Ummm, I may have blown it up?”
“...” There was a looong pause. And then, “Yuki!”

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Chapter End Notes

Canon Terms:

- Wall-Walk Technique
- Hokage

Author’s Note: ‘Manufacted’ is not a misspelling of ‘manufactured’. 'Manufacted' is a word from Final Fantasy XII meaning ‘made by mortals’, in opposition to the term ‘deifacted’ meaning ‘made by gods’. I love it, I think it’s an excellent word and would love to see it become a common term in fantasy literature.

Also I’m so glad to finally get to this point in the story. The stuff I actually want to do with this is still a ways off, but I’m glad to finally have Uzushio sealing properly introduced. I hope y'all enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Questions for you: How do you think Misao and Kazue would react to hearing that Yuki absent-mindedly blew up his copy of Ninja Tools and How To Use Them Safely?

What role do you think Uzushio sealing and Yuki’s knack for it will play in the story?
Chapter Notes

A bit of notation clarification:

---, short time skip / perspective change

-----, long time skip

~~~, anachronistic perspective change

And as always, thanks to my wonderful beta, Wecantgiggleitsacrimescene.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 23: Education

I knocked on the heavy wooden door and took a measured step back. I controlled my breathing and very carefully did not focus my sight to look through the walls of Elder Taeko’s house.

There was probably nothing wrong with looking in on Elder Taeko’s early morning schedule. This was the Hyuuga compound, walls might as well be glass and privacy was a privilege afforded to no one. Heck I looked inside of the houses of main family members all the time: when doing my daily stretches, during clan training, on my way to and from the Academy, basically any time I walked around the compound and came with twenty meters of a house. There was absolutely no reason to be afraid of peeking in on Elder Taeko.

I kept my eyes conspicuously dim and empty anyway.

The door swung inwards and a middle-aged man with a bare forehead stepped out. I could hear the clink of silverware on plates past him, inside the house. “Ah. You must be the child mom mentioned. We’re finishing up breakfast right now. You can wait for her in the workshop. It’s right over there, the door is unlocked.”

He gestured to a large squat shed set aside from the Elder’s house. If I allowed chakra into my eyes, just a trickle, I could see the tell-tale glimmer of seals inside.

“Thank you,” I replied. He nodded, and shut the door.

I walked over to the workshop and let myself in. The door swung open easily, and clicked shut softly behind me. The inside of the workshop was covered in scrolls. Scrolls everywhere. Glowing spiderweb scrawls decorated half-finished scrolls hanging on the walls. Neatly organized bins held piles of chakra-filled scrolls and sealed paper squares. An entire wall was given over to a diagonal criss-cross of cubbyholes, holding precisely labeled mundane scrolls inked without blood. The only part of the room bare of paper was a knee-height (to me) table in the center of the room, set atop a thick plush blanket meant to serve as seating.

I slipped out of my sandals, laying my bare feet on the seal-warmed floor, and walked over to the
I knelt on the blanket, hands demurely folded in my lap, and faced the door.

I waited.

~~~

“Hey Yuki, Hizashi, come on in!” Akito exclaimed. He slid open the well-oiled iron gate in the Inuzuka compound wall and invited us inside.

The Inuzuka compound was … different. For one thing it was set close to the heart of Konoha, unlike the Hyuuga compound which was closer to the periphery. The compound’s wall was ringed by apartments and convenience stores rather than open fields. But more than that, the Inuzuka compound was just small. The Hyuuga compound stretched over acres, with long winding paths between each house and expansive gardens filling up space. The Inuzuka though, they took up maybe a city block’s worth of apartments at most. And that made all the difference.

I stepped through the gate and was assaulted by the sudden scent of people living close together. Of sweat and body heat, bread baking and meat cooking, linen drying and the chemical smell of a communal laundry. All of it made heavy and thick by the underlying musk of wolves. It was a lot to take in.

A pair of shirtless toddlers ran in front of me, laughing and giggling as they played keep-away with an older tattooed teen and her wolf. A pair of women marked with clan tattoos leaned out of neighboring balconies and carried on a loud conversation about what could be expected from Earth Country’s textile exports this year. A scarred old man missing most of an arm and part of a leg knelt in the flowerbeds lining the gate, singing to himself and a pair of gamboling puppies as he weeded. Somewhere in the distance I heard a pair of voices raised in an argument.

And that was just outside. In the apartments closest to me I could see so many people. In kitchens, on couches, pacing about, reading, cooking, talking, laughing, fighting, loving, so many people I couldn’t keep track of them all.

Over my head Akito told my father, “-and I’ve got snacks ready for when Neji and Hiiiii-Hinata, right, Hinata,” he laughed nervously, “come over later. And my sister and I just finished double-checking the Inuzuka sealing chamber, it should definitely handle anything Yuki can throw at it. And, uh, let me think … right, I have the address of the restaurant you three are going to be at in case there’s an emergency. Oh and I’m pretty sure Keiko said none of your kids have any allergies but I’ve got some food which should work if they have any common food allergies, ’cus some of my younger cousins do. And, uh, was there anything else…” Akito floundered.

Dad smiled, “Sounds to me like you’ve got everyth-” he started to say.

“Oh!” Akito interrupted. “Rightrightright. You and your sister-in-law -that’s what she is, Yuki’s aunt is your sister-in-law right?- should be able to see us from the restaurant right? I figured you might want to look in on your kids every once in a while but I’m not sure exactly how the Byakugan works and how easy it is for you to find people and all that, and I didn’t want you being worried if we moved somewhere else while you weren’t looking, so I have a list of places we might go.” He pulled out a small hand-drawn map and showed it to Dad. “There’s a couple dog parks nearby, and maybe my mother’s place if she decides she’s up for cooking for a group tonight, and a little library over here if they want to read, and Miyuki said your kids always smell
like flowers so I checked out this garden they might be interested in. And, uh, yeah. It’s only those four places.” His verbal momentum petered out and he cleared his throat. “Yup.”

Dad grinned. “You are adorable.”

“I- what?”

Dad stepped forward and wrapped the now very flustered Inuzuka in a hug. He squeezed him and then stepped back, gripping Akito’s shoulders. It was odd how even though he was so tall, Akito could still look very small while getting wrapped up in Dad’s hug. “Is this your first time babysitting someone who’s not family?”

“Um. Yes?” Akito signed frantically at Yuuna behind his back, assist, assist, assist, apparently forgetting that we could see through his torso just fine. Yuuna eyed Dad, but did not seem to know what else to do.

Dad laughed, but did let go of Akito’s shoulders. “You’ll do just fine. You seem plenty prepared, and they’re good kids. They won’t give you any trouble. Besides, I was watching you and your sister fussing over that sealing room for hours earlier and it’s pretty obvious to me you’re going above and beyond to keep Yuki safe.” Dad’s grin settled into the fond smile he used whenever he was proud of how Neji and Hinata and I handled ourselves. “You care. That’s how I know you’ll do alright.”

“Oh. Um. Thanks?”

Dad laughed again. “No, thank you. This will be the first time all three of us have been able to get some time alone together in over a year. We owe you.”

“Well I mean I’m getting to study the seals of my dreams so you don’t owe me anything really-”

“Nonsense,” Dad told Akito. “You’re taking care of our kids, we can take care of you. It might be kind of awkward having you over for dinner at the compound,” I winced, yeah the Hyuuga main family rather famously did not get along with the Inuzuka, “but we can take you along on a picnic or something.”

Akito blinked, looking down at Yuuna for support and then back up at Dad. “That- that sounds really nice Hizashi. Would you mind if I brought my niece along?”

“Of course she’s welcome!” Dad said. “Alright, great, we’ll hold you to that. Next week maybe?”

“Sure, uh, I’ll write down my schedule so you can take it when you pick your kids up.”

“Awesome,” Dad replied. “Alright, I gotta get going. Yuki, the larger Yuki, will be along with Neji and Hinata in an hour or so.” He leaned down to give me a hug. “Will you be alright Yuki?”

I nodded into his chest. “Mhmmm.” I soaked up Dad’s warmth for a long second before pulling back and telling him, “I’ll be fine.”

Dad stood up and smiled. “Good. Alright, have fun you two. And be safe!”

“I will!” I said.

“We will!” Akito said.

As soon as Dad left we turned to each other and spoke in unison, “I have ideas.”
I only had to wait a few minutes for Elder Taeko to finish her breakfast and come out to the workshop. Not long enough for my knees to hurt, pressing on the wooden floor beneath the thick blanket, but long enough to know that they would hurt before we were done.

Elder Taeko slipped in through the workshop door. She removed off her sandals and toed them over to where mine were, pushing mine a bit to make room. She didn’t speak to me. Instead she puttered about the room, slipping a few small mundane scrolls from their cubbies, picking up some blank scrolls from a bin on the floor, and retrieving one of the half-finished hanging scrolls from the wall.

Only when she had finished did she set her gathered supplies down on the central table, sit down, and address me. “The key to a good education is a solid foundation. Before you can start bending the rules, you must know what the rules are. Before we begin our work recovering the Uzushio’s unique style of sealing, you must understand the basics of sealing.”

No one knew what the basics of the Uzushio style were. It wasn’t even clear if Uzushio spirals were related to sealing. Knowledge from one might not apply to the other at all.

I didn’t say that. I didn’t think it. I knew it, but whatever twitch of thought that knowledge might have triggered in my mind flowed through me and out of me without finding purchase. Instead I listened to what Elder Taeko had to say, registered what it meant I was expected to do, and nodded deeply in acknowledgement. I did not disagree with her.

She set the small mundane scrolls before me. She pointed to each scroll in turn, “This scroll describes the underlying concepts of sealing on a rudimentary level, how thoughts are stored in chakra, imprinted in blood and symbol, and made manifest by the flow of raw chakra. It describes what you need to craft seals: clarified intent, true knowledge of underlying physics, unconsciously intuitive symbology, and a stable blood medium. Lastly, it details what a novice seal-crafter can expect from sealing, what simple seals can be crafted, how long seals last, and what is beyond the reach of the art of seal-crafting.”

“This scroll contains basic seal ideas, the basic physics knowledge needed to execute them, and starting points to develop your own intuitive symbology. These are simple seals to produce elemental evocations, seal objects, impart momentum, etc. I will be guiding your first sealing efforts, but I expect you to be familiar with all of this scroll’s seals nonetheless.”

“This last scroll is an instruction manual, to teach promising young-” her voice skipped a beat, “-Hyuuga how to imprint chakra before they’ve learned shaping exercises or chakra refining at the Academy. It’s a somewhat out of order education, but necessary to learn sealing at a young age. I myself learned from this scroll, and I can assure you the educational method is sound. When you have finished the other two scrolls you may take this scroll home and practice under your par-” her voice skipped a beat again, “-father’s supervision. This scroll is never to leave the Hyuuga compound however, and you must not lose it. Is that understood?”

I replied without thinking, “Yes Elder Taeko.”

“Good,” she replied. “You may start with that scroll.” She pointed to the sealing concepts scroll. “Tell me when you have finished and we will review your understanding. I will correct any errors
and discuss the material with you. I am given to understand your reading comprehension is beyond your years and that you will not struggle with the text, but if you do encounter a word you do not understand simply move on and ask me when you are done. Seal-crafting is a delicate process and I should not be disturbed.”

With that said she laid out the half-finished scroll in front of her and began expanding the glimmering spiderweb scrawls creeping across its surface. She did not give any impression I occupied a place in her awareness.

… huh. I looked at the scrolls, then back at her.

Alright.

I picked up the first scroll and opened it. It was not a long scroll. Definitely meant for small children, pre-teens at the oldest. I skimmed it. This was basic material. I’d already picked up most of this stuff just by existing in the vicinity of Akito’s ramblings.

I’d have to tell Aunt Yuki later that Taeko introduced me to sealing with this. She’d get a kick out of that. … And also check out a higher-concept sealing book from the restricted section of Konoha’s library and ‘happen’ to leave it on the dining room table. Aunt Yuki was excellent like that.

Warm with that thought, I settled in to read.

~~~

What is it with ninja clans and nearly identical sibling names? Are Mom and Dad the only sane ninja parents in the world?

Akita Inuzuka, younger sister of Akito Inuzuka, was poise incarnate. Her hair cascaded down her back in a complicated series of braids, with just a few loose strands springing free about her temples in a way that was clearly intentional. She wore a simple open-necked shirt and cargo pants which lay close against her form in way which suggested she’d had them tailored. The short sleeved wire mesh shirt she wore over that, which climbed up her neck and stopped just beneath her chin, was definitely tailored. A pair of needle-shaped earrings dangled from her ears, which drew attention to the sharp points of her canines whenever she spoke. Her glasses made her look stern and twenty years older and that looked good on her. And while her makeup was barely a thin wisp of chakra in my sight, I had no doubt it was applied with skill and finesse.

Akita led me around the Inuzuka sealing room, showing me their setup. “I’m terribly sorry about the clutter but we’re not the only ones who use this space and the vets need a lot of equipment to test their work. It’s not just paper and ink for them you know?” Her voice was steady and smooth, flowing effortlessly from one sentence to the next.

I nodded. The room wasn’t actually all that messy, just small. From the looks of it someone had been forced to squeeze a veterinarian’s office, an entire medical college’s specimen collection, an alchemy lab, and a witch’s cottage into a tiny apartment, while still preserving space for a wide metal desk to spread a scroll out on. Whoever worked here tried to be neat but the result was cramped. I could have walked the length of the room in ten steps if it was empty, but as it was I’d be lucky to squeeze my way through at all.

“And I’m sure Akito already told you this, but there’s no reason to be concerned about safety. Our
workspace may not be warded against as much esoterica as the R&D labs, but forcefields are incredibly durable and a cinch to prepare in a static environment, as are replacement jutsu triggers. This room is completely secure against brute-force accidents and tests, like the ones you two will be performing.”

“You’re not going to be staying?” I asked.

“Oh no, kid.” She knelt down and ruffled my hair. She had to bend low to reach my level, she was almost as unfairly tall as her brother. “I’m sorry if I gave you that impression. I don’t work with the weird stuff like my brother does, I do sealing-mechanical interfaces. Nothing that’s all that useful to you. I was just helping Akito double-check the wards earlier, and figured that I might as well make myself useful when you showed up, show you the room.”

“Besides,” she said with a friendly wink, “I’m pretty sure I’m gonna end up looking after your siblings while you and Akito play around in the future, and it would be a shame if I only ever got to see them and not you.” She smiled just enough to show the tips of her fangs.

“I look forward to it Akita,” I said, giving her my sunniest smile.

“Aw. Well aren’t you just the politest little thing.” She stood up, looking over me to where her brother was standing at the entrance to the sealing room. “Akito your apprentice is fantastic! Maybe you can learn something from him!”

Akito rolled his eyes. “Alright sis, you showed Yuki around, said hi, now shoo. We’ve only got an hour to work before Neji and … and …”

“Hinata,” I supplied.

“Hinata! Right! I’ll get her name before she shows up I swear. Before they show up.”

Akita rolled her eyes in turn and squeezed her way out of the room, brushing past her brother. “You have fun with your swirly seals bro. I’ve got a hot date with a good book, a box of chocolates, and a cuddly puppy.” That earned her a tongue stuck out at her back as she walked away, though Akito quickly retracted it and tried to look innocent when she turned around. “Really though, tonight’s a break night for me so if you need help with anything later while the kids are over, just knock on my door.”

“Sure thing sis.”

She gave the two of us a last jaunty wave before turning around and heading off.

_Huh_. Akita was the polar opposite of her brother, smooth, composed, well put together, and confident in a way that said she had earned her confidence and she knew it. Except-

She’d been quietly having a panic attack the whole time. Her pulse had quickly climbed as she’d shown me around, fluttering somewhere around two beats a second. Her nerves had damn near exploded every time she brushed up against something and her mouth had been completely dry.

“Hey, um, Akito?” Damn there was just no good way to ask this. “Why was your sister having a panic attack?”

His head whipped around to look at me, braids flying. “She was?”

“Mmhm. Kinda hard to miss. Her heart was beating really fast.”
He swore. “That’s, uh, normal for her I guess. She has anxiety. It happens to her sometimes, not always for good reasons. Dammit though, she promised she’d stop using scent-blocking jutsu.” At my quizzical look he clarified, “We, uh, we can smell panic attacks. It’s a thing.” He tapped the side of his nose.

“Okay. She’s alright though?” (I scratched both sides of my own nose).

“Eh.” He shrugged. “Yes? She’s good at dealing with that stuff. Mostly. Ish? Actually she is pretty good with it, ignore me. I just need to have a talk with her about hiding that stuff, make sure she’s not covering up a bad episode or something.”

We both stood there for an awkward moment.

“So, ah, I guess that’s that then,” Akito said. He clapped his hands, “Alright let’s get to work”.

~~~

I set down the third scroll. I waited for the elderly seal-master to finish a length of sealing scrawl before interrupting politely, “Elder Taeko?”

Her hand stilled. “What?” Her tone was cold.

“I’m finished.”

That got her attention. Her eyes brightened for a brief moment, probably looking at a clock inside her house. “It’s been thirty minutes.”

“Yes Elder.”

She sat up straight and looked at me. “Well. Do you have any questions?”

“Yes Elder. The second scroll said most standard seals have a lifetime of several years at best. Can that be improved with better materials? And if so is the lifetime typically dictated by the blood medium used or the material the seal is written on?”

“Child you read the wrong scroll.” A hint of ire wove into the elder’s voice. “I told you to read that one.” She pointed.

I stilled. Setting a banal, mildly confused smile on my face I replied as flawlessly as I could. “Of course Elder. I finished it and moved on to the other two. Was that not what I was supposed to do?”

A long moment passed in which I had no idea what went on inside Elder Taeko’s head. The moment stretched before she responded. “Hm. You read quickly for your age. To answer your question, yes, the time can be extended and the sealing substrate is the better candidate for improvement.”

She stared at me for another long moment before asking, “Next question?”

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Akito and I looked at our finished spiral. It had been a collaborative effort. The spiral almost certainly wouldn’t have worked without his input. Or rather, probably wouldn’t work. We hadn’t tested it yet. This was the first spiral I’d ever made which was supposed to not explode and we wanted plenty of time to admire it before we turned it on, in case it exploded anyway.

The ‘spiral’ was actually six spirals and it had taken a lot of brainstorming to figure out their configuration. The middle spiral was an intensely tight spiral with four arms, about the size of Akito’s head. It terminated halfway to its center, the ends of its arms connecting directly to a thick shining circle of solid ink which filled the center of the paper. The circle wasn’t completely filled in though. The very center of the circle was left open, filled in by a tiny loose four-armed spiral whose arms only completed a half-rotation each, like two letter ‘S’s laid across one another. Most importantly they rotated in the opposite direction of the middle spiral.

Four ancillary spirals the size of my palm sat at cardinal points around the middle spiral. Each was crafted similarly to an exploding spiral, loose at the outside and tighter towards the center. Unlike an exploding spiral though, each had two arms (a configuration which felt ‘loose’ to me, not right for focusing chakra to a point). And these spirals were lopsided. One of each ancillary spiral’s arms was drawn in dimmer ink with lower blood content, with the outer ends of the lighter arms set adjacent to the middle spiral. From each of those dimmer arms I’d drawn a straight line of dim ink extending through the middle spiral, sinking all the way into the central circle of ink. Lastly, each of the outer ends of the middle spiral curved back around, looping back and cutting across those straight lines of ink.

“Do you think this is going to work?” I asked Akito.

“No idea. Yuuna?”

Yuuna did not respond. She was taking a very pleasant doze in the corner of the room, heavy belly inflating and deflating in time with her soft snores.

Akito chuckled. “Okay, if something goes wrong we’ll blame it on Yuuna’s negligent oversight.”

I giggled. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Well, let’s do it,” Akito said, eyes wide and excited.

We each placed our hands on two ancillary spirals each and, on the count of three, shoved chakra into our hands. All four ancillary spirals lit up in my sight and we scrambled back, outside the wards’ forcefield range.

“Is it working?! Is it working?!” Akito exclaimed.

“Shhhh,” I admonished. “I must observe the process,” I said in the snootiest scientist voice I could manage.

And observe I did.

The blood-heavy arms of each ancillary spiral began devouring the chakra in the surrounding air. They glowed, the false light of chakra blazing out from them in my sight. But no kernel of burning light appeared in their cores. Instead the chakra that reached the center flowed back out the spirals, following the path of their dimmer arms. The chakra flowed all the way back out of the ancillary spirals and then along the straight lines of ink, pouring into the shining circle of ink in the center.
I gasped. “The generator spirals are working!” I cried. “They’re working perfectly!”

Akito grinned as wide as he could, bouncing up and down on the tips of his toes.

The chakra pouring along the straight lines of ink did two things. First, most of it poured into the central circle, filling it with light. But some of it leaked into the lines of the middle spiral it cut through. Chakra began rotating through that spiral, picking up speed and whirling, whirling as fast as it could. But the middle spiral didn’t draw in its own chakra. The backward loops at the ends of its arms wouldn’t allow more than a trickle in. Instead the middle spiral simply spun the chakra it absorbed from the ancillary spirals, creating a barrier which trapped chakra in the central circle.

“It’s filling up! The battery is filling up!”

“Oh! Oh, is the anchor core working? Is it?”

“Shush, shush. There’s not enough chakra in the battery yet. Be patient.”

“Easy for you to say, you’re the one who can actually see what’s happening.”

I stuck my tongue out to show Akito what I thought of that, forgetting in my excitement that he couldn’t see that unless I turned around.

The central circle -the chakra battery- filled and filled. And filled. And filled. We waited for over a minute and the central circle of ink just kept glowing brighter, bound by the whirling boundary of chakra set by the middle circle.

“Hey Akito the room’s forcefields are rated for, like, a lot. Right?”

“Definitely. The outermost forcefield is a four-corners barrier type. One-use and only lasts a few seconds, but literally inviolable, transfers impacts to another plane of existence.”

“Good.”

We waited another half a minute.

“Is it still filling?” Akito asked.

“Yup.”

“... damn.”

We waited. As the battery filled the chakra inside it started to spin, pushed around by the whirling border containing it. But … not too fast. Chakra in the center of the battery flowed into the small central spiral, the ‘anchor core’ Akito had recommended I include in the design. And the chakra which flowed into the anchor core flowed back out into the battery, but with the opposite rotation. Eddies and vortices sprang up where the reversed chakra reentered the battery, making its light ripple oddly, and most importantly preventing the battery’s stored chakra from picking up speed.

“Okay the anchor core has to be doing something by now,” Akito complained.

“It is…” I hedged, “but the battery’s not done filling yet so I don’t want to jump to conclusions. That’s bad science.”

“Hey. Being a better scientist than your mentor is not allowed. Not allowed do you hear me?”

I cheerfully ignored Akito.
“Alright, tell me this,” he asked, “do you think the battery could have filled up this much without
the anchor core?”

I thought about it. Without the anchor core the chakra in the battery would have been spinning
really, really fast by now. Probably fast enough to shed chakra through its containing spiral. Maybe
enough to break free entirely and explode. I nodded, conceding the point. “Yeah, you’re probably
right.”

“Yessss. I knew there was a reason it kept showing up in all the really large-scale Uzushio spirals
I looked at. Repeating design elements are always important, even when they’re not big and
flashy.”

The battery filled some more. Finally it began to reach capacity. Excess chakra bulged back up the
arms of the middle containing spiral, against the spinning flow. The containing spirals lines glowed
brighter and brighter … until the increased glow pushed all the way back up to the backwards
loops at the end of the spiral’s arms. When it reached those loops, which slashed across the straight
lines of ink supplying chakra from the ancillary spirals, it cut the incoming chakra flow. Chakra
which had been flowing into the battery along the lines of blood-thin ink splashed against the
thicker chakra-filled ink, escaping the its weakly confining ink and washing back into the air. The
ancillary spirals kept pulling chakra in, but now their chakra simply returned to the air.

The incoming flow of chakra slowed to a trickle, just enough to keep the containing spiral
spinning. It was done. The chakra battery was filled, bloated and engorged with the brightest light I
had ever seen, so bright that the optical equivalent would have blinded my old eyes.

“Wow.” I breathed out. “That was amazing.”

“Yuki this is cruel. Please, please just tell me what you saw.”

“The terminators worked perfectly. The battery filled up, excess chakra flowed into them, and they
cut the incoming chakra before the battery could overflow. Gods that was beautiful. Genius idea
Akito, really, way better than a manual stop.”

“Details Yuki, please . All I see is ink on paper. I can’t.” he stopped.

“Hm?”

“Yuki. I- I think I can feel it. I think I can feel the chakra in it.”

I turned my head to him and blinked. Was that supposed to mean something? “And?”

“Yuki I am not a sensor!” Akito hissed. “How much chakra is in that thing?”

“Ehhh,” I wasn’t actually sure. The spiral was … bright? Very bright? Really, really bright. But it
also wasn’t that big. So … “Maybe about as much chakra as,” I wracked my brain, “the Hokage? I
think? No wait people-bound chakra isn’t as bright, not as much radiative loss. Uhhh, a third? A
third of the Hokage’s chakra? Or half? I dunno we’re supposed to get trained in this kind of
estimation when we’re older, I don’t even know the hand seals for properly focusing the Byakugan
yet.”

Akito was giving me an appalled look.

“What?”

“Half?”
“Of?”

“Half of the Hokage’s chakra?”

“Oh. Yes. Ish. I think. The chakra storage spiral has about half as much chakra as the Hokage did when I saw him.”

Akito made a noise like a cat being strangled.

“That’s a lot?”

“Let me put it this way,” he forced out. “I, like every sane ninja, assumed the Uzushio propaganda that they controlled the weather and could call hurricanes down on invading fleets was just that. Propaganda. A bluff. No one has access to that much energy. Every ninja in the world combined couldn’t produce an effect like that, not with all the chakra in their bodies. Those three hurricanes which happened to destroy invading fleets were just coincidences. They had to be.”

“But uhhh, that?” He pointed at the spiral. “That is our tiny, shitty, poorly optimized, first-attempt prototype of a chakra generation and storage setup. You made it in about forty minutes. If it can absorb and store that much chakra, then…” Akito swallowed and his voice rose to shrill pitch, “-then maybe they weren’t bluffing.” He whispered in horror to himself, “Oh dear gods they weren’t bluffing were they?”

“Neat,” I chirped. “Oh and I kind of forgot to ask earlier, but can you actually do anything with raw stored chakra? Like, do you know any efficient ways to convert chakra into electricity? And oh hey, how many watt hours do you think this translates to?”

Akito made another noise like a cat being strangled.

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Chapter End Notes

My current estimate is ~10 chapters between now and Yuki’s graduation from the Academy. So that’s probably going to happen … sometime around April of next year. *shrug* Eh. It could be worse.

And as always, comments are much appreciated. I’d especially love to know how the description of the chakra battery came across. This is probably as in-depth as I’ll ever get with a description of a spiral and I’d love to hear if it was easy to follow, or too hard, or whatever.
Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Graphic depiction of verbal and indirectly violent child abuse.

I am writing a Hinata interlude because I want to. I could make some excuses about it leading into the next chapter, or establishing Hinata a bit better as a character, but the truth is I just wanted to write from Hinata’s perspective and anything else is an afterthought used to justify its space in the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 24: Being Loved (Hinata)

Hinata relaxed.

She leaned back against Miyuki, the two of them splayed out on the grass, and smiled as the Inuzuka girl ran sharp fingernails across her scalp. Hinata knew that if she focused her eyes she’d be able to just barely see the fuzzy fog of her hair slipping through Miyuki’s fingers. But she didn’t want to. She didn’t need to see what Miyuki was doing. She could feel what her brothers’ friend was doing and it felt warm and soft and fuzzy and that was enough.

Miyuki’s uncle called out to Hinata, “Hey Hinata, are you alright?”

Hinata opened her eyes. (You always opened your eyes when adults talked to you). “Yes sir?”

“Are you alright? You’re, uh, you’re okay with Miyuki playing with your hair? She’s not bugging you or anything?”

Hinata shook her head gently, enjoying how Miyuki’s hands slid through her hair. “No. It’s okay. I like it.” She smiled to show that she was happy.

Miyuki’s uncle nodded, and then tilted his head a little to look at Miyuki behind Hinata. “Did Miyuki ask you if she could play with your hair? Did she make sure that you were okay with it?” he asked, giving Miyuki a look which made it clear that he was talking to Miyuki more than Hinata.

Miyuki had not asked Hinata. Hinata tensed. Miyuki was in trouble.

Miyuki didn’t respond to her uncle, instead rubbing some of Hinata’s hair between two of her fingers and humming. Hinata tensed up more. Miyuki was in so much trouble. Why wasn’t she saying anything, why wasn’t she responding to her uncle?

The Inuzuka girl paused, letting Hinata’s hair slip through her fingers. She leaned forward a bit and sniffed Hinata. Her nose wrinkled.

“Miyuki?” her uncle said again.
Finally, finally, Miyuki looked up at her uncle. She blinked at him.

“Miyuki, did you ask Hinata if you could play with her hair?”

Miyuki thought for a moment. “No. I didn’t.”

For some reason Hinata’s heart leapt in her chest, beating so fast she could feel it in her neck. Miyuki turned away from her uncle and leaned in again to sniff Hinata.

“Miyuki.”

“Mm?”

“We’ve talked about this, you need to ask people before you can touch them, and keep double-checking to make sure they’re okay with it.”

“Oh. Right. I’m sorry.”

“That’s alright Miyuki. Just try harder to remember in the future, okay?”

The Inuzuka girl beneath Hinata nodded. “Okay.” She looked away from her uncle, done with the conversation.

Her uncle sighed. “Miyuki. That means ask Hinata if she’s okay with being touched now. Even if she is okay with it, it’s important to ask.”

Miyuki nodded and leaned her cheek against the back of Hinata’s head. “Are you okay with me touching your hair?” she asked.

Hinata’s heart kept racing and she didn’t know why. “Um. Yes?” She wouldn’t have said no, no matter what. She didn’t want Miyuki to be in trouble.

The grown-up Inuzuka nodded and turned away, rejoining Neji, Yuki, and Yuuna in a game of beanball-tag.

Miyuki didn’t put her hands back in Hinata’s hair. Instead she tucked her hands around Hinata’s tummy and mrbled sleepily. (Mrbling was a real word, no matter what Yuki said).

Hinata … waited? Rested? She didn’t know what she was doing. She was lying back against Miyuki but she didn’t feel relaxed anymore. The other girl’s hands in her hair had felt really nice, but now the inside of her chest kind of ached and she wasn’t sure what she felt but she knew she didn’t feel happy.

“Um, Mimi?”

“Mrr?”

Hinata winced. She didn’t know what she wanted to say. She didn’t know why she’d spoken. But now she had to say something. “Um, Mimi, why didn’t you, uh, play with my hair again?”

“You were scared. You’re my friend, I didn’t want to scare you.”

“I’m not scared!” Hinata cried. “I’m not! I wasn’t!”

“Yes you were. You smelled like the thin sharp sweat, the bad kind.”
“I wasn’t!” Hinata insisted. She wasn’t! She hadn’t been scared! Scared people were weak and cried. The ache in her chest sharpened. Why was Miyuki calling her scared?

“You didn’t want me to touch your hair. You said you did but you were scared.”

“I do want you to touch my hair!” Hinata yelled.

“Nn? You do?” Miyuki sounded confused, and a little … hurt?

What Hinata had just said caught up with her and she ducked her head, curling in on herself. She whined back in her throat. She hadn’t meant to say it like that. She wasn’t sure if she’d meant to say it at all.

“Oh,” Miyuki said, “um, okay.” She paused.

“I-”, “It’s-” Hinata and Miyuki both tried to speak at the same time.

“You first,” Hinata said softly.

“I’m sorry,” Miyuki said quietly, “that I thought you were scared. Of me. Of that. I … I thought you were scared. I wasn’t trying to be mean. I … yeah.”

“Thank you Mimi.” Mom always said to thank people when they said sorry. “I do like it when you comb my hair. It’s nice. And I’m sorry I yelled at you.” Aunty Keiko said it was important to always say sorry after yelling arguments no matter how right you were. Those apologies weren’t about admitting you were wrong, Aunty said, but making sure the other person knew you loved them and didn’t want to hurt them.

“Mmm,” Miyuki hummed. “I like your hair. It’s really nice and soft. Like fur made out of silk.” She buried her hands back in Hinata’s hair, making a happy mrble as she did.

“Mmm,” Hinata hummed back. “Thanks. Uncle Hizashi has this super nice shampoo. It smells really good and he rubs it into my hair for forever, every week. That’s why it’s all soft.”

“Could I have some?” the other girl asked. “Daddy’s really nice but all his stuff smells like men stuff.” She wrinkled her nose and stuck out her tongue.

“Mhm. Tomorrow’s our special bath day. You can come over and I can rub the shampoo in your hair and you can rub it in mine.”

“Mmmmmmmmmmm” Miyuki accompanied her long drawn-out hum with scratchies on Hinata’s scalp, and Hinata hummed along happily. Hinata puddled up against Miyuki with a broad smile on her face.

“Oh! Wait!” Hinata exclaimed. She opened her eyes. She hadn’t realized she’d closed them.

“Mrp?” Miyuki made a noise that sounded just like a disturbed cat. Hinata giggled at the thought of the Inuzuka girl being like a kitty. “What?” Miyuki asked, “What is it?”

“You called me your friend! When we were fighting. Are we friends?” Hinata was so excited. She didn’t really have any friends in her class. Not anyone she could cuddle with. Miyuki didn’t really count, Miyuki was really Neji and Yuki’s friend not her friend. But now Miyuki had said she and Hinata were friends! “Are we?”

Miyuki pulled back in on herself a little. “Um. Yes? Is that okay?”
“Eeeeeeeheeeheeeeee,” Hinata giggled softly. Yes that was very much okay. She wriggled back against Miyuki. That was very okay. Hinata felt warm and glowing and happy, all throughout her whole body. From the tips of her toes and her fingers to the top of her head.

“Hinata is that okay?” Miyuki sounded worried.

“Yes Mimi. It is.”

-----

“Fifty touches on the bag, viper stance.”

Hinata snapped into position. She settled her feet, a little closer together than a normal stance, knees bent a little. She raised her hands up in front of her chin, hands open and loose. Strike from the head, she reminded herself, strike as if pushing from the head, not from the chest.

She struck, left hand darting out and middle finger just brushing the punching bag in front of her. No follow-through. Not like Academy punches. Strike at the target, not through it. Her right hand darted out as soon as her left hand was pulled back enough to protect her head from counterattacks. Move with the strike. Back shoulder moves forward, push with back leg for an extra couple centimeters of reach. Don’t move the hips too far though, the Gentle Fist doesn’t need power and viper stance never commits fully to a strike.

“One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six.” Hinata counted in time with the strikes, making sure to breathe out with each number. She focused on the numbers. It was hard to keep count and touch the bag at the same time. “Seventeen. Eighteen. Nineteen. -” Hinata hesitated for a moment. After the teens was-，“Twenty!”

Daddy’s hand lashed out and flicked Hinata on the side of her head, snapping a sliver of chakra into her skull.

“Ow!” Hinata clutched her head. What had she done wrong?

“Hands up. Never drop your guard while attacking.”

Hinata ducked her head. “I’m sorry.” She raised both hands and continued. “Twenty-one.” On her first strike she winced. She’d misjudged the distance and slammed her fingers into the bag. Ow. “Twenty-two. Twenty-three.” Ow. Now every time she touched the bag with her jammed fingers they hurt again. “Twenty-four.” She slammed her other hand’s fingers into the bag. Owww. The bag was swinging a little now, and she couldn’t tell where her fingers should go.

Daddy frowned.

It wasn’t fair. The bag was moving. How could she hit it right? She kept trying. One, two, three strikes went well and then she missed the fourth entirely, not touching the bag. Daddy frowned again and Hinata immediately threw another strike, doing her best not to wince when she hit the bag too hard.

She tried again. And again. And again. Hinata knew how to throw viper stance strikes. She’d practiced really, really hard. But she just couldn’t aim well enough to touch the bag while it was swinging. No matter how hard she tried.
“Forty-nine. Fifty.” Her fingers hurt.

Daddy shook his head. “You need more practice. Fifty more.”

“Yes sir.”

-----

“What is the fucking point of you having these?!” Daddy shoved the brace of training kunai in her face. “What is the damn point?!”

“I- I don’t, Daddy please,” Hinata hiccupped and sobbed. “Daddy please I need those.”

“Really? Do you?”

“Daddy plea- please,” gross ugly sobs tore apart Hinata’s words before she could piece them together.

“Because it doesn’t seem like you fucking need these.” He shook the training kunai again, right in her face. “It doesn’t seem like you actually fucking use them. You barely hit the targets at all. Do you even train with these? Or, gods, is this how you train with them at the Academy? Do you show your teachers such a miserable fucking display? Or is it just me? Do you just not care about giving your best for me?”

Hinata wiped tears from her eyes and reached out weakly for the kunai. “Daddy please. I nee-” she hiccupped tearily, “I need them.”

“No. Not until I get an answer from you. Is that how fucking miserable you are at school too? Do you show that kind of shameful performance to everyone? Or is it just me? Are you just disrespecting me by not giving your all? Or are you just that fucking miserable?”

A tortured whine built up in Hinata’s throat. She didn’t know what to say, what could she say, why wouldn’t Daddy just give her her kunai back-

Daddy snorted. “No you know what. It doesn’t matter. I know the answer. Clearly you don’t respect me, or our clan. Or you’d have trained much harder. You’d have the decency to be ashamed of showing such awful skills to your teachers.”

Hinata’s lungs wouldn’t work right. They jerk and bucked with her hiccups and her tears. Snot and tears dripping down her face and she cried. “Pl- plea- please. Please Daddy. Giv- give them back. I need them. Sc- school starts soo-” she sucked in a wet breath, she couldn’t breathe, “-school starts soon. I need them for class. We- we’re practicing today. I need them. Please.”

“No.”

“Daddy I need them.”

“I said no.”

Hinata sobbed. “Daddy you can’t. You can’t, I need them.”

“HINATA I SAID NO!” Daddy screamed at her. With a flick of his hand and a whipcrack flash of
chakra he shattered one of her training kunai.

Hinata wailed, “Daddy no! No I need those!”

“Do you really? Because you sure don’t act like it!” He destroyed another kunai, screaming over her wails. “You act like you don’t care! Like being a ninja, like being a Hyuuga means nothing to you! You’re my godsdamn heir but you throw kunai like an untrained civilian and it doesn’t seem to fucking bother you!” He shattered the rest of the kunai, turning the whole brace of kunai into twisted shards with a single blast of chakra.

Hinata cried.

Later, at the Academy, Yuki approached her. He slipped a brace of training kunai into her bag. “The Academy’s storage closets have simple locks,” he told her. “They’re sensitive; they break and need to be reset if you push the pins too far. Squirt your hand with ink too. Keeps most of the students out. But if you can see the pins, well, they’re actually pretty easy to open. I can teach you, if you want.”

Hinata didn’t nod. She didn’t say yes. She just tried to push down the awful cold clenching around her heart and pretend none of this had ever happened.

But next week she let Yuki teach her. Her brush was broken.

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“This is my daughter, Hinata.” Daddy introduced her to one of his noble friends with his hand on her shoulder. “Hinata, this is vice-counselor Sano Sadako.” He twitched his fingers behind his back, title: Lady.

“Hello there Hinata. I’m so pleased to meet you. Your father has said so much about you.” The noblewoman reached down and extended a thin-fingered hand.

Hinata looked the noblewoman in the eyes (it was so hard to look non-Hyuuga in the eyes, she couldn’t tell the difference between their eyes and the rest of their face) and smiled. She shook the noblewoman’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you too Lady Sano.”

The Lady smiled. “I see what your father said about your manners is certainly true. Tell me, do you work hard in your studies?”

Hinata nodded. “Yes Lady Sano.”

“Wonderful. I’m sure you’ll be an excellent successor to your father in time.”

“As am I,” Daddy said. He pulled her against him in a half-hug and smiled down at her. “She does the Hyuuga clan proud.”

Hinata looked up at Daddy. She put a smile on her own face, and then looked back at Lady Sano.

Later, when the noblewoman had left, Daddy patted her on the back and told her what a good job she’d done. “That was good Hinata, you were so composed. You made an excellent impression on Lady Sano.” He continued, “Actually, do you want to get some noodles with me now? You
deserve a reward. I’ve got some time before my next meeting with the landowner’s council and there’s a great Akimichi place next door to where we’re meeting. I could sneak in a quick meal with you. Would you like that?"

Hinata nodded. “Yes sir.” She wouldn’t have said no, no matter what.

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“Hinata do you want to knead the dough?” Mommy asked.

Hinata nodded eagerly and made grabby motions with her hands. Of course she wanted to knead the dough.

Mommy scattered a handful of flour on a cutting board and plopped a big, heavy blob of dough down on its center. She picked up the cutting board and moved it to an empty section of the kitchen counter. She smiled at Uncle Hizashi as she did, saying proudly, “Haha, look who remembered the kneading flour this time.”

Hinata looked up at the dough eagerly, raising her hands and bouncing up and down so Mommy and Hizashi would know she needed to be lifted. “Up! Up!”

Uncle Hizashi laughed to Mommy, “But you haven’t forgotten to do that in almost a year!” He reached down and grabbed Hinata under the arms while he talked, lifting her high up into the air. “Up we go!”

“Eeeeeeeeee!” Hinata squealed happily.

Mommy giggled, smiling at Hinata before responding to Uncle Hizashi. “I know, I know. But you spend one time trying to knead dough without remembering the extra flour, unable to figure out why the dough is sticking to absolutely everything, and the experience sticks with you.”

Uncle Hizashi set Hinata down on the counter so she was kneeling next to the dough. “Sticks with you? Lady Yuki, is that a pun?”


Uncle Hizashi shook his head. “You’re terrible.” He looked at Hinata. “Hinata, sweetie, you know that no matter what your mother says, puns are bad. Right? Even if your aunt joins up with her and both of them start punning. Especially then, actually. Don’t give in to peer pressure.” Hinata giggled and nodded.

Mommy shook her head. “I just doughn’t see what your problem is with puns.”

Uncle Hizashi looked at her for a long moment. “You know what, no. I refuse to engage with this.” He turned back to Hinata and smiled. “Alright Hinata, let’s start kneading that dough. Oh, but make sure you smell it too before you start, take a big whiff. Fresh dough is such a wonderful smell.”

Hinata pushed her nose right up to the dough and breathed in deep. Mmmm. It smelled warm, if being warm could be a smell. She sighed happily.
“So? How is it Hinata?” her uncle asked.

“Mmmrrrrrrrr,” Hinata mumbled and wriggled her whole body.

Hizashi laughed. “That good huh?”

“Mmmmmmmmm. Mmhmm” Hinata sunk her fingers into the dough, squishing them around and soaking in the warm fluffy feeling of the dough through her fingers.

Mommy’s lungs swelled as big as they could and every part of her glowed brighter with a little extra chakra. She leaned against Uncle Hizashi’s chest, raising her hands to her mouth and laughing. “Hizashi,” she said through her hands and her smile, “this was a wonderful idea. Thank you so, so much.”

Uncle Hizashi hooked an arm around Mom’s shoulders. “Of course it was a great idea. What kid doesn’t love baking bread?”

“Well,” Mommy replied, “this has definitely risen above my expectations.”

“Mhm, it sure is~” Uncle Hizashi stopped talking. His face did a lot of funny, complicated things. “... was that another pun?”

Hinata grinned. Oh! Oh she’d just had the best, best, best idea. She interrupted Uncle Hizashi before he could say anything more. “Uncle, Uncle, could you come help me with the dough? I knead you to help me with this.”

“Sure Hi~” his face twitched, “-nata.” His face did all those funny, complicated things again, and more. He let out a deep, deep sigh through his nose and then slumped. He spoke resignedly, “I’ll never know peace will I? I’m doomed to live in a house of punners forever.”

Mom let out a delighted laugh and stepped over to kiss Hinata on her forehead. “Good job,” she whispered. “And no,” she said smugly, turning back around to face Uncle Hizashi, “you will never know peace. The puns will continue forever.”

Uncle Hizashi sighed. “Ah well. You know what they say: if you love someone, you’ve got to live with all of them. Even the puns.”

Hinata smiled. She was so warm. Every part of her felt fuzzy and light, and the inside of her chest felt like she’d just sipped a hot cup of cocoa. She needed to do something with that feeling, to say something or do something or... Something! There was too much of it inside her to stay there.

There was something Uncle Hizashi had said to Yuki once, that Hinata had watched him say. He’d told Yuki that if he didn’t have the words for a feeling, or know what to do with the feeling, he could always ask his parents for a hug anyway. And he’d always get one. So that’s what Hinata did.

“Hey Mommy? Can I have a hug?”

Mommy’s lungs swelled again and she smiled. She stepped up to the kitchen counter with her arms wide, “Of course you can Hinata. Here- oof!” She let out a woof of air as Hinata latched on to her. “Aww. I love you too. I love you so much Hinata.” She rubbed Hinata’s back.

Hinata grabbed her mother as hard as she could and squeezed. She squeezed until she could feel the warm, fuzzy feeling inside of her pushing into Mommy. “I’m really happy right now,” she told Mommy. “Really, really happy.”
As soon as Mommy let her go, Uncle Hizashi swept in with a hug of his own. Hinata squeezed him too and mumbled. She was so, so happy.

“Mmm, Uncle?” she said.

“What is it Hinata?”

“I actually don’t know how to knead dough. I really do need your help. Can you show me how?”

“I’d love to.”

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Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: You ever suddenly realize you completely forgot to describe a character’s physical appearance? Like, say, you’ve completely neglected a physical description of one of your primary characters because you originally intended her to be a minor side character before she muscled her way into your story and inseparably entwined herself with your plot? And that you should probably go back and edit a description of her into your story somewhere?

On that note: What do you think Aunt Yuki looks like? If there’s a consistent agreement on her appearance in the comments I’ll make sure to incorporate that into my edits.
Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Self-directed ableist language. Gaslighting. Discussion of pregnancy risks. Coercive discussion of pregnancy, reproductive control as an abuse tactic, and child abuse as spousal abuse leverage. Mild sexual contact with an abuser. Explicit sexual language regarding an abuser. No graphic depictions of rape or sexual assault occur (nor ever will occur in this story), but the scene beginning with *---* could easily be triggering to people with such experiences nonetheless.

If you have past or current experiences with abuse, please take care of yourself while reading this chapter, it hits on some pretty strong abusive themes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 25: Choice, Part 1 (Aunt Yuki)

Yuki adjusted her gas mask. She really needed to get a new one, this one bit into her chin. It had become so hard to get ahold of new gear since retiring though. She could still technically sign up for replacement gear. All ex-ninja even theoretically capable of combat were obliged to maintain ready status—or the closest they could manage—and granted a place on the equipment roster to ensure they could do so. At least on paper. But the reality was that active-duty ninja needed replacements now, off-duty ninja needed replacements soon, and washed up cripples like her needed replacements … eventually. Someday. Come back in another month and maybe we’ll see what can be done for you.

And forget about buying equipment from private suppliers. The paperwork needed for anyone other than an active ninja to purchase ninja equipment could be measured in tonnage.

Yuki ground dried boarflower petals with her mortar and pestle absentmindedly, working in easy silence with a room full of Hyuuga. Maybe she could ask Keiko to help her out. She would never consider asking Keiko to help move her up the equipment roster, she wanted a new gas mask to make grinding medicinals more comfortable but active-duty ninja needed new gas masks to survive battles. Maybe Keiko could help her out with some purchasing paperwork though?

Hm. Keiko loved chocolate-covered strawberries. Really, she loved them. The noises she made while eating them were breathtaking. Maybe Yuki could convince Hizashi to teach her how to make them. Then she could bribe Keiko for her bureaucratic skills with her own culinary skills. Yuki smiled at the thought. Yes she could do that.

A young woman stood up on the other side of the room, setting her bowl of ground boarflower dust down. Yuki looked up quizzically, setting her own bowl down. What’s this?

The young woman, a Hyuuga of the main family named Ami, cleared her throat. When she spoke her voice was muffled by her own gas mask, but that didn’t prevent any of the Hyuuga in the room from reading her lips. “I have some news,” she announced. “I wasn’t sure when I should bring this up honestly, but now seems to be as good a time as any.” She took in a deep breath and beamed,
“I’m pregnant.”

A wave of well-wishes burst from everyone in the room. Yuki cheered, adding her own congratulations to the noise. She clapped and smiled. Ami and her husband had been trying for almost a year now, this was wonderful news. Yuki swelled her eyes with chakra. Was that an embryo she saw inside Ami? If it was it wasn’t very far along at all. Three weeks? Four?

Ami swelled with the applause, smiling so wide she looked fit to burst. “I know, I’m really excited. But that also means I’ll only be coming to a few more herbalism meetings before I have to step back. I probably shouldn’t be touching any of this stuff once my baby has a nervous system after all.”

While those near Ami stood up to congratulate her and tell her she would be missed, Yuki’s neighbor Harue leaned over. “Hey Yuki, when were you planning on having your second kid? It’s been a while hasn’t it?”

Oh. “Yes. It has.”

“Yeah it’s been...” Harue thought, “wow it’s been a long while. Hinata’s what, six years old now?”

Yuki smiled weakly, “She’s turning seven in a month.”

“Whoa. So what’s been the hold-up?” Harue asked.

“Nothing,” Yuki lied, “just life I suppose.”

-----

Yuki didn’t enjoy her monthly teas with Elder Taeko. But the elder was Hiashi’s aunt and it would be wrong to deny her her say in their family.

“Your nephew is progressing well,” Elder Taeko told Yuki. “In a few months it may be safe for him to practice some of the simpler seals without my supervision. Not wholly unsupervised, of course, but under your supervision perhaps, or his father’s.”

Elder Taeko tapped her fingers on the table between them. “And pass a message onto his other instructor, if you could. Tell that mongrel to draw up a damn lesson plan. He’s teaching your nephew all sorts of advanced minutiae without covering the foundations and it’s giving your nephew all kinds of mad ideas about what can and cannot be done with sealing.” She pursed her lips. “And I’m the one who has to take the time to set him straight.”

“Of course Elder,” Yuki replied smoothly, “I’ll see to it.”

“Good, good.” Elder Taeko pursed her lips. “And so long as we’re on this topic, what about your daughter? Has she shown any interest in sealing? I’d be more than happy to train her if she does.”

Yuki responded with a strained smile. “We may have to wait a bit longer to know if she’s interested in sealing. Hinata is a late bloomer you see, her eyes only developed enough to parse text recently and it’s still a bit of a strain for her. She’s catching up with the rest of the kids her age and she’s doing really well considering how late she started, but she’s just not far enough along for that sort of thing yet.”
Elder Taeko gave a shallow shrug. “There’s no need to make justifications for her Yuki. Very few children are far enough along to be worth my time at her age, and few people ever display a talent for sealing regardless. It was an idle thought, nothing more. Do tell me if she ever does develop an interest of course, but it’s no matter if she doesn’t.”

“I will Elder.”

“Also…”

“Yes Elder?”

“Well, normally I wouldn’t bring something like this up. I do my best to avoid clan gossip after all. But this has gone a bit beyond mere gossip and become a matter of some concern among the elder council. When can we be expecting another child from you?”

Oh. “Hiashi didn’t tell you?”

“After Hinata was born he mentioned it was a difficult birth and that you two would be waiting a few years before trying again. Is that what you mean?”

“He … told you that, did he?”

“Yes. And, not to belabor the point, but a few years have come and gone. To have the line of succession balanced on a single child is dangerous. It would assuage the council’s worries if you and your husband could give us some assurance that a second child will be on the way soon.”

“I’ll … speak with Hiashi about it Elder.”

“Please do.”

-----

Yuki meant to bring it up with Hiashi. She was just busy. And Hiashi was busy. She was going to bring it up with him soon, when they both had time and Hiashi was in a good mood. She would find the right moment. Eventually.

Three weeks later it was Hiashi who brought it up over breakfast. As soon as he was done eating he ran through the handseals for a genjutsu, reaching for her mind with a thin tendril of illusion carried on a shimmering braid of glittering yin chakra. It was a request for a private conversation within Hiashi’s illusion, beyond the perceptions of the Byakugan. Yuki let the illusion in without dispelling it.

Ambient noise faded and details washed out of the background as Hiashi replaced their perceptions of the world with an illusory replica. Hiashi gave her a long look before breaking the silence. “Elder Taeko and I spoke the other day.”

Yuki tensed.

“She was under the impression you’d spoken with me about us having another child. She wanted to know when we’d decided would be appropriate.”

“Hiashi…”
“I told her we were planning to wait a few more months, to give Hinata some time to become more fully situated at the Academy.”

“Hiashi!”

“Well what did you want me to say? ‘Oh I’m sorry I don’t know what you’re talking about? My wife lied to you Elder, she doesn’t talk to me about these things?’ I covered for you as best I could!”

“Why would you tell her that?! You know I can’t have another kid!”

“Really? That’s news to me. That’s not what the doctor said is it?”

“I- not exactly, but Hiashi Doctor Noa said-”

“Yuki it’s been years. Have you double-checked since? Did you ever even get a second opinion?”

“...”

Hiashi sighed. “Of course you didn’t.” He sighed again. “Look, Yuki, we can fix this. Just go talk to your doctor again, look into it.” He reached across the table to place his hand over hers, the sensation of his skin on hers muted in the illusion. “Yuki, your health has always been an issue. Carrying Hinata was hard on you, I know. If this was just a question about what’s best for us, I wouldn’t even bring it up. But this is about more than just us. So long as Hinata is the sole primary heir she will be a target. This is about our daughter’s safety.”

Her husband continued on stridently. “Gods Yuki, you know I suffered assassination attempts after my brother abandoned the main family. Kumo has already tried to kidnap Hinata! Do you want that to be what her whole life is like?”

“... no. Of course not.”

“Sometimes we have to make sacrifices for our children Yuki. That’s what it means to be parents.”

-----

Doctor Noa at least had the courtesy to give Yuki’s file a thorough reread before she gave the answer Yuki knew was coming. “No. Absolutely not. I’m terribly sorry, but I cannot in good conscience recommend you try for another pregnancy. This kind of immune reaction doesn’t go away, it gets worse with each successive pregnancy. If you try to have another child your body will almost certainly identify it as foreign matter and kill it, possibly hurting you in the process. My advice remains the same as it was seven years ago: you could try again, but in my professional opinion Hinata should be your last child.”

Yuki winced. “Are you sure? Aren’t there immunosuppressive treatment options? You gave me a drug regimen to help me with this during Hinata’s pregnancy. Can’t you just give me that again?”

Doctor Noa smiled sympathetically. “There are immunosuppressive options we could explore, but Yuki, those almost killed you last time. Those are almost certainly why you got maternal pneumonia while pregnant with Hinata and why it was so bad. I mean Yuki, you ended up in the intensive care ward. Your file says a chakra healer with a bacteria speciality was checking up on
you every four hours. You’re lucky to have survived one pregnancy and a second would likely be worse.”

Yuki grimaced. “I know, I know, I just-” She knew that. She’d known this. This was why she hadn’t had another kid. This was what she’d told Hiashi when he’d started pushing for another child right after Hinata had been born.

Her doctor sighed. “Look, it’s not strictly impossible. We could try different immunosuppressants. You might have a better outcome with a different regimen. But we just don’t know. We’d be guessing, and we could easily end up making it worse than last time. That’s likely even, given how much we’d have to step up the dosages compared to what was needed for you to carry Hinata to term. And even if you survived to bear your second child, you and your immune system would likely be in terrible shape by the end of the pregnancy. You could easily die from a postpartum infection and that’s not a gamble I want to take.”

Yuki hung her head. This was why she’d married Hiashi. To carry on the Hyuuga line, leave behind a clan larger and stronger than what she’d been born to. What was the point of all of this if she couldn’t do that?

“I’m sorry. If you decide you want to try again, we’ll do everything we can for you. But I can make no guarantees and I can’t in good conscience recommend something so risky.”

-----

“Seriously Yuki,” Harue said, “what’s the wait? At this rate you’ll never have another kid!”

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“I see. And how severe is this immune reaction?” Elder Taeko asked. “Hn. Your husband is right, I think we should get a second opinion. Regardless, this is not an insurmountable obstacle. The Hyuuga clan has resources. If securing the future of the clan’s leadership means you need a branch doctor assigned to tend your immune system at all hours, that is what will happen.”

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“If there’s even a chance of course you have to try,” Harue insisted. “Pregnancy is always hard. But what would happen to the clan if we let that stop us?”

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“I spoke to Lord Eijiro about your difficulties. He graciously offered to lend us his doctor when the time comes.” Hiashi laid a hand on Yuki’s shoulder. “He’s one of the best in Fire Country. He’ll ensure nothing goes wrong.”

-----

“Of course we’d help if you had another kid,” Hizashi assured her. He dusted floury hands off on his robes and beamed. “Our home is your home and your children are our children, for better or for worse.” He gave a wry grin. “Speaking of worse, have you seen what Neji and Hinata did to the neighbor’s flower garden yet?”

-----

“Sure, I can take time off work to spend more time caring for the kids if you get sick. The office can spare me, we mostly just spin our wheels drafting ‘what-if’ reports during peacetime anyway.” Keiko set down her coffee and looked at Yuki through narrowed eyes. “Is this about the pneumonia you got while pregnant with Hinata? I heard about that. Is there any chance that had to do with your bad lung? Have you talked to your doctor about what you’ll do if it happens again?”

Yuki didn’t talk to Keiko about it again. She didn’t like lying to her.

-----

“It doesn’t matter, Yuki bit down, Hinata and I don’t eat in this house when you’re not here anyway. She didn’t say that. Instead, “If you’d sent me a letter saying you were coming back early I could have taken the time to stock the fridge for you. I was busy but not so busy I couldn’t do this for you.”

“For me? This isn’t about me, Yuki. You let the milk in the fridge go bad. It was curdled when I put it in my coffee this morning. What if Hinata had drunk that? She’s just a little kid, she doesn’t know any better. She could have gotten seriously sick!”

Yuki muttered, “She doesn’t drink milk.” She’d hadn’t meant to speak quietly, but that’s how it’d come out. Like trying to repress a flinch and failing.
“What?”

“What? Hinata doesn’t drink milk. I don’t either. I just use it for cooking. You’re the only one in this house who drinks it.”

Hiashi’s scowled. “You’re stuck on the wrong point Yuki. It’s not about the milk specifically. It’s about the fact that you let something go bad in a fridge our daughter eats from. It could have been something other than the milk! You could have made her sick!”

Yuki breathed as deep as she could and steeled herself. Next time she’d keep a better eye on the damn fridge. But for now there was nothing to do but stand straight and wait this out.

Yuki was late to Hinata’s theater recital.

*___*

Tonight was the night. The first of many to come.

Hiashi rolled over in bed, turning to face Yuki. He reached a hand out for her and if he was hesitant, well, it had been a long time since they’d done this. He lay his hand on her hip, brushing his thumb over the curve of her waist. He let out a huff of air and almost smiled.

And Yuki recoiled. His hand was too hot and too sweaty and too heavy and just … too much. It was too much. Yuki shrank down into the mattress away from his hand and rolled away from him. His presence in their bed pressed heavy against her back and her stomach churned. She couldn’t do this. She didn’t want to do this. The thought of him touching her, in her …

Hiashi left his hand in the air for a second. Two seconds. Three. When he pulled it back his movements were heavy and slow. He rolled onto his back, facing the ceiling with his hands on his chest. He lay like that and did not move. Several times his lips twitched and it looked like he might speak. But he didn’t. And after long minutes, he fell asleep.

Yuki took much longer to reach sleep. Hiashi’s presence, previously an inoffensive weight on the mattress each night, was suddenly unbearable. He made her nauseous, planting a sick awful feeling inside of her. She tasted bile in the back of her throat and- and … She wanted to cry.

Instead she bit her tongue, and hated herself for it.

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Hinata pushed her eggs around her plate and ate small bites. Yuki didn’t eat. She’d get brunch at the hospital cafeteria, she told Hiashi.

Hiashi ate what Yuki set before him, drank his coffee, and said nothing at all.

Hinata left for morning training with her father with her plate only half-eaten. Yuki tossed the
remaining eggs rather than eat them herself. She couldn’t have kept them down.

School started in two hours. In an hour and a half Yuki would round the kids up and walk them to the Academy. On a normal day she would use that time to cook lunch for the kids, peer in on the morning mission roster in the Hokage’s tower for some good gossip fodder, and maybe read a chapter or two of her latest book if she had time. She’d peek in on and worry over Hinata’s training once or a dozen times, and prepare Hinata some special snacks if Hiashi had been curt with their daughter that day.

Today though, Yuki didn’t do any of that. Her head was a churning mess, thoughts eating their own tails and going round and round in her head. Was … this not going to happen? Would she and Hiashi still sleep in the same bed? Could they just not talk about? What was she going to tell the elder council? Hiashi’s father? Hiashi? Could she just get over this and go through with it? Wouldn’t that be better? Easier?

She spent ten minutes with Hinata’s lunch box held motionless in her hands, thoughts running a mile a minute and leaving her behind. She certainly wasn’t going to get her routine done this morning. It left too much room in her head for thought. So she left early instead, walked over to Keiko’s house and asked her to handle Hinata’s lunch and taking the kids to school. Brushed off Keiko’s questions about her health.

Yuki didn’t strictly have work to do today. But Doctor Suzuko had mentioned in passing that some of the hospital’s sanitation wards were fraying, and no one had the spare time or resources to check them over. Yuki volunteered. It was something to do, something that took focus and care and gave her mind something to do.

That was important today.

So the retired ninja walked the halls of the hospital, staring intently at the knots of bound light swirling through the walls and floors. She marked the positions of seals with frayed or loose twists of light, and buried her thoughts beneath her work. That was a skill every ninja learned, and learned well. Even the retired ones who refused to do their duty to the clan.

---

Yuki had worked through lunch, and was intending to keep pushing to the end of the day, when a message scroll arrived for her carried by a swarm of buzzing motes of light. Yuki recognized the Kikaichu swarm at once. She’d worked with her fair share of Aburame in her life. What she didn’t know was why in the world an Aburame would be contacting her like this. She hadn’t so much as talked to an Aburame in years. But the message was certainly for her. The kikaichu flew right up to her and hovered there with the scroll.

Puzzled, Yuki took the scroll from them. It was folded up tight and curled in on itself enough times that Yuki couldn’t read it. The Byakugan didn’t deal well with layers of paper and ink, reading became like trying to parse a maze in three dimensions. So she unfolded it and took a look.

She started running before she finished the first paragraph. She read as she ran.

Auntie, this is Yuki. I’m sending this message via Tomomi Aburame, their kikaichu got your scent off Hinata. I don’t know how long it will take for them to find you, but I’m sending this message at
10:48. This is an emergency. Hinata’s hurt. We need you at the Academy right now.

If you don’t show up by the end of naptime -Yuki flicked a look through the hospital’s walls until she found a clock: 12:40, when did their naptime end?- I’m going to take Hinata to the hospital no matter the consequences. Meet us there if this message finds you too late.

Hinata wasn’t at the hospital -Yuki would have noticed her chakra, she always noticed her chakra- so she must still be at the Academy. But why would Yuki wait to take her? The world pulsed between too-bright and too-dim and the scroll blurred in her sight as Yuki’s control over her chakra slipped. Her heartbeat pounded in her throat. Why would Hinata need to go to the hospital? If she did, why wouldn’t her teachers have taken her?

Hinata never showed up to walk to school with us this morning. Dad had already gone to work and Neji and I didn’t have the range to look for her, so we couldn’t find Hinata. We-

-Yuki’s sight blurred again. She couldn’t get enough air. She couldn’t run. Pain seared her bad lung and her chest trembled every time she tried to breath deep. Yuki pushed her hand into a pocket inside her robe and fumbled for her pills. She popped a soldier pill and an analgesic into her mouth and bit down, crushing them both. Instantly the too-much rush and buzz of the soldier pill filled her chakra system, muted a moment later by the wave of relief the painkiller washed through her system. You weren’t supposed to mix the two, it was too easy to hurt yourself. But right now Yuki needed them to run.

And if Hinata was hurt, maybe she needed them to fight.

-we couldn’t find Hinata. We asked Harue for help and she said she’d seen Hiashi taking Hinata out of the compound towards the village training grounds, but that she didn’t know exactly where they went. Mom wasn’t happy about taking us to school without Hinata but she decided to take Neji and I without her, so long as we knew Hinata was with her dad. Mom wanted to send you a message but didn’t know where you were, and you were out of Harue’s range.

When all this was over and her heart had stopped pounding its way out of her chest, Yuki was going to sit her namesake down and force him to learn how to write a concise mission report. What had happened to her daughter?!

We went to school and Hinata just didn’t show up. We didn’t know if she was going to show up at all. We covered for Hinata and told Misao and Kazue that Hiashi had taken Hinata on some special training thing at the last minute, but honestly we didn’t know.

Hinata showed up half an hour ago. She came in alone, walked here from gods know where. She has a bruise covering the left side of her face, spot bruises all over her arms and legs, her rib cartilage is torn in three places, and I don’t think she’s concussed but she wouldn’t focus. She was crying. Misao was going to take Hinata straight to the hospital but then Hinata said it was from training with her dad and Kazue said Academy teachers aren’t allowed to interfere in clan training practices. They yelled at one another about that but eventually Misao relented and both of them said they couldn’t send Hinata to the hospital. They gave her some painkillers, are letting her rest, and they brought in the school nurse to look at her, but the nurse is just a healing student, not a full chakra healer, and Hinata still looks really bad.

The world roared in Yuki’s ears.

I asked Kazue if I could ‘interfere’ with clan training practices because I’m a Hyuuga. She told me that I probably don’t count. Actually she said because Hiashi’s the clan heir and Hinata’s his heir, and because I’m a twig -guilt squeezed Yuki’s throat- that I’d probably get into even more trouble.
I don’t care. I hope you get here soon so you can help Hinata, but if this message doesn’t find you by the end of naptime I’m taking her to hospital myself. Misao said she wouldn’t stop me.

Yuki ran faster.

---

?

Every breath hurt.

Why?

Yuki reflexively steadied her breathing. Slow breaths in through the mouth, not too deep but not too shallow, soft as can be. She had years of practice moderating her breathing during a flare-up. The pain didn’t recede but it became managed, something her mind immediately folded up and set aside.

Self assessment: Why do my lungs hurt? And the next question after that: Where am I?

The next question after that, like a lightning bolt: Hinata! Where is Hinata?! Is she okay?! Without even getting up Yuki formed the handseals to maximize the chakra she could fill her Byakugan with and slammed chakra into her eyes, wincing at the tumbling nausea of expanding her senses too fast. Hinata’s chakra burst into sight immediately, so recognizable Yuki could spot her by the way her chakra flickered even before she resolved her daughter’s form. She held her breath. Hinata was ... okay. Thank the gods, her daughter was okay.

The injuries her nephew had described were gone. Hinata lay resting in a hospital bed, alive and well. Lingering pockets of dead chakra ghosted under Hinata’s skin where a chakra healer must have removed her bruises and her daughter’s whole musculature was mottled with faint disruptions of chakra flow where strain injuries had been healed. But Hinata was alive. She was being cared for in the hospital and she was alive.

A moment later Hinata’s -and therefore Yuki’s- location registered. Hinata’s in the hospital. I’m in the hospital. And-

“Yuki,” Hiashi said, “we need to talk.”

Yuki shot straight up in her hospital bed. She regretted the movement a moment later as pain lanced through her lungs. She coughed hard and curled in on herself to lessen the pain.

Hiashi sat in a chair next to her bed, hands folded neatly in his lap. He patiently waited for her to finish coughing. Just as she did he spoke. “This is your fault Yuki.”

Hiashi’s words lanced through her and for a moment Yuki hated him. Angry, furious words pushed up through her throat too fast and sparked another coughing fit.

“I know it seems like I’m being the asshole here,” Hiashi said patiently, “and believe me, I don’t like being the bad guy in this situation. But the reason I have to do this is because of your decision.”
Yuki managed to push out one incredulous word. “What?”

“It’s your choice if you want to bear more children. It always will be; I’m not a monster, that’s not ever something I’d force on you. But as I told you, choosing to condemn Hinata to being the only link in the primary chain of succession has consequences. She will have to take her place as heir to the clan through the same hardships I did. Hinata will have to be perfect. She will have to bear the weight of the whole clan herself. She’ll have no siblings to share the load or help her and no one to take her place if the burden is too heavy. The world will expect -and the clan will need- Hinata to be perfect.”

Hiashi continued relentlessly, “And Hinata will be the target for all of Konoha’s enemies. She will be the most vulnerable point of attack by which to harm Konoha’s most valuable clan. There will be attempts on her life and she will have to defend herself. And if you won’t protect our daughter by removing the target painted on her back, then I will have teach her to protect herself. Because of you, there will be no room to coddle her in this. Hinata must learn to fight, and fight well, or she will die. That’s on you. And if I’m forced to use harsh methods to make that happen-” Hiashi shrugged lightly with a regretful twist to his lips, “-that’s on her.”

Too many emotions pushed through Yuki. Astonishment. Rage. Horror. Guilt. “Hiashi I had to take Hinata to the hospital! She-”

“No you didn’t.” Hiashi interrupted her, “Hinata was fine. You panicked because an unblooded twig became overwrought at the sight of mild injuries and you downed a cocktail of combat drugs and passed out in the street. Hinata is here because you’re here. She’s in a hospital bed because she panicked and had a meltdown when she couldn’t get her mother to wake up and respond to her earlier. Her training injuries didn’t merit hospitalization. She is being treated for them, yes, but simply because the healers might as well do so given that she’s here. Hinata wouldn’t have any reason to be in the hospital being poked and prodded and interrogated if not for you.”

Yuki’s train of thought tumbled to a halt. Confusion. Uncertainty. “I-” Was that what had happened? What was the last thing she remembered? Yuki tried to pull the exact wording of her namesake’s letter to mind, how he’d described the injuries and what he’d said about his teacher’s reactions. What-

“I can’t say I understand your outburst Yuki, or your decisions. I certainly don’t think you’re doing what’s best for our daughter. I will accept and deal with your choices however. So long as you refuse to give Hinata the protection of siblings, I will continue these stricter training sessions each and every day, as I must.”

Hiashi stood up. He interrupted Yuki again as she started to speak, “I don’t know what happened to you Yuki. The woman I married wouldn’t have done this to our daughter.” He didn’t wait for her to respond to that. He walked out of the room, dimmed his eyes, and turned down the hallway. Yuki was left behind.

What. Was that what- Yuki needed to step back. She needed her head to stop whirling and the questions to stop but she also needed to know what had happened-

When Hiashi was gone Yuki turned her sight back towards her daughter. She found Hinata wide awake in her hospital bed, eyes bright and watching.

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In keeping with the practice of having something light to say after dark chapters (because I badly need it), Hinata was a tree in the Academy’s play. One of the First Hokage’s trees. It’s a much more active role than it initially sounds like.

Now I'm going to go bed, try to get the dissociative tingling out of my arms, and desperately try to get a full night's sleep. I've brushed up against some triggers of my own these past few weeks and writing this chapter was maaaaaybe not the healthiest thing to add to that. I knew what I was signing up for when I started this story, but damn if there aren't some chapters which take a toll.
Choice, Part 2 (Aunt Yuki)

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Suicidal ideation, graphic depiction of suicidal thoughts. Child abuse, graphic depiction of traumatized children, graphic depiction of persistent psychological abuse. As always, Aunt Yuki’s internal monologue while depressed should not be taken at face value.

This chapter is dedicated to Lin-Manuel Miranda’s song Dear Theodosia from Alexander Hamilton, without which I absolutely could not have found the right mental state to figure out how I wanted to finish this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 26: Choice, Part 2 (Aunt Yuki)

“I don’t want to go!” Hinata pleaded. “Can’t we just stay home? I wanna stay home!”

Yuki sighed. “Hinata the play will be wonderful. You had so much fun at recital and I know you’ll have just as much fun tonight. Come on, you and I worked so hard on your tree costume.”

“No!” Hinata stomped her foot. “Trees are dumb! I don’t want to be a tree!”

“Not even a mokuton tree? I thought you said the First Hokage and his tree jutsus were cool. Aren’t you excited to get to fight Madara on stage?”

“No!”

“Why don’t you want to go Hinata?”

Her daughter’s face scrunched up into a scowl. “Because I don’t want to!”

“That’s not a reason Hinata.” Yuki reached out for her daughter’s shoulder.

Hinata pulled back, quickly moving past upset and on to a teary meltdown. “I said I don’t wanna to go!”

Yuki closed her eyes and breathed as deep as she could. This was too much to handle right now. “Hinata, you will have fun once you’re there. I promise. Besides, you’re part of the play. Your classmates need you to show up, they can’t do the play without you.”

“No! I said no!”

Yuki bit down a frustrated swear. Could Hinata not just make this one thing easy? This was supposed to be a fun silly thing for Hinata to do with her classmates, and a low-stress project for Yuki to work on, and now they were going to be late and Yuki knew Hinata would have fun once she was there but this was just miserable. Yuki was exhausted, and tired, and she almost wanted to let Hinata have her way and stay home even though she’d just end up spending the evening sulking
and unhappy.

“Hinata please, why don’t you want to go?”

Yuki could have mouthed along with her daughter, “Because I don’t wanna!”

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Hinata did have fun, once Yuki got her to the play. She chattered up a storm with the other mokuton trees while they were getting into costume. She got way, way too into it while fighting the students playing the tails of the Nine-Tailed Beast Madara summoned. And after the play was done she grabbed her cousins and bounced up and down, demanding they tell her how cool it was and crowing about how good her jabs had been and how she’d just barely touched her fellow students with them.

She hadn’t really been supposed to jab the other students but Yuki could talk to her about that later. She’d been using Gentle Fist strikes so it wasn’t like anyone had actually gotten hurt anyway and Yuki didn’t want to spoil her daughter’s evening with a lecture.

Hinata was still pumped up on the excitement of the play an hour later, but Yuki saw the signs of an impending crash for the kids and decided to get them home. Neji was slowing down, Yuki had retreated to the roof of the Academy to read, and even Hinata was starting to slur her torrent of excited babble. It was time for the fun to end and the kids to go to sleep.

Neji and Hinata walked ahead of Yuki on the way home, as they usually did. Neji spun an epic - and clearly half-remembered- tale of the first two Hokages fighting Madara’s ghost for Hinata as they walked, which Yuki was dead certain he’d heard from his twin first. There was no way Neji came up with a narrative that twisty and convoluted on his own, especially while tired. Neji did an admirable job trying to relay it to Hinata though, and Hinata did an admirable job trying to listen even as her energy deserted her and she started to sway on her feet.

Keiko and Hizashi were working late tonight so once they got home Yuki walked the kids through the motions of brushing their teeth and getting their nightgowns on -her heart beat just a little bit faster when she helped Hinata into her nightgown- so she could put them to bed. Neji and Hinata collapsed into a heap on the bed, fading into unconsciousness before Yuki could even kiss them goodnight. But little Yuki, her namesake, asked her if he could stay up a little longer and read.

“Mom and Dad should be home soon and I want to tell them how Hinata’s play went. Can I stay up and read for a little while?”

Yuki eyed her nephew. That was unusual. Little Yuki never passed up an opportunity to sleep, especially when cuddling was involved. But if she was going to be honest with herself -Yuki’s vision expanded just enough to see her husband waiting alone at home and her breathing hitched- she didn’t want to sit alone in a quiet house with nothing to focus on but Hiashi doing the same half a mile away. And she definitely didn’t want to sit alone and think about whether she’d go back there once Keiko and Hizashi got home.

“Sure,” she told him, “we can both read a bit. So long as you’re sure you’ll be fine in the morning?” With Neji or Hinata the question would have just been a pointed reminder that they did need to get their sleep, but she trusted little Yuki -that still didn’t sound right in her head even after
all these years, Yuki was her name- to actually give an answer to her question.

And that answer was- “No.” He shook his head. “I won’t. I’ll be exhausted and grumpy tomorrow and it’ll suck.”

Yuki waited a long moment for him to continue and he said nothing. A twinge of annoyance ran through her. She knew when she was being baited into asking a question. She closed her eyes for a moment. She did not have the energy to play these games with Yuki. Not tonight.

She still bit the bait though. Even knowing it was bait. “Alright Yuki,” -that was still weird to say- “why do you want to stay up late if you know it’s a bad idea?”

Her nephew rushed his words out before she was even finished asking, like he thought he needed an excuse to speak and was worried it would slip away. “I’m not going to sleep the whole night through anyway. I’m just not. I had nightmares last night after seeing Hinata ... After seeing Hinata. Like that. Seeing her hurt and not being able to do anything about it. I’m gonna have them again tonight. I’m hoping that if I stay up long enough I won’t be asleep long enough to dream. I ...” he twisted his fingers together, “It was bad last night. Please?” He looked up at her like he expected a specific reaction, like he wanted something from her.

For a moment, Yuki hated the little boy. Wanted to scream at him, tell him to shut up, that she couldn’t help him, she can’t fix this, can’t help myself, can’t help Hinata, I can’t help anyone at all so why do you think I can fix you?! But only for a moment. The anger passed and then Yuki was just tired again. Just … tired. I don’t know how to fix this. Yuki swallowed and did her best to speak with a level voice. “Okay. Alright. You can stay up and read with me.”

“Thanks Auntie.”

Yuki didn’t say anything back. She just nodded.

The two of them settled in to read on the couch downstairs. Yuki took up a corner of the couch, resting her head in one head as she read. Little Yuki sprawled out over the rest of the couch with his feet in her lap. Yuki settled in with a treatise on pharmaceutical seal uses and raised an eyebrow when her nephew -after setting his new copy of Ninja Tools and How To Use Them Safely down on the floor- cracked open an equally large tome titled Ninja / Civilian Interactions In The Field, Academy Edition.

Yuki looked at the book and then past it to her nephew. She sighed and pulled up what little energy she had to tell him off. “Yuki,” -that was still weird, would always be weird- “there is no way that book is assigned reading for your class. And Academy texts are restricted. How did you get your hands on that?”

“Uhh. Academy texts are restricted?”

“Yes. They are.”

“Oh. Well then Misao gave it to me.”

“Uhuh. Well wherever you stole it from, put it back tomorrow.”

Her nephew deflated theatrically. “Yes ma’am.”

Yuki sighed. Well at least that had gone over painlessly. She’d have to check his hiding spots
around the compound and at the Academy when he inevitably tried to store it for later rather than
giving it back, but it could have been worse. Although: “Yuki why did you steal that? That’s way
above your class’ level.”

Her namesake gave her a look which said they’d been over this whole ‘appropriate reading level’
thing too many times already and he wasn’t going to even bother responding to that part of her
question. “First off, I didn’t steal it. This is an official Academy textbook designated for official
Academy student use and I am an official Academy student. And the storage room locks are just a
formality anyway, it’s not like they’re good enough to actually mean anything.”

The worst thing about her nephew was how he suckered you in by being such a sweet, bright little
kid. It lulled you into a false sense of security and made you forget just how much of a
troublemaker he actually was. She sighed again. “Okay, but why did you take the book?”

The left corner of his mouth twitched. He reached up to the scarred side of his face with his left
hand and wriggled the fingers on his right hand. “Ninjas aren’t supposed to care about stuff like this
‘cuz you see it so often. I mean, they notice, they look. But it’s just scars to them. Just … they’re
just scars. The kids though, at school, they aren’t like that. Yet. Especially the ones from civilian
families. They look at my scars like I’m a fr-” the young boy stuttered “-like I’m a freak.” His
voice broke as he said the word. “My scars are all they notice. They want to ask how I got them but
they know they’re not supposed to and they can’t imagine not wondering, so they just stare and it’s
all they think about when they’re looking at me. And I know that. But I know civilians stare for the
same reasons, ‘cuz they just don’t see this stuff that often, and ninja have got to deal with that on
missions. So I was hoping this book might have some advice for scarred ninja, about dealing with
that.”

Oh. “You can keep the book then.”

Little Yuki shook his head. “It’s alright. I already read that section. It was just a couple paragraphs
anyway. It … didn’t really help. I’m reading it right now for something else.” He looked away
from her, almost like he was abashed.

“Oh.” Yuki drew the word out a touch, inviting him to continue.

He scratched the back of his neck with both hands. His voice wavered as he spoke, like he couldn’t
decide if he wanted to rush his words out all at once or draw them out slowly. “There’s a chapter.
In the book. For if you have to deal with traumatized children while on mission. Like if you’re
rescuing a kid from a bad situation or you’re escorting them and they see combat. That kind of
thing. And I thought it might help for me to read it.”

Yuki sat very still. She knew what he meant. Of course she knew what he meant. He assumed
Hinata was traumatized.

Her hands trembled.

He continued on without stopping. “It briefly talks about psychological triage and suggests some
more detailed books to read, but there’s also some stuff in here which just … I dunno, it helps, to
know this stuff. Like, there’s a part where it talks about moving traumatized kids and it says that
you can typically expect them to get upset when changing locations. Sometimes it’s full-blown
tantrums but also sometimes it’s just, like, getting anxious and irritable? And it also talks about
how much attention you need to pay to possible triggers because they can be kind of random and
younger kids can’t always articulate why certain things freak them out.”

He gestured as he spoke, moving his hands as much because he didn’t know what to do with
himself as to punctuate his sentences. “Like, kids - adults too but it says especially kids- can get triggered by really random stuff that was going on while they were traumatized, but they might not realize what’s going on when they’re triggered and they don’t know how to manage those feelings so sometimes it can just seem like they’re randomly lashing out for no good reason. But also they’ll sometimes lash out at you for no reason even if you’re doing your job right and the kid feels safe around you, because they feel safe around you. Because they need to test and see if they can express anger and fear without getting hurt.”

Of course Yuki knew all that. She’d read the same book back when she was in the Academy, and put its lessons into practice more than once during the war. But Hinata wasn’t … that. She wasn’t one of those traumatized children who’d seen soldiers disemboweled or watched their parents die. Hiashi hadn’t hurt her like- like that. He hadn’t done that kind of damage.

Right?

Her chest ached.

Little Yuki kept talking, unaware of what was going on inside her mind, “And it helps to just know this stuff but also…” he struggled for words, “I didn’t know how to help Hinata when she came into the Academy that morning. I didn’t know how to … be there, for her, if that makes sense? And it hurt. It hurt really bad to just- to just not be able to help. It hurt. I keep on going over it in my head, over and over and over, trying to figure out if there was something I could have done to get her to stop crying or to make it better but I can’t. I can’t. It’s just- it’s in my head, every time I stop moving. What could I have done? What should I have done? Everytime I stop to think that’s all I think about. And I don’t know. So,” he lifted the book and let it flop back down, “this. I- I want it to have answers. I hope it has answers.”

Yuki had read that book. She’d also read the psychological triage texts it referenced. She still remembered passages from them. *Secondary trauma may occur in those close to the traumatized primary. The helpless inability to provide meaningful aid can be disempowering and violate a civilian’s intrinsic sense of a just and reasonable world just as direct trauma does.*

She swallowed. “You can keep the book. And I’ll see if I can’t get my hands on those more detailed books. Do-” she swallowed again, hard, fighting down tears, “-do you think that would help?” *Please say yes. I need you to say yes.*

Little Yuki nodded hesitantly. “I think so. Yeah. This, uh, this book has been pretty helpful so far.”

“Good,” Yuki said, “that’s good.” She gave the little boy a watery smile. “I’ll try to get those other books for you too. And if I can’t you should ask your mom. She’s better than I am at this kind of thing.”

He gave her a smile back and the sight of it made her chest ache. “Thanks Auntie.”

Yuki tried not to cry.

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The next morning Hiashi took their daughter out to the training fields and beat her.
“I hate you! I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!” Tears streamed down Hinata’s face as she screamed at Yuki.

I don’t know what’s wrong, what’s wrong, why is she crying? “Hinata? What’s wrong? Are you okay?” Of course she’s not okay.

“I-” Hinata choked on her tears, “I hate you!”

Of course she hates me. What kind of mother doesn’t know why her daughter is crying? Yuki had just given Hinata a plate of eggs and the next thing she knew Hinata had started screaming.

“Hinata? Sweetheart, what’s wrong?” She tried not to let desperation seep into her voice. “Don’t you want your eggs? You love eggs, I’m sure you’ll feel better after you eat them.”

“NO!” Hinata lashed out and slapped her plate off the table and onto the floor where it shattered. “I HATE EGGS! I DON’T WANT THEM!”

Freezing cold settled into Yuki’s chest as she realized what was wrong. “Okay. Okay sweetheart. No more eggs. I’ll get you-” Yuki scoured the kitchen with her vision, “some plums okay? You can snack on those while clean this mess up, and then I’ll thaw out and cook some dumplings. Would that be okay Hinata?”

Hinata’s face twisted into tear-filled grimace, her chest rising and falling with too-rapid breaths. “I don’t know.” She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Yuki tried to keep her own breathing steady. “That’s okay. There’s nothing wrong with that. If I get you plums and you don’t want them, we can find something else. It’ll be alright.” She leaned over and kissed Hinata’s hair. “Just stay in your chair until I get back, okay sweetheart? I don’t want you to step on any bits of broken plate and get hurt.”

Hinata was still breathing too fast to be calm, but she took the time to pause and think about that. Eventually she nodded. “‘kay”.

“I know you feel really bad right now, but I promise you’ll feel better in an hour. I promise. I know some breathing exercises I can show you, special ways to breathe that will help you feel better. I promise.”

Hinata hiccuped and nodded again.

“I’ll only be gone a second,” she told her daughter. She smoothed her hand over Hinata’s hair and then rushed into the kitchen to grab the plums.

Yuki stopped with her hand on the refrigerator door though. She took a deep shuddering breath and bit her lip. She knew she shouldn’t leave Hinata alone, that she should get back to her as quick as she could. But she just … needed a moment. She needed one moment.

Hinata got triggered by the eggs. My daughter is traumatized and eggs are a trigger for her now. She could tell something was up at breakfast that first morning Hiashi really beat her, she was nervous and she couldn’t finish her eggs, and now eating eggs and the warning signs of being beaten are all mixed up in her head. Because she’s traumatized. Because that’s how badly Hiashi hurt her.
Yuki shoved her knuckle in her mouth and bit down. She couldn’t cry. Hinata needed her, she couldn’t cry.

But it was her fault Hiashi had hurt Hinata. So how much did Hinata really need her anyway?

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If I wasn’t around then little Yuki could just be Yuki and he could have his name all to himself.

Yuki buried the thought. That was ridiculous.

If I wasn’t sleeping in Keiko and Hizashi’s home every night they could have more time alone together.

Yuki buried the thought. Keiko and Hizashi would never value their sex life more than her life and she shouldn’t either.

Yuki could deal with thoughts like this. She wouldn’t have survived the last six years otherwise. She always pushed through, even when she couldn’t remember why she should. She always did.

If I gave Hinata a sibling her father would stop beating her.

Yuki didn’t know how to bury that thought, because it was true.

She had thoughts like this sometimes. They came as a part of a mental fog, a state of mind which didn’t whisper to her reasons that she should die so much as it hid reasons she should live. It clouded the future and shrunk her entire world down to the tiny sliver of time she existed in. One moment after the next after the next, until she couldn’t remember ever feeling otherwise and couldn’t imagine anything else.

It was manageable though. If she just kept pushing. If she just didn’t let the fact that she couldn’t think of a reason to keep living from getting in the way of actually living, she would keep living. It was that simple. The offenses for which her brain decided she should die -messing up dinner, getting the kids to school late, interfering with her in-laws’ sex life- were ephemeral. They were shadows of her inability to imagine positive reasons to live, but they weren’t actually good reasons to die.

But this. Hinata wouldn’t be traumatized if I had just been less selfish that night.

Yuki didn’t know how to bury this.

If I have another kid Hiashi will stop beating Hinata. But what if she died? If I die in childbirth Hiashi will stop beating Hinata. What if she never made it to term? What if she died in vain? But what if my death can help Hinata?

Yuki didn’t know how to bury this. She didn’t know how to push past her foggy thoughts when there was actually a reason for her to die. A concrete, actual way in which her death could help Hinata.

A quiet muffled corner of her brain shrieked that she’d stopped thinking of the pregnancy as something she might survive. She wasn’t thinking of it as a risk, it yelled, she was thinking of it as
a way to justify dying. But that corner of her brain had such a small voice. So small that most days she forget it existed at all.

When she wrestled with the revulsion she’d felt in Hiashi’s bed and found herself thinking - *it won’t be so bad, it’s not like I’ll have to deal with it very long after all, I’ll be dead soon anyway* - she knew it was over. She’d fought for six long years.

And now she was going to lose.

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Doctor Noa cheerfully welcomed Yuki into her office. “Come on in, sit, sit. I’m curious what brings you here today. Reception said you didn’t put a purpose for your visit down on the forms?”

“No I-” Yuki shook her head, “it’s a sensitive issue.”

“Okay. Are there any privacy concerns which need to be addressed then? Security clearance issues? We can go to a warded room to talk if you need it.”

“No. It’s fine. No need for that.”

“Great. So what can I do for you?”

Yuki wrung her hands in her lap. She was doing this wasn’t she? She was actually going to do this.

“Yuki?”

She took a deep breath. “I need you to sterilize me.” There. She’d said it.

“Oh sure, I can do that.” Noa smiled. “Heh, and I thought this might be a complicated visit. Snipping fallopian tubes with medical chakra is a breeze, it literally takes thirty seconds. Open up your robe and let me touch your stomach, I’ll have you out of here in under a minute.”

Doctor Noa rolled up her sleeves and kept talking. “Keep in mind though that cutting your tubes won’t do anything to prevent conception with any egg that’s already been released and it won’t affect your period unlike some other forms of birth control. It’s also a bit more complicated to reverse the procedure than to perform it so if you ever want this undone you’ll need to schedule it ahead of time, not just do a walk-in.” She held her hands up in front of her expectantly, waiting for Yuki to open her robe. “Ready?”

Yuki swallowed. “I don’t want it to be reversible,” she said quietly.

Doctor Noa blinked. “You don’t- Uh, that would entail destroying your ovaries completely. Is that what you want?” When Yuki nodded she inquired, “May I ask why?”

Yuki shook her head, a quick jerky motion.

“Right, I’m sorry, you did say this was sensitive. It’s just that I’d rather not do anything irreversible to you if a reversible procedure would do…” Doctor Noa waited for Yuki to pick up the dangling sentence. When she didn’t Doctor Noa continued, “If you’re worried about the health risks you’d face getting pregnant, I’d actually recommend the reversible tube cut. It promise you it’s just as effective and a it’s far less impactful procedure overall.” When Yuki still didn’t respond Noa
persisted, “You don’t have to tell me what it is, but is there a specific reason you need this to be irreversible?”

“Yes.”

Doctor Noa let out a huff of air. “Okay. I suppose that’s that then. Let’s do this.”

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“Mommy,” Hinata asked Yuki at the door when she got home later that night, “what happened to your organs?”

Yuki reached down to rub her daughter’s head as she stepped inside. “Nothing you need to worry about,” she told her daughter wearily, “just some adult medical stuff.”

“But-!” her daughter exclaimed, clearly intent on hearing more.

“Hinata,” Hizashi spoke from the kitchen, “remember what we told Neji about asking about people’s internal organs?”

Hinata pouted. “Not to.”

“Uhuh. It’s rude, and the same rule applies to you too. Besides, you know that little organ attached to the intestine that people sometimes get removed?”

“The app-en-dix?” Hinata pronounced carefully.

“Yup. Well the organs your mom got removed today, ovaries, are kind of like that. You don’t really need them to live and sometimes people need to get them taken out. It’s just a thing that happens sometimes. Nothing to worry about.”

“Oh. ‘kay.” Hinata looked up at her mother. “Are you gonna have your appendix taken out too?”

Yuki managed a half smile for her daughter as she shook her head. “No, I’m not planning on it any time soon.”

Hinata nodded seriously with an aura of affected understanding and then, curiosity satisfied, ran back into the house to where Keiko was painting with Neji and Yuki.

Yuki joined Hizashi in the kitchen, rolling up her sleeves as she entered. “Thank you for that, Hizashi.”

He nodded. “No problem.” He paused a moment, visibly turning his head a fraction so she’d know he was looking at her. “I suppose you’re not having another kid then, huh?”

Yuki was exhausted. Tired to her very bones. She didn’t have the energy to talk about this. Didn’t want to dance around what she could or could not safely say to Hizashi about his twin brother. So she just shook her head, no.

The silence between them sat comfortably as Hizashi passed Yuki vegetables to slice. He waited almost a minute before picking the line of questioning back up. “I told Keiko already, about your sterilization, when I saw you approaching the compound. I didn’t feel comfortable keeping her in
the dark when all the rest of us can see it. And she—well she got really quiet when I told her. She got that look in her eyes, you know exactly the one, where she gets really quiet and angry and you can see the gears churning in her mind.”

Yuki knew the look.

“I asked her what was wrong and Keiko told me that it wasn’t her place to say. She said I’d have to ask you.” Hiashi signed _cease weapon use_ and put his hand on Yuki’s once she’d stopped cutting the vegetables. He looked at her sadly. “But I can make some guesses about what’s wrong. And if you need to start spending nights here, or you and Hinata need to move some stuff here more permanently, we’ll make it work.”

“Okay. Sure” Yuki said quietly. “I’m kind of tired right now though, so can we just … not talk about this stuff right now? Can we just make dinner?”

“Sure.” Hizashi gave her hand a squeeze before letting it go.

Yuki tried not to think about how much of a burden she was being, and resumed chopping the vegetables.

Dinner was a quiet affair, with little spoken and less said. Yuki was grateful for that.

After dinner though, when Yuki was picking up dirty plates, her namesake approached her. He held that book, _Ninja / Civilian Interactions In The Field_, against his chest like a shield, and he had a determined look on his face. “Auntie,” he said.

She did not have the energy left for whatever this was. “Yuki—” she started.

The young child straightened his spine and interrupted her. “You need to ask Mom and Dad for help. Hinata needs you to. She needs to see that it’s okay to ask for help. It- it doesn’t matter if I ask Mom and Dad for hugs and Hinata sees me, it’s just not the same. She needs to see you asking for help.” Yuki could see the pain in his posture, past the determination he tried to project.

“Please,” he begged.

“…okay,” she said. For Hinata.

She brought the plates into the kitchen where Keiko and Hizashi were cleaning up. _This is for Hinata_, she told herself, _it’s not being selfish if it’s for her_.

Still a burden either way, her mind told her.

But this wasn’t about her. This was about Hinata. So she stood in the kitchen with Keiko and Hizashi and she drew up her courage and she asked, “Hizashi. Keiko. Can I—” she swallowed, “-can I have a hug?”

Keiko actually body flickered across the room to slam Yuki in a hug, the shorter woman wrapping her arms around Yuki’s ribs and squeezing tightly. Hizashi was only a moment behind his wife, wrapping himself around Yuki’s shoulders from behind. He made a noise halfway between holding back tears and laughing and said, “I thought you’d never ask.”

Keiko let out a short laugh, muffled against Yuki’s chest. “Hah. Haven’t you noticed by now Hizashi? Your sister-in-law always tries to do everything herself. Never asks for help unless she absolutely has to.” A smile ghosted across Keiko’s face and she addressed Yuki, “That’s what I like about you though. You’re tough. You always soldier on. It’s endearing, even when it’s kind of dumb.”
Pain stabbed through Yuki’s chest. No, she wasn’t tough. *I’m not as strong as you think I am.* But she didn’t say that out loud. She could see Hinata in the living room and she knew Hinata could see her, and she couldn’t pull away from any part of Keiko and Hizashi’s affection while Hinata was watching. Even if it wasn’t true, even if she didn’t deserve any of it, she needed to accept it so Hinata could see her accepting it.

And maybe deep down she wanted to hear it again.

Yuki started sniffling, and the more noise she made the more her chest hurt. And then before she knew it she was crying and sobbing and she couldn’t say why. It just hurt. Everything hurt, but here were these two wonderful people who she- who she didn’t deserve- and they- they-

Yuki cried.

“Oh shit,” Keiko said, “oh gods Yuki I’m sorry-” she started to pull back but her husband stopped her by reaching down and pulling her back into the hug.

Hizashi lay his cheek against the back of Yuki’s head. He spoke to Keiko first, “You’re good love, we’re good.” Then he spoke to Yuki, pitching his voice so she felt it as much as she heard it. “Thank you. For letting us see you when you’re not strong.”

Yuki’s sobs redoubled, gross ugly sobs which spilled tears down her cheeks. She pulled in air and all that came back out was sobs. It took a long, long time for her to stop crying.

But when she did stop crying she noticed little Hinata, her baby, standing in the kitchen beside them. Little Hinata watching with watery eyes and a trembling lip. She stared up at the trio of adults and, hesitantly, she asked, “Can I have a hug too?”

The painful feeling inside of Yuki’s chest burst open, and whatever it became she didn’t have a name for, but it was strong and deep and it filled her to the brim in a moment. New tears pushed their way out of her eyes as she reached down and yanked Hinata up into her embrace. “Yes,” she cried out, “yes you can. Of course you can.”

Then Keiko and Hizashi wrapped both of them in another hug, and Hizashi smoothed his hand through Hinata’s hair and Keiko kissed Hinata’s cheek, and Yuki started crying again like she’d never stopped. Hinata didn’t cry but her eyes watered and she smiled, really *smiled,* and Yuki held her as tight as she could.

And as soon as the crying was done and Yuki set Hinata down -and Keiko and Hizashi did their fair share of crying too- Yuki’s namesake and his twin wrapped Hinata up in a hug of their own. “I’m sorry,” her namesake sobbed, “I’m sorry I couldn’t help, I’m so sorry I couldn’t fix this, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

Yuki smiled, and it was a fragile broken thing wet with tears but she smiled, and she knelt down to kiss her namesake’s cheek. “It’s okay,” she told him, “you did fix it.” And she was surprised that maybe, just maybe, she meant that.

Later that night, after the children had been put to sleep, Yuki was rummaging through the linen closet when Keiko approached her from behind. “Yuki,” Keiko asked, “what are you doing?”

Yuki froze. “Oh. I, uh, I was getting a blanket. To sleep on the couch.” A tinge of worry crept in, “Hizashi said I could stay the night if I wanted, is that- is that not okay?”

Keiko smiled and let out an exasperated huff. “Yuki, you are not sleeping alone on the couch after all that just happened tonight.” She turned around and made a ‘come here’ gesture with her hand.
“Come on, the bed’s got enough room for all of us.”

Yuki took a deep breath. Hinata was asleep now, so Yuki could finally say it. “I don’t deserve this.”

Keiko turned back to Yuki and blinked.

“I don’t. I don’t deserve any of this. I don’t know why you think I do but I don’t. I don’t know why you’ve forgiven me for any of the things I let happen to your children, but I don’t deserve it. I don’t. I really, really don’t. I’m enough of a burden as is, I- you can’t actually want this. I’m not worth it.” There. She said it. All of it.

Keiko arched an eyebrow and put her hands on her hips. “Are you done?”

That was … not the response Yuki had expected. “Yes?”

“Good. Now listen to me very carefully. I’m sure Hizashi could say this much more tactfully, and I’m sure he will once we get in bed. But I’m just going to tell you this as best I can.” She jabbed a finger into Yuki’s chest, punctuating each word with a poke. “You. Do. Not. Get. To. Decide. Who. I. Love. You do not get to decide how I feel, or what I decide is forgivable, or what I decide never needed to be forgiven. That’s not your fucking call.”

Keiko glared. “I love you Yuki, and so does Hizashi. You’re family, and we’ll always be here for you. So stop trying to tell us we can’t love you and just make your fucking peace with that fact that we do.”

She snorted. “Now, are you gonna come to bed or what? Because I want to share some quiet intimacy with the woman who’s helping me and my husband raise our children, and I’m really not in the mood to hear her say another word about why she’s not worth our time.”

“Oh.”

Keiko huffed. “‘Oh’, she says.” She extended her hand. “Come on.”

And Yuki took her hand.

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Chapter End Notes

Canon Terms:

- Mokuton Tree (Wood Release)
- First Hokage (Hashirama Senju)
- Madara (Uchiha Madara)

Author’s Note: As always, comments are very much welcome and absolutely make my day. For this chapter in particular though, I’d appreciate critical feedback about
anything I messed up in portraying Aunt Yuki’s situation. I ended up rewriting every scene in this chapter from scratch several times, and wrote and then scrapped a couple scenes entirely, so I kind of had to rush at the end. The chapter touches on some pretty heavy stuff though, stuff I really don’t want to do a disservice to, so if I butchered anything in my haste, please tell me so I can fix it.

Also any editing mistakes are absolutely not wecantgiggleitsacrimescene’s fault, who did an amazing job betaing what they could of this chapter in spite of how last minute and rushed the final product ended up being.

Side note: Konoha’s hospital ninjas treat paperwork and bureaucratic red-tape in much the same way its field ninjas do, as after-action reports to be filled out only after everything interesting has happened. Liability management and procedural oversight are really more of a ‘civilian hospital’ kind of thing.
Hiashi still took Hinata out for ‘training’ most mornings that he was in the village. And as much as Keiko seethed every time the bastard took their child, there was precious little she could do about it.

Konoha had bluntly clear rules regarding clan training, written into Konoha’s very founding charter as a necessary compromise to get the clans to agree to subordinate themselves to a central authority. The rules were religiously upheld given how important they’d been in Konoha’s formation, and the rules were simple. There were no rules. Konoha could not, under any circumstances, interfere with a clan’s private training. It didn’t matter if the training killed most of the children who went through it or if it scarred them for life, Konoha could not interfere. And when it came to clan heirs the lack of rules was even more stringently enforced. Hiashi, through his father’s power as clan head, could veto any decision that Konoha made regarding Hinata so long as he could argue that decision interacted with her training in any way. There was no mechanism in Konoha’s bureaucracy that Keiko could lever to pry Hinata out of Hiashi’s grasp, not even if she went to the Hokage himself.

The internal politics of the Hyuuga clan were no help either. Since the elder Yuki had moved in with Keiko and her family the elder council had cut her off. If she was going to abandon her husband to move in with a blood-traitor and his clanless wife, then she was dead to the clan so far as they were concerned. No good would come of bringing the elders into a fight between her and the clan heir.

At least Hiashi didn’t beat Hinata during their training anymore. Or rather, he didn’t use training as an thinly veiled excuse to send her back to her mother battered and bruised. That wasn’t to say the bastard was gentle with his daughter.

Instead Hiashi pushed Hinata relentlessly every morning, drilling her on basics over and over and over again until exhaustion and repetition drove her to make mistakes. Each mistake then became a reason to berate and belittle her attachment to her mother.

“Keep your speed up Hinata! Are you really getting tired already? This is just like your mother, always using any excuse to take a break the moment she gets tired.”

“You don’t have to jerk your head that far to slip a jab. Gods, you’re as jumpy as your mother. You must get that from her because you certainly don’t get it from me.”

“What do you mean you can’t kick that high? Hasn’t your mother been helping you stretch like I asked her to? I’m sorry Hinata, I should have known better than to ask your mother for help. I
thought that since she helped your cousin with that she could help her own daughter, but I suppose not.”

“Of course she can help you practice your endurance Hinata. She plays up that lung injury to get out of going back to active duty, but she could run a few laps with you if she wanted to.”

Every morning Hiashi casually tore into Hinata’s mother. He mixed derision and lies and made it absolutely utterly clear to Hinata that she was not to contradict a word he said. When at first she did, when she told him that he was wrong about her mother, those days she did come home bloody and bruised.

And there was nothing Keiko could do to help.

Hizashi helped by distracting the elder Yuki in the mornings, learning ever more complicated recipes to practice with her to keep her focus and her vision off of what Hiashi was saying to Hinata. And if sometimes neither of them could focus on their kitchen work and they both stared into the distance, clutching each other’s hands and seething with rage at what they saw being done to their precious child, that was something Hizashi could do for her as well.

Neji practiced forms and strikes with Hinata. He had a relentless simple joy in practicing martial arts that turned the overwhelming and exhausting task of meeting Hiashi’s expectations into something fun for Hinata. Unlike most children his age, he didn’t get frustrated by his own failures. Even more unusually, unlike most people of any age, he didn’t get frustrated by the failures of those he tried to help. It didn’t bother him if Hinata messed up a stance for the dozenth time, or if she forgot something they’d practiced together last week. He just liked trying, and liked seeing Hinata try with him.

Neji was just happy with all the work Hinata did beside him. It showed in his face and his posture and his attitude, and it helped. Keiko could see the tension drain out of Hinata every time she trained with Neji, could see the world of good it did her.

She saw the help her other son provided as well. It was much subtler than what Neji did for Hinata. Keiko might not have even noticed at first if her office hadn’t reassigned her to analyzing Kumo’s internal propaganda network.

Night after night, the stories Yuki told to his siblings changed. Scary monsters and epic ninja and frightened children vanished, replaced by lying counsellors who turned noble families against one another, authority figures who betrayed the trust invested in them, and young girls who fought back, who fought and fought and fought until they were broken and beaten and then got back up to fight some more. He told stories which often didn’t end, where the evil men didn’t lose and the brave young girls didn’t win, but where the story finished with ‘and then she got back up’.

One day Hinata took Hiashi’s vitriol to heart and lashed out at her mother for being slow, spitting out “you could walk faster if you only tried”. When Hinata did that and the elder Yuki cried out her helplessness that night between Keiko and Hizashi, it was their son who fixed it. Oh Keiko sent Hinata to her room when she learned what happened, and scolded a pouting, sullen Hinata up one side and down the other. But it was the younger Yuki who undid the poison Hiashi had planted in her head.

That night he told his siblings a story about fairies who could use their pouches of magic dust to do fantastic feats, amazing things that astounded and wowed the villagers who saw. He wove a tale about how the villagers asked the fairies to help them, for surely with such amazing magic they could help so much. And the fairies did. But when the next day the villagers asked for help again, the fairies were hesitant. The villagers were offended, that beings with so much power would balk
at such an easy request. So the faeries, reluctantly, helped again. And so it went, day after day, with
the faeries become ever more reluctant, but helping anyway. Until one day, one after another, they
started to die. The faeries crumbled, and withered, and died. The villagers were horrified, but there
was nothing they could do.

See, Yuki told his siblings, the faeries could do amazing things. But really, they were fragile. Their
magic dust allowed them to do those amazing things but they only had so much. And being so
fragile they needed most of that magic dust just to keep themselves alive. The villagers demanded
the faeries use that dust for them without realizing just how much energy it took for the faeries to
live, and the faeries were too good to refuse them. So eventually the faeries ran out, and they died.

The next morning a red-eyed sniffly Hinata threw herself at her mother and told her she was sorry,
over and over, that she didn’t want her mommy to walk fast just because walking slow was boring
and that her mommy should keep all of her energy that she needed to not die. She was so, so sorry
for being mean about mommy’s lung, and she didn’t want mommy to die.

If Keiko took Yuki aside and asked him to maybe tone down the stories a little bit so that Hinata
didn’t think she had murdered her mother by being rude, that didn’t mean she missed what Yuki
had accomplished. Punishing Hinata and scolding her hadn’t helped get Hiashi’s slime out of her
head, it had just put her back up against the wall. Yuki had been the one to help Hinata, by putting
her in a situation where she could realize for herself why asking too much of her disabled mother
was wrong and trusting Hinata to be good enough to act on that realization.

Yuki did that, not Keiko. Neji helped Hinata with her sparring fears, not Keiko. Hizashi stood by
the elder Yuki, not Keiko. It wasn’t like Keiko didn’t have anything to offer or that she didn’t help
where she could but … her skillset just wasn’t very useful here. She didn’t have a calming presence
like her husband, or the honest cheer that Neji did, or whatever flavor of crazy Yuki had which
inspired him to wage a positive propaganda campaign on his cousin (probably the same crazy
which inspired him to make and gush about his latest gigajoule chakra storing seal over dinner and
almost give Keiko a goddamn heart attack).

Keiko did have half a dozen heavily encrypted action plans on her desk at work which had nothing
at all to do with foreign ninja but would utterly destroy Hiashi’s social standing and political
influence forever if she used them. Not that she ever could use them considering who Hiashi would
take his frustrations out on, though it made her feel better to write them out.

But they didn’t help her sister-in-law. And that was the problem. Keiko wanted to save Hinata and
free Yuki and punish Hiashi and make everything better, but when she couldn’t … well, she spun
her wheels writing up elaborate revenge fantasies.

And that wasn’t helping.

Keiko would be the first person to admit that she was more of a solutions person than a pillar-of-
support person. She knew this, and also knew how to work around it. She’d learned the hard way
while married to Hizashi that solutions-first problem solving just made him feel alone and isolated,
that she needed to be a shoulder for him to lean on first. But when Keiko’s step one wasn’t
‘remove the problem with extreme prejudice’, it was still always her step two.

When the elder Yuki cried in their bed at night, or had only a hollow smile to offer at dinner, Keiko
could deal with that. She could offer her shoulder or take Yuki’s hand in hers. When Hinata sobbed
that she couldn’t fight, Keiko wiped tears from her cheeks and told her she was strong. But Keiko
didn’t have a step two. She didn’t know what to do the day after when ‘murder Hiashi’ was off the
table.
So Keiko worked on that.

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Hinata needed something to be proud of in her life that wasn’t related to a ninja’s craft and Hiashi’s constant denigration. So Keiko taught herself how to sew and then set up sewing nights twice a week with the kids. She gave them heaping piles of scrap cloth, balls of fluffy cotton, big blunt pre-threaded sewing needles and showed them how to sew together dolls. The ‘dolls’ were really just misshapen lumps of squish with faces drawn on them, but the children loved them and their room quickly filled with examples of their soft cuddly work. Every night Hinata went to sleep surrounded by things she’d created, things she could be proud of and draw comfort from.

On rare nights -rare to keep it special- Keiko would ask Hinata to select one of her absolute bestest squishies for the adults to sleep with. They just loved her creations so much, Keiko told her, could they please sleep with one of them tonight? And gods, it was all worth it every time she saw Hinata’s face light up and she got to see the deliberate, intense care with which she picked just the right doll she thought her parents should sleep with.

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The elder Yuki clearly had a whole pile of issues she’d been keeping at arm’s length from their family. So Keiko bonded with her. Aggressively. Once a week she took Yuki on a long meandering walk through Konoha’s parks and talked with her about life. And when conversation flagged and Yuki fell quiet, Keiko filled the space by listing off all the things Yuki did for their family and all the things she liked about her. Makes an amazing cup of coffee despite not drinking coffee, reliably draws the younger Yuki out of his own head and into conversation, is deeply empathetic towards the kids-

And then when Yuki rejected the praise by insisting on all the ways those things weren’t important or weren’t true, well, then Keiko got a peek at the depression Yuki tried to keep hidden away inside her head. And no matter how hard she had to bite her tongue, she -fuck she hated this so much- she did not vigorously correct Yuki. So far as Yuki’s mind was concerned, those inadequacies were true and real. And depression did not yield to angry arguments. If Keiko contradicted everything negative Yuki said about herself, Yuki would just feel disbelieved and then she’d stop telling Keiko about those thoughts entirely.

So Keiko very, very carefully grit her teeth, and listened to the lies Yuki believed about herself, and. Didn’t. Correct. Them. She frowned sympathetically, and told Yuki how much she loved her anyway, and. Just. Listened.

And if she made sure to compliment the elder Yuki on absolutely every positive thing she did during the rest of the week, Keiko told herself that that wasn’t her trying to ‘fix’ Yuki’s depression. That was … alright that was totally her trying to fix Yuki’s depression through compliments. Some habits die hard, especially when you don’t want them to.
When Keiko and Hizashi both found themselves run a bit ragged by taking over what they could of Aunt Yuki’s childcare duties, Keiko didn’t let that get in the way of loving her husband. Every week - every damn week, even if Keiko had to blackmail Hizashi’s shift supervisor to make it happen - the two of them went on a date and talked and laughed and caught up on the little things. They went dancing, they watched plays, they curled up in cafe nooks. Keiko listened contentedly to Hizashi’s warm words and the beautiful way he saw the world. Hizashi basked in Keiko’s passion and her drive and her fire. And both of them reminded each other why they were in love. That was important too.

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If they were going to be a family under siege, Keiko would become everything she needed to be to see them through it safe and sound.

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Chapter End Notes

Spoon theory, now repackaged as faerie dust theory for easier consumption by children. ;)

A gigajoule of energy is equivalent to several hundred pounds of chemical explosive, so about the energy of a typical aerial bomb. Not village-destroying by any means, but still way bigger than anything your typical ninja will ever work with.

This is the shortest chapter yet. The next one will be pretty short too I think, I’m trying to rebuild my chapter buffer at least enough for my beta to have time to actually edit stuff.
Chapter 28: To Kill A Ghost

Hanabi will never be born.

The night that Aunt Yuki sterilized herself, long after Neji and Hinata fell asleep beside me and long after Mom and Dad went to bed with Aunt Yuki nestled between them, I lay awake and let my vision drift through the house, thoughts churning.

I mean, on some level I’d always known Hanabi would never be born. From the moment I’d gotten involved in Aunt Yuki’s life I’d derailed the very specific series of events which would have led to the fusion of the exact sperm and egg that would have created Hanabi’s genetic code. Heck, it was up to interpretation whether or not I’d even prevented Neji and Hinata from existing. My very existence radically altered every moment of their childhoods; if someone’s environment determined even a hint of their personality then the Neji and Hinata I’d read of would simply never be. Two very different people were growing up in their places.

Actually to be honest I didn’t even know if my Hinata was genetically the same as the would-have-been Hinata. She’d been conceived after my birth after all and there were a thousand little ways my existence could have changed the exact circumstances of her conception without changing the name she was given. So maybe Hinata herself hadn’t actually been born! Wasn’t that a thought?

I’d thought about this before, ruminating on the fact that just by existing I changed things. But somehow it was different seeing Aunt Yuki come home with chakra-cauterized ovaries and realizing: Oh shit, Hanabi will never be born. Sure, earlier I’d saved Hinata from kidnapping and Dad from execution, but doing that hadn’t really driven the lesson home. I’d been thinking of my actions then as tweaking a minor event and altering the flow of the story, but the end result had still felt like part of the same story. Like I was making adjustments to the Naruto I knew, tweaking the story one scene at a time.

But that wasn’t how it actually worked, was it?

Hanabi would never be born. She had -would have- played a critical role in the political power struggle driving major decisions of one of the most influential clans in Konoha. What the fuck was that going to change? I didn’t even know what I’d done to make this happen, if there even was a single event which did it, but it was going to completely reshape Konoha’s political machinations for decades.

Gods, I’d altered how the Third Shinobi War got resolved. I’d showed Konoha how to resurrect a lost sealing art. What had those actions already changed that I didn’t know about?

Just how much could I change if I tried?
Four months later Shisui died, and I had a plan.

The whole Hyuuga compound was abuzz with the news. An Uchiha jounin, Shisui of the Body Flicker, hero of the Third Shinobi War, was dead. Murdered inside of Konoha’s walls, his Sharingan eyes torn out and stolen.

Ostensibly he’d left a suicide note saying that he’d crushed his own eyes and intended to drown himself. But within hours an autopsy showed that his eyes had been extracted intact with the use of medical chakra, so all the note did was make it clear that the murderer had been rushed and sloppily stalling for time when they tried to cover up Shisui’s death with a forged suicide note.

Which was both true and false, in a horrible sort of way. If my memories were correct, Shisui had indeed been rushed and sloppily stalling for time when he penned that note in an attempt to cover up the circumstances of his imminent death at Itachi’s hands. He was lying about his eyes being crushed (Danzo had attacked him and taken one and Shisui had given the other to Itachi for sake-keeping) and he was lying about the circumstances of his death (he’d demanded Itachi drown him personally so Itachi would gain the Mangekyo Sharingan). Almost every detail of what he wrote about the whole fucked-up affair was a lie, but he had in fact penned that suicide note. And he had wanted to die.

I tried not to think about that too much, that Shisui had reached a point where he thought he could do more good by dying than living and chosen to die. I tried not to notice the parallels between that and the hushed conversations I oversaw between Mom and Dad and Aunt Yuki late at night when they thought I was asleep.

I couldn’t have stopped his death. I barely know anything about the situation leading up to Shisui’s death, the window between his death and the massacre is the only time my foreknowledge is useful. I couldn’t have saved him.

I tried to believe that. I really did. I told myself that it wasn’t my fault. Just because I knew he was going to die and let it happen didn’t mean I was to blame.

The first time I oversaw a gossiping Hyuuga talk about his torn-out eyes I vomited anyway. I couldn’t stop imagining his last moments. What being pinned to the ground and having your eyes torn out must feel like. How it would feel to know someone could have stopped it and they didn’t.

It was a miracle I only vomited once.

I couldn’t have prevented Shisui’s death. No matter how I looked at it, his death was the only public event I could use to pin down the timeline of the Uchiha massacre and without a concrete timeline my foreknowledge was useless. There were just too many moving parts which led up to the massacre, too many unknowns. I didn’t know how long the Uchiha’s coup had been in the works, how long Itachi had known about it, when the Hokage had learned about it, when Itachi had defected to the Hokage’s side, when Shisui had gotten involved in any of this, when Danzo had gotten involved, or anything at all about what happened before Shisui’s death. Fuck, Itachi worked for at least four freaking different sides -that I knew about!- in the months(years?) leading up to the massacre.

All of my foreknowledge -and who even knew how shaky that was now- pertained to the day or two right before the massacre. That was the only window of time I had in which my intervention wouldn’t be a blind fumble in the dark. And the only way I had to know the timing of the massacre was by Shisui’s death.
So I let him die.

The next day I wrote a letter to Itachi.

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When writing a letter to a potentially-soon-to-be mass murderer filled with incriminating knowledge about the most heavily guarded secrets in the village, step one is to not let people know you wrote the letter. When you’re a small child with no autonomy living in a supernatural panopticon populated by professional spies though, that’s not an option. So I would make do with a slightly different alibi: yes I wrote that letter, but it’s not my letter.

See, passing secret messages from one person to another to obscure the true identity of the sender is a time honored tradition in the Academy’s halls. It’s a ninja thing. And a kid thing. Children who can send anonymous secret messages find all kinds of reasons to send anonymous secret messages to one another, and we literally had classes on how to do just that. So if I were to give a kid an envelope which said “give me to Tomomi Aburame” and inside that envelope was another envelope saying “give me to Sasuke Uchiha” and inside that was yet another envelope saying “give me to Itachi Uchiha”, that would be completely normal and my fellow students would cheerfully oblige me.

Of course given that this was a ninja Academy, such measures were imperfect. Many attempted letter-chains had failed because a Hyuuga looking in the right place at the right time just happened to see a student writing the letter in question or bringing it to school, or because an Inuzuka could smell and identify all the people who had handled the letter. If you’d personally written the letter, no matter how much you obscured your handwriting or encrypted the message, you could never guarantee that someone wouldn’t be able to identify you as the person who wrote it.

Which is why some of the older students used yet another layer of secrecy. The trick was to cast a low-level genjutsu on another student and use that genjutsu to ask them to write the letter for you via dictation. Tricky, but much more secure. Very few Academy-aged Hyuuga could spot the fine chakra flows making up a genjutsu without focusing their eyesight, so the odds of evading notice were much better. A particularly paranoid author could also dictate the letter in a pre-encrypted form, so that the person writing the letter wouldn’t even know its contents.

Most importantly for me, it would be almost impossible to prove that someone else didn’t ask me to write Itachi a pre-encrypted letter (the incredibly secret contents of which I certainly did not know, no sirree) via genjutsu, and perfectly reasonable for me not to know their identity. If Torture and Interrogation came knocking on my door tomorrow, I would tell them that some unknown person cast an auditory genjutsu on me and asked me to write out a letter and I was super-excited to be part of the big students’ games so of course I did it for them for them. But no I don’t know who that person was, sorry. And if everything went well there would be absolutely no reason for anyone to disbelieve me.

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This is the letter I wrote:

Itachi,

Yesterday you murdered Shisui. Today you will agree to slaughter the Uchiha clan at Danzo’s behest. And tomorrow you will do so with Madara’s help.

Do I have your attention?

Shisui wanted to find a peaceful resolution to the Uchiha clan’s nascent coup. He wanted to use his Mangekyo Sharingan’s ability -to twist people’s chakra into a self-induced permanent genjutsu- to change the Uchiha elders’ minds and end the coup without bloodshed.

Danzo attacked Shisui and stole his eye because he does not want such a peaceful resolution, just as Shisui told you when he gave you his other eye. Danzo wants to see the Uchiha clan destroyed and use the resulting power vacuum in the Uchiha-controlled Police Force to seize investigative and punitive power within Konoha, as I’m sure you already know. Of course he may also believe what he claims, that Shisui’s Mangekyo genjutsu is fallible and untested in the long-term against other mature Sharingan, and that in time the Uchiha elders might have broken free of it and re-attempted the coup.

You killed Shisui at his behest because the two of you didn’t fully understand the Mangekyo Sharingan. You believed that it always grants the same set of powers, that if you killed Shisui you would gain the power he lost when his eye was stolen. You thought you would be able to carry out Shisui’s intent and change the elder’s minds. You didn’t know that you would gain the ever-burning black fire of Amaterasu and the distorted hellscape of Tsukuyomi instead. You killed your friend for no reason and now you are alone. You don’t know what to do.

Today Danzo will tell you that there is no longer any alternative to killing the Uchiha clan. If the Uchiha rebel and win, their victory will break Konoha asunder, the other villages will sense weakness and invade and the ensuing war will consume the world. If the Uchiha rebel and lose the damage will be catastrophic, the other villages will sense weakness and invade and, again, there will be war. If word even leaks that a coup was planned it may undermine Konoha’s reputation and trigger a war. Only if the Uchiha die before their coup, Danzo will tell you, can the village be saved.

Danzo is right.

A Konoha civil war would upend the entire world. The Uchiha elders know this and your father knows this, but they’re going to go through with it anyway because they feel slighted by being merely tied for first place as the most influential clan in Konoha. Their desires are selfish and dangerous enough that if the only solution is their death, death is warranted. Furthermore, I don’t know if Danzo was right about the limitations of Shisui’s power but I suspect he was. The three-tomoe Sharingan can break free of the Mangekyo’s Tsukiyomi with enough power and skill, and I expect the same would hold true for Shisui’s Mangekyo. Even if Danzo had not maimed Shisui, I do not think Shisui’s plan would have worked.

Regardless, now that Shisui is dead the only choice you have to preserve peace is to kill your clan. You will kill the clan elders to put a stop to the coup. Then you will kill the influential figures of the clan who backed it, including your parents, to prevent it from ever being resurrected. Then you will kill the rank and file ninja who went along with it to prevent the secret of the coup from leaking. Then you will kill all the Academy children who might have been old enough to be in on
the secret. You will only leave the children too young to possibly know alive.

And then the man who calls himself Madara will kill them.

You will meet him tomorrow. He will be ghosting around Konoha using a Mangekyo-based dematerialization technique to make himself incorporeal and invisible (full details listed in Appendix A). With your new Mangekyo you will be the only person who can see him. You will approach him and talk to him. He will tell you that he is Madara Uchiha, Konoha’s disgraced founding father, who has gained immortality and so still lives. He will tell you that he disapproves of the Uchiha clan’s reckless plot and offer to assist you in nipping it in the bud. He is lying.

His true name is Obito Uchiha, the same Obito who ‘died’ destroying a critical supply bridge at the end of the Second Shinobi War. He calls himself Tobi now, when he’s not pretending to be Madara. His survival is a long story, but the short of it is that Obito didn’t die immediately when he fell in battle, he was rescued by the actual -aging and almost dead- Uchiha Madara who wanted to manipulate him and use him for an eventual resurrection plan (see Appendix B) and world domination (see Appendix C). Obito achieved use of the Mangekyo Sharingan during the capture and death of his teammate Rin at a later date, which gives him the ability to discorporate and teleport arbitrary distances. He has staved off Mangekyo-induced eye degradation through unknown means (not the standard sibling eye-theft).

The actual Madara has since died but Obito is continuing to carry out his orders (in his own insane way), which include destroying the Uchiha clan in its entirety to prevent any of them from using the Sharingan’s Bijuu controlling abilities to interfere with Madara’s world domination plan (see Appendix C). Obito first attempted this by dominating the Kyuubi and teleporting it into the Uchiha compound (see above: Obito is insane). His next attempt will involve pairing up with you and straightforwardly murdering as many Uchiha as possible. With your assistance, he will succeed.

However, unlike you who have no reason to kill the youngest Uchiha children, Obito’s goal is genocidal extermination of the Sharingan. He will kill the children. He will leave Sasuke alive, as you have the potential to become a useful tool to him (see Appendix C) and he wants you to take Sasuke’s future Mangekyo eyes to stave off Mangekyo-induced blindness. But he will slaughter the other children. And then attempt to resurrect Madara (see Appendix B) conquer the world (see Appendix C) and in the process accidentally unleash a vengeful god who will kill the world (see Appendix D).

I hope that by this point I have demonstrated enough knowledge that you will take my warning seriously. So I tell you this with the utmost seriousness, with full knowledge of what the future holds.

You need to kill Obito. His continued existence imperils us all.

P.S. Danzo is going to steal your family’s eyes and implant dozens of them in his arm to gain power, which will then eat away at his sanity. Do not let him do that. Destroy the corpses’ eyes. I can only imagine how difficult it will be to desecrate your family’s bodies after they are dead, this is already more than anyone could be asked to endure. But you cannot leave their eyes behind intact.

P.P.S. Given the chance you should also try to kill Black Zetsu (see Appendix D). He may or may
not be immortal, but I implore you to do your best. So long as he continues to operate I fear even Obito’s death will be a mere setback to Kaguya’s return.

P.P.P.S. Do not torture Sasuke with the Tsukiyomi. It will not end how you hope it will, and it will push Sasuke down a path even darker than your own.

Appendix A: Obito’s Powers

Appendix B: Madara and Pein

Appendix C: Akatsuki and the Moon’s Eye Plan

Appendix D: Kaguya and Black Zetsu

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I couldn’t have saved Shisui. I had to let him die. Maybe if I tried hard enough, long enough, one day I’d convince myself of that. But honestly, it didn’t matter if I made peace with that one death. Because gods forgive me, the plan was never to save anyone. The plan was never to stop the Uchiha clan massacre, to spare Sasuke, or even to spare Itachi.

The plan was to kill Obito.

Chapter End Notes

Comments feed me and give me life. They water my chapters and help them grow and are honestly the biggest help you can give me as a writer.
Chapter Notes


See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 29: Send For A Crow

A voice stirred me from my sleep. “Wake up.”

“Nn?” I grumbled and shunted the barest sliver of chakra into my eyes so I could- Itachi stood beside my bed. Instantly I was awake. I jerked upright in a panic. My heart pounded a million miles an hour and my breath shuddered erratically through my lungs. Oh gods no- please don’t- how did he- Terrified thoughts skittered across the surface of my brain too fast for me to hold onto them.

The clan-killer stood at the edge of my bed, looking down at me with eyes already burning with the extra chakra vessels of an activated Sharingan. He wore a featureless blank ANBU mask moulded to his face and from behind it he stared impassively at me and- Neji! Hinata! I threw one arm out behind me to touch them even as I tore my focus from Itachi to look at them. They were alive. Chests rising and falling with gentle breaths, hearts beating, brains humming with the flicker of chakra. They’re not dead. He didn’t kill them. They’re not dead. They’re not dead.

I focused back on the silent figure. He hadn’t made a sound since he’d woken me up. Why is he here? How is he here? Why aren’t there Hyuuga guards swarming this house right now? Even Itachi can’t hide from the Byakugan.

A moment later the obvious conclusion came to me. No one is reacting to Itachi’s break-in because they’re all dead. He’s killed the Hyuuga clan instead of the Uchiha clan and now he’s going to kill us we’re all going to die we’re all going to die- No. No, that couldn’t be right. I was just panicking. There wasn’t any reason for Itachi to kill the Hyuuga.

I poured chakra into my eyes anyway, raw terror pushing me to squeeze in more chakra than I ever had before. Needles of pain lanced into the back of my eye sockets but I pushed anyway, until the edge of my vision extended out to almost forty meters. Our parents were alive and breathing. Our neighbors too. Out in the fuzzy blur of light beyond the edges of my vision I thought I might be able to make out the distant glows of the compound guards’ fully powered Byakugans. Itachi hadn’t killed them all. Probably.

Yet.

But if they weren’t dead- how is he here?!

He still hadn’t moved. His heart beat remained slow and steady as he stared down at me, as if this meant nothing to him. Like breaking into one of the most secure compounds in the entire world to show up at the foot of a child’s bed while wearing an assassin’s mask was just another day’s work.
I forced myself to take deep breaths, to push air into my lungs that my shallow panicked breathing didn’t want to give me. **What does he want?**

Finally -finally!- he spoke again. “Meet me downstairs when you can control yourself. We will not be disturbed.” He turned and walked out of the room. I watched him turn down the hallway, walk down the stairs, take a left into the kitchen, and- and started making a pot of tea.

I laughed, a thin hysterical sound with a high edge. I couldn’t help it. Itachi was in our kitchen. Making tea! And he might just kill us all because I’d provoked him. I clasped my hands to my mouth and struggled futilely to stop laughing. Tears streamed down my cheeks and over my hands. Itachi could kill us all and here he was making fucking tea in our kitchen!

I lost control over my breathing. The deep breaths I kept trying to force through my lungs stuttered into too-shallow gasps. My vision twisted and blurred. I couldn’t get enough air. I was suffocating!

Every moment stretched endlessly into the next as I tried to breathe. I needed air! I pulled it in with jittery too-quick breaths only to push it back out before it could fill my lungs. My pulse pounded in my ears. I needed. To. Breathe. One-two-three-four-five-, too many breaths. One-two-three-four-five-, one-two-three-four-five-, one-two-three-four-five-, one-two-three-four-five-, one-two-three-four-five-, one-two-three-four-five-

Fweeeeeeep!!!

The piercing shriek of the teapot split the night. I gasped and air flooded into my lungs, the shock of it jerking me out of my panic. I breathed in and out without choking on my own air. I … I needed to move. I did not want Itachi to come looking for me.

I levered myself up out of sweat-drenched sheets and crawled over Neji to get out of bed. He and Hinata were still asleep. The teapot’s whistle hadn’t woken them. My panic hadn’t woken them. No one moved in the house except for Itachi. **He did say we wouldn’t be disturbed.** I swallowed.

I stepped over to our closet and pulled my nightgown off with trembling hands. It was soaked completely through with sweat. I could smell the terror in it. I swallowed again, hard, and pulled on a robe. Then I stepped back over to our bed and looked over my brother. Over my sister, because that’s what Hinata was to me, regardless of the specifics of blood and inheritance. This might be the last time I saw either of them. I leaned over Neji and kissed his forehead with as much force as I could, then leaned past him to kiss Hinata as well.

“I love you,” I whispered.

I crept into my parents’ room next. I probably didn’t have to actually creep around, whatever Itachi had done to keep everyone asleep would likely hold no matter what I did. I still opened their door as softly as I could anyway. I shuddered. All of this already felt just barely real, like I could lose my grip on reality at any moment. Or like I’d suddenly realize this really was real and lose it. Clomping around even though everyone was asleep felt like it might just be the last step over the edge.

Mom and Dad were nestled together on the side of the bed closest to me, facing each other with their hands resting on top of one another’s. Aunt Yuki lay on the other half of the bed, with her back pressed against Dad’s back. I wanted to leap onto their bed, to hug them and curl up in their arms. I wanted to hear that everything would be alright.

But I didn’t. They were ninja, all three of them, and they slept on a hair trigger. If I hugged them or kissed them and they didn’t wake up … I couldn’t tolerate the thought. They wouldn’t be **them** if I
touched them and they didn’t snap awake.


I slipped out of their room and paused a moment in the hallway, taking a few more not quite steady breaths before I walked downstairs. I thought of how Hinata was scared of going down stairs as I did. Maybe I’d be scared of going down stairs too after this. Heh. It’s true what they say. You really do think of the oddest things when you might be about to die.

Itachi sat at the dining room table with a pot of tea and two empty cups. He was seated so that he faced the stairway and he watched me approach the table with expressionless eyes. “Take a seat,” he told me. I did as he commanded and took the seat directly across from him, folding trembling hands on the table. I watched as he lifted the teapot and very precisely filled the cups, the smell of Aunt Yuki’s green tea blend seeping into the room.

As he did I took a risk. “Um, sir?” I asked with a quiver in my voice that I didn’t have to force. “Why are you here? Is- is this about the letter I wrote? I- I read the names on the envelopes, I know it was being sent to an Uchiha. Oh! I, uh, you don’t know. I didn’t write it. Well I did but it wasn’t my letter, someone asked me to write it with a genjutsu-”

Itachi interrupted me with a flat voice devoid of affect, “The Sharingan can see lies.”

My blood ran cold. Oh. Oh gods.

He continued. “The Sharingan reads the intent of one’s chakra. Recognizing lies is one of the publicly known uses of this power. Another publicly known use is document analysis. The Sharingan can see an author’s intent through the chakra echoes they leave in their writing. A Sharingan user can confirm if an author knows the true contents of an encrypted message they have written, if they believe what they have written, and if the words they have written are their original thoughts. This is common knowledge.”

Itachi pushed the second cup of tea across the table. He reached out and took one of my shaking hands in his, folding it around the warm cup. Mentally I drew back from Itachi’s touch, trying not to process it. “Drink,” he told me. I did. If he was going to drug me the compound would already be in my system, I reasoned. The masked assassin continued once I was done drinking. He tilted his head very slightly and stated, “You did not know this.”

I shook my head jerkily. “N-no.”

“You knew about the Mangekyo Sharingan though.”

I twitched my head in a nod and swallowed heavily, the action pushing a pair of tears out of my eyes.

“How?”

I folded both hands around Aunt Yuki’s tea and drank deeply, until I could feel the warmth in my belly. I set the cup down and kept my trembling hands clenched around it, so tightly I could see the circulation being cut off in my fingers. I didn’t say a word.

Itachi tilted his head the other way, very slightly. He stared at me in silence.

I closed my eyes. I could still see him. I breathed deep. I was still terrified. I spoke anyway. “I’m not-” I mumbled. I stopped, started again, “I’m not going to tell you.”
He didn’t speak. He just stared.

I raised the tea to my lips again with trembling hands, this time spilling a generous portion down my front. I finished what was left and set the cup back down.

Itachi reached out and plucked the cup from my hands. He refilled it and handed it back to me.

“I won’t tell you,” I repeated. I didn’t know what Itachi would do with all my foreknowledge. Itachi was still loyal to the Hokage too, and I didn’t know what the Hokage might do either. Gods forbid, the Hokage could tell Danzo. I knew what Danzo would do with it.

He looked at me for a long moment before asking, “Will someone hurt you if you tell me? Or hurt your family?”

I pushed my tongue into the side of my mouth and bit down. I couldn’t give him anything. He couldn’t know.

He narrowed his eyes. “No. That’s not it.” He tilted his head again, like a crow eyeing something interesting. His Sharingan eyes burned. “You know about the Mangekyo,” he said, “and the Uchiha coup. You know about gods and the Rinnegan. Is that all you know?”

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Hn.” For the first time since I’d sat down, his eyes left me. He looked off into empty space, at the stairwell behind me and he sipped his tea. His lips furrowed in thought and frown lines creased his face.

Oh gods no please tell me the Sharingan can’t- No. No, no. He’s not reading my mind. The Sharingan can’t read minds. Only the Yamanaka can do that. He can’t be reading my mind. He’s-

What? What was he doing? Using the Sharingan to cold-read me? If he could see lies by how my chakra carried intent then he could probably read yes/no answers off of me just as easily. And that wasn’t much better. If he could just play twenty questions with my mind-

Itachi turned his gaze back on me and said flatly, “Did anyone tell you this information?”

“Does anyone else know what you know?”

“Are you afraid of what others might do with your knowledge?”

“Are you afraid of others knowing about the means you used to come by this knowledge?”

“Because you could be punished?”

“Hn. Because you are afraid others would think differently of you?”

Itachi paused. He moved, making the first unnecessary action I’d seen from him yet. He raised his hand and touched his mask just beneath his left eye. He hesitated a moment before asking his next question, for the space of a breath. “Could any other Hyuuga see what you’ve seen?”

And then the question I’d been afraid of, “Can you see the future? No, I would not be here if … other's futures? Not your own?”

No! No, gods no please no!

“Do you know Sasuke’s future?”
No, no, no!

“Hn.” He looked up at the ceiling. “It shouldn't surprise me that the Tenseigan Byakugan is more than a myth.”

Wait, what?

“I wasn't aware seeing the future was a gift it granted. But then,” for the first time emotion crept into his voice, a deep and terrible bitterness, “what do I know of the higher dojutsus?”

Wait, does he think I'm some kind of super-Byakugan Hyuuga oracle?

He turned his gaze back down to me. The flat emptiness returned to his voice and he told me, “I was going to kill you today.”

I froze.

“No one should know what you know. But if you truly can see the future, then I have a use for you.” He rose from the table, pushing his chair back. He wasn't a tall man, still barely an adult really, not fully grown and not going end up too tall either. But he loomed over me nonetheless and I pressed myself back into my chair as far as I could.

His voice became ash and soot and ruined things and I saw the mask beneath his mask break, and grief and rage came pouring out. “If you saw Shisui die, if you watched and foresaw his death and did nothing,” his voice cracked on that word, “then you should know what happened after. You should know what happened to his eye.” He lashed out faster than I could flinch and grabbed me by the chin, ignoring my panicked thrashing struggles. His fingers jabbed into my face, digging painfully into the soft flesh over my jaw. “If you have seen what would have come to pass, then you should know that even without its partner the Kotoamatsukami Mangekyo still has power.”

His last word pulsed through the room and for a moment the world became a blur as Itachi’s chakra washed through me like a cresting wave and wiped out everything else I could see. When my vision returned a crow sat on Itachi’s shoulder. It stared at me with one lone eye and its eye—

Its eye shone bright with the intricate twisted webs of the Sharingan, but also more. Those tangled patterns of the Sharingan formed a fractal within its eye, repeated endlessly in on itself, down and down and down, vanishing into gossamer repetitions of itself too faint for me to see. Where the patterns of the Sharingan ended this continued, forever into eternity. And those repeated patterns, they reflected the eye’s chakra back in on itself. What shone out of the eye wasn’t the incandescent glare that blazed out from active chakra vessels, it was something reflected from itself, smooth and soft. It was—

Moonlight.

Oh. I hadn’t expected the Mangekyo to be beautiful.

And then the moment of beauty ended, as Itachi exerted his will and the thrum of power which had run through me tightened. He seized me in a web of chakra and extended his grasp through the crow’s Mangekyo eye and—

-red-

-black-

Colors flashed through my mind: shifting red cutouts of shapes, impossibly thin, set against a black
wall too impossibly far away to make sense. I couldn’t understand it. Distantly I was aware of my head thumping against the table. My body had collapsed. I couldn’t use my muscles, they didn’t make sense. Nothing made sense. This new- this old- this alien sensation of color was too much. I didn’t know how my senses worked in a world with-

-red-

-black-

“Listen,” Itachi Spoke, “for this will be true for the rest of your life.”

I couldn’t hear words. Even the steady pounding of my blood in my ears was barely comprehensible static to my too-full mind. But I didn’t need to hear him to understand. All the way down in my soul I knew his intent. Somewhere in the endless reflections of the Kotoamatsukami his will and my will ceased to be a meaningful distinction and there was only the truth that he would always -I would always- do everything he could -everything I could- to his last breath -my last breath- to

“Protect Sasuke.”

His command slammed into my mind as if it were the will of the gods, until I couldn’t bear its weight and I blessedly knew no more.

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On a low hill overlooking the Uchiha compound, Itachi opened his eyes. He withdrew from his illusion, severing the connection he had forged through a crow perched atop the Hyuuga child’s roof some ten kilometers away. A moment later the crow dissolved into smoke and shadows, which was all it had ever been. The child slumped limp in a bed soaked with sweat, freed from a dream that had been more than a dream.

Itachi filled his lungs and raised himself from his sitting position.

An impatient voice filled his ears. “Ah, finally! Was your ‘errand’ successful Itachi?”

Itachi barely bothered to flicker his gaze over to the tall thin man standing beside him. He knew the other Sharingan user would catch the motion, even with only one eye.

“Well, it doesn’t matter either way. We have a clan to kill and no more time to waste.”

“‘Waste’ is the right fucking word. Who cares how some Hyuuga brat learned about this? They didn’t tell the goddamn Uchiha and it’s too fucking late for them to change their mind about that now.” The gravely distorted voice came from a pitch-black humanoid figure on the other side of Obito, the creature called Black Zetsu.

“Zetsu’s right about it being late. We’re behind schedule. Itachi, if you will accept a ride from my companion, he will deliver you to the compound without any further delays.”

*Itachi responded with barely concealed derision, declining to touch the creature. Obito-Tobi-Madara chided Itachi for his inefficiency and gave assurances that Zetsu would do him no harm, out of mutual interest if nothing else.*
Itachi took Zetsu's hand and they slid into the ground, merging with the earth and flying through it towards the compound at the speed of chakra. A moment later Tobi (as he thought of himself) whirled through the space between spaces and appeared atop the Uchiha Military Police Headquarters, ready to do his half of the bloody work ahead. The low hill overlooking the Uchiha compound stood empty.

Itachi stood atop the low hill overlooking the Uchiha compound. He stepped around to stand behind the motionless forms of Obito and Black Zetsu.

How arrogant Obito had been, to never ask Itachi how he intended to kill their entire clan. To never wonder if perhaps the method by which Itachi intended to kill hundreds of Sharingan users might also work against him. How arrogant of Obito and Zetsu both, to trust in Obito’s mastery of the Sharingan to sense betrayal rather than ward their minds against Itachi’s illusions. As if anything in this world was infallible. There were things in this world that even the Sharingan could not see, Itachi’s crows had taught him that.

The Sharingan could see the intent carried by the arcane chakra that flowed through living things because it itself was filled with arcane chakra. It could see the divine energies Yin and Yang, and the five elements, Earth, Water, Fire, Wind, and Lightning because arcane chakra could be split and separated along those categories. It could see -faintly- the natural chakra of the world, because traces of natural chakra bound themselves to all living things possessed of will, including the eyes of Sharingan users.

But there were exotic forms of chakra that humans did not naturally possess, to which the Sharingan was blind. Techniques formed of these chakras the Sharingan could not see and could not copy. The Uchiha knew this. How could they not? The Nara clan of Konoha used one such chakra, Shadow Chakra, as the basis of all their techniques.

How many times had Itachi listened to the clan elders groan and mutter about the Nara’s dark chakra? How many secret illusory meetings had he been part of where they discussed strategies with which they would combat the Nara’s techniques? How many times had Itachi sat and wondered why they never thought to learn such powers for themselves?

The Nara broke their shadow chakra into its yin and yang components. They used its yang component to forge a link with a physical, turning the touch of shadows into something real. They did not bother training with the use of shadow’s yin. It did not do anything special that ordinary arcane yin did not. True, the illusions one could craft with it were a little harder to detect with one’s chakra senses, but the improvement was marginal and not worth the effort, or so thought the Nara. The only true use of shadow’s yin would be to weave illusions the Sharingan and the Byakugan couldn’t see and what Nara would want to do that?

Learning to manifest shadow chakra had not been easy. But the crows with whom Itachi forged a summoning contract were old masters of the shadows, and eager to share their knowledge with a dedicated student. So now Itachi stood behind Obito and Black Zetsu, the Sharingan master and his creature wrapped in illusions crafted from threads of shadow and completely unaware of the true world around them.

Itachi frowned. It was fitting that Obito should die because of the same sin for which the rest of the Uchiha clan would die: arrogance.

Itachi reached out with his left hand to grab Obito’s face from behind. Then, with a sharp thrust from his right hand, he drove a kunai into the base of Obito’s skull. The metal grated between the bone of Obito’s skull and his spine and squelched into the gray matter of his brain. Itachi pulled the kunai out and carried the body to the ground, lowering it slowly and softly as if he were silently
disposing of a guard. Once the body settled on the ground he flipped it over and removed its mask, so he could gouge out its eye and destroy its Sharingan.

The killer turned to look at the still motionless Black Zetsu. He frowned. He hadn’t wanted to use his Mangekyo so early in the night, at all if possible. But if the Hyuuga child truly could see other’s futures…

The dark flames of Amaterasu consumed the creature, as they did all things under the sun.

Itachi took his time to rest his bleeding right eye after using that technique. After all, Obito had been wrong. There was no rush to kill the clan. Over the last two days Itachi had embedded shadow genjutsu in the minds of every Uchiha in Konoha, and every potentially prying Hyuuga too for good measure. None of them would be able to see him tonight. None of them would notice any bodies, or blood, or missing persons.

Tonight Itachi would walk through the Uchiha compound and through the Uchiha Military Police Headquarters. He would kill them one by one without rushing, taking his time to be thorough and eradicate their threat to Konoha, root, trunk, and stem. He could afford to. The Uchiha wouldn’t see him even as they died, would mount no resistance.

Absently Itachi noticed he had been plunging his kunai repeatedly into Obito’s eye socket. He stopped. That was not a good sign. Maybe he actually didn’t have time to waste. If his emotional state was already so compromised that he was acting erratically, he was running the risk of a breakdown during the mission.

With a sigh Itachi stood and frowned. It was going to be a long night.

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Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Okay, I swear after this we’re having a nice long stretch of ordinary life before any more dark stuff. Fucking hells, do I ever need a break from this stuff.

Itachi’s policy is: When someone gives you a gift horse first check it for traps and deceit, then abrogate its free will and weaponize it.

Lastly, let’s all give our resident beta wecantgiggleitsacrimescene a big round of applause. They helped out fantastically with this chapter and really went above and beyond with detailed comments and editing.
Living, Part 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 30: Living, Part 1

Life moved on after Itachi slew his clan and I did my best to move on with it. Sure, I didn’t sleep so well any more. If I’d been a perpetually sleepy kid before, now I was a walking zombie. I even lost a centimeter on Neji when we hit our growth spurts, I was missing so much sleep. But I was in good company there. Hinata and Aunt Yuki didn’t exactly sleep well either and even Dad had nightmares which jolted him awake some nights. They got it, even if I couldn’t tell them the specifics of why.

I’d gotten what I’d paid for though. Obito was dead, I knew that for certain. Heck, all of Konoha knew Obito Uchiha was dead. When the unaccounted-for Uchiha corpse on a nearby hilltop was finally identified as the long-assumed martyr of the Second Shinobi War the village had exploded with speculation. The unquenchable black fire which hung in the air next to his corpse for a week afterward only amplified the rumors. Privately I hoped that Amaterasu’s flames meant what I thought they did and Itachi had managed to kill Black Zetsu as well, but I never did confirm that for sure.

Itachi also killed every single member of the clan but for his brother, even the infants. With Obito dead I couldn’t imagine any reason for Itachi to do that but it happened nonetheless. There were persistent rumors that some Uchiha out on distant assignments had survived Itachi’s culling and were now hidden away where Itachi couldn’t find them. Maybe that was true, maybe without Obito and Black Zetsu’s teleportation techniques Itachi hadn’t been able to get to them faster than they could be warned. I never learned the truth behind that either.

So far I hadn’t felt any unusual urges to protect Sasuke. Whether that was because I hadn’t had anything to protect Sasuke from yet or because I couldn’t recognize any such urges as unusual, who could say?

I tried not to spend time thinking about those things. I tended to wake paralyzed by fear in the middle of the night when I thought too much about Itachi these days. I just had to hope that my intervention had stayed Kaguya’s hand and bought us all a future.

All I could do now was to live the life I’d paid for.

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(11 years)

“Ow,” I complained, “fuck you Neji.”
Neji stood over me, smiling broadly and breathing heavily. He extended his left hand down to lift me up. “Think you can finish the round?”

I lay flat on my back on the training field’s grass, panting. “No. No definitely not. Neji that was overkill. My whole leg is pins and needles.”

“Think about it like this Yuki,” he responded, “it’s a compliment. It means you’re good enough at shielding against chakra spikes that I can’t pull my punches.”

“Uhuh. Yeah, fuck you. Go fight Hinata.”

Neji turned his brilliant smile on our sister. “You ready to go Hinata?”

Hinata moaned from where she lay flat on the ground too. “Yukiiiiii,” she whined, “you couldn’t have lasted one more minute?” Despite her whining she kipped up to her feet and raised her open hands in front of her face. “He hit me in my leg too and I finished our fight.”

“Screw you too Hinata, he scrambled my goddamn peroneal nerve, I know you saw that.” I addressed Neji, “That was a pretty good hit though. You’re getting better at targeting nerves.”

“Aw, thanks Yuki.” Neji turned to face Hinata head on, settling into mirror of Hinata’s stance. He was still breathing hard as he said, “Alright, let’s … go!”

Neji lunged towards Hinata, moving diagonally to keep off her center striking line and ducking his head sideways and down just enough to slip the jab she tried to use to stop his momentum. A moment later he reversed his duck, throwing his shoulders around the other way to propel a strike of his own straight at her face.

Hinata swept his hand aside with a wrist glowing bright with a sheen of chakra and followed through on the motion to throw out her own counter but- I winced. She’d forgotten to shift her weight on her legs and her counter lacked spring. That was more than enough of an opening for Neji. He batted Hinata’s strike aside easily and flowed into a combo of blows that drove her back. Once she was on the back foot Hinata’s form degraded noticeably. Her counters became sloppy and shy and she jerked into a nervous block with every feint Neji threw. Which was expected. That was one of the big things we were trying to fix with Hinata’s fighting, albeit with limited success so far. Even so though, Hinata did a good job fending Neji off. He was tired after fighting us one after the other and he was starting to hit his limit. He didn’t have the energy to shut Hinata down when she finally started pushing back.

She still didn’t win though. Eventually she threw a palm strike that was far too hesitant and Neji grabbed her wrist. Hinata sheathed her wrist with chakra as soon as he touched her but that didn’t stop him from yanking her towards him and slamming a palm strike of his own -with a chakra pulse behind it- into her solar plexus.

“Glrck,” she coughed, crumpling into a ball on her side.

“Oh! You okay?” Neji asked. He and I could both see her lungs, we both knew she’d be just fine. But it was the principle of the thing. Even though he wasn’t concerned that he’d really hurt her, Neji still wanted her to know that he cared.

“Ow,” she gasped, “fuck you Neji.”

Neji grinned, chest heaving from the exertion of their fight. “That’s fair. You think you can-”
“G’fight Yuki.”

“Also fair.” Neji threw her a sloppy sign, good fight, and turned to face me. “You heard her Yuki, on your feet.”

“How about -and hear me out on this- I don’t? The grass is pretty comfy. I like it here.”

“C’mon Yuki get u-”

I interrupted him mid-sentence by whipping a training kunai out of my sleeve and hurling it at his face. He barely blocked in time, jerking his head back and slapping the kunai out of the air with a backhand and a messy burst of chakra. I slapped my left hand and my right leg on the ground and rolled upright, swinging my left leg beneath and behind me and pushing off the ground towards Neji. I threw a second training kunai as I did, just for good measure.

Neji blocked that kunai too and shifted into a defensive stance to meet my charge. But he was on the defensive and at the end of his rope and that’s a bad combination for any fighter. He didn’t have it in him to initiate a proper chain of counters. I threw blow after blow, backing each one with a chakra strike that forced him to burn energy sheathing his hands with chakra. Finally he blocked a knife hand aimed for his throat and I saw his chakra sheathing flicker. The moment I saw that I brought my front leg up to kick him flat in the stomach, leaned back, and pushed.

Slowed by fatigue, Neji didn’t bring his elbows down to block in time and I planted the ball of my foot in his abdomen. He still managed to reinforce his stomach with chakra and that would have saved him if I’d been using a Gentle Fist strike and just lightly touching him to conduct my chakra into his body. But I wasn’t. Neji was fond of mixing Konoha Standard and Gentle Fist and I’d picked up a thing or two from him. When I kicked him I actually kicked him. The impact of it doubled him over and disrupted his fragile chakra reinforcement. Then I pumped a diffuse wash of my chakra through his internal organs.

Neji hit the ground with a fwump and I cheered weakly. “Woo! Finally!” Then I put my hands on my knees and took a deep breath. “Oh dear gods I’m wiped, why the hell did I go so hard?”

Neji moaned. “What, no concern for your dear brother?”

“Hah. No, absolutely not. That was barely a ripple of chakra. Besides, you’ve kept us out here for forever. You burned up any familial goodwill about half an hour ago.”

Hinata clapped lightly from where she still lay on the ground. “Ya-ay. Great. Can we go home now? I’m hungry and Mom is making bao. And Uncle bought that really nice green tea-” I suppressed a spike in my heart rate and a flash of thoughts-red--black-, “at the market that Mom likes and I want some.”

Neji levered himself to his feet and pleaded, “Aw c’mon you two. Just a few more rounds. Hinata we’re so close to fixing your balance issue! And Yuki, you promised you’d work with me on that leg hook feint Instructor Tamie showed me.”

I shook my head. “Neji, Hinata’s right. We’re tired, we’re hungry, and this kinda stopped being fun for us a while back. You may not get frustrated when you keep making mistakes but we do, and we’re done. We can always practice some more tomorrow.”

Hinata limply raised an arm and pointed a finger in the air. “What he said.” She let her arm flop back down and made grabby motions at me with her fingers.
I walked over to Hinata and helped her up. She made a melodramatic fuss out of it, groaning loudly as I lifted her up and then collapsing against me and insisting I support her. I wrinkled my nose a bit as she did. The smell of her barely dried sweat clung to the inside of my nostrils. *Dang it, Mom is definitely going to make us take showers before we get to eat Auntie’s bao.*

I gave Hinata my arm and supported her weight anyway though. I wasn’t going to let a little workout stink get in the way of spoiling my baby sister.

Just as we started to walk off the training field, Neji interrupted us. “Wait,” he said, “wait.”

Something in his tone of voice made me pause and stop. I turned my head so that he’d know I was paying attention to him and Hinata did the same.

“Look,” he started, “I know I’m a better fighter than you two.”

I gave him a flat look that said: *We stopped for this?* Next to me Hinata gave him a considerably less restrained look.

“I know that makes it hard to train with me sometimes. I learn fast and it’s no fun being left behind. Like how practicing math with Yuki sucks.”

Neji was right about that. He did learn faster than us. Learning to fight involves mastering dozens of moving parts, and keeping all those different pieces straight at once is hard. Remember to shift your weight and forget to keep your head moving, throw a kick just right and forget to keep your off-hand up protecting your face. Or at least, that’s how it worked for Hinata and I. Neji didn’t seem to have that problem. If you pointed out a problem he was having he just worked on it without forgetting any of the dozen other subtleties he was also working on. It was incredibly unfair.

As I mused on that I noticed Hinata nodding along with Neji’s last statement. “Hey!” I objected, “I revisit old topics with you two! I am not a bad math tutor!”

“Yuki you’re as bad as Akito,” she informed me.

Neji kept talking, “So yeah, I know that. But…” he struggled for words. “But if I just keep getting better eventually I won’t be able to spar with you anymore. And I really like practicing with you two. It wouldn’t be the same with anyone else. I want you to get better with me so that doesn’t happen.”

I turned my head slightly towards Hinata. She looked back at me. She sighed, but nodded.

“Alright Neji,” I replied, “we’ll train another half hour, okay? Then we go home and eat.”

Neji smiled again, bright and brilliant.

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“He’s just like a cat.”

I woke up without opening my eyes, coming awake suddenly and instantly as I heard a someone speak over my head. My heart beat a tattoo inside my chest even as I remained perfectly still.
“Oh dear, we woke him.” Aunt Yuki smiled apologetically down at me from above. “Hey little Yuki. Sorry for startling you.”

I took a moment to orientate myself. I was lying across Aunt Yuki’s lap. We were on the couch. She was holding a book in her right hand and resting it on my back. (I saw her left hand laid flat on the couch and I itched). I had fallen asleep while we read together. Mom had just sat down on the arm of the couch next to my head.

Once I’d pulled together a picture of my situation I made myself smile. I smirked and asked Mom, “How exactly am I like a cat?”

“Aside from the fact that you’re as flexible as one and as prone to sleeping in odd places?”

“Yes, aside from the obvious.” I gave her my best Cheshire cat grin. Aunt Yuki snorted and poked me in the ribs with her book-holding hand. (I rolled the fingers of my left hand to offset that).

Mom rolled her eyes. “Well, I saw you lying on your Auntie’s lap and she looked kind of trapped, like she wanted to get up but would rather sit there forever than wake you. Just like someone with a cat on their lap that’s too cute to wake up.”

I glanced inside Auntie and ... yup. “Auntie if you need to go to the restroom I can get off you.” I phrased the statement like a question, asking if she wanted me to move.

She set her book down instantly and breathed a sigh of relief. “Woo. Yes, absolutely. Let me up Yuki, c’mon.” She waved her hands at me until I rolled upright and then -taking a deep breath so she wouldn’t faint- stood up quickly and darted off to the restroom.

Mom laughed out loud and I called after her, “You really couldn’t just wake me up?”

“No!” she shouted back, “your mom is right! You’re just like a cat!”

Mom laughed even harder and I turned to give her a mildly suspicious glare. “Somehow it feels like you’ve stopped laughing at Aunt Yuki and now you’re laughing at me.”

Mom pulled me closer with an arm around my shoulders and kissed the top of my head. “Just a little bit, and only because you’re so cute.”

I mock frowned at her, “I’m not cute. I’m fierce.”

I studiously ignored the cooing noises and the snuggly hugs which happened after that because I was, of course, fierce and not cute. I still enjoyed them though. I was a preteen, not dead inside.

By the time Aunt Yuki got back from the restroom my heart had stopped racing, and my smile wasn’t something I had to plaster on my face. If I felt an empty tingle in my fingers and toes, as if what I felt through them wasn’t quite real, it didn’t creep out into the rest of me. I still felt like I was here, not someplace else where I didn’t have to feel the panic of being woken up.

I laid back down in my Auntie’s lap and curled up into a ball, eyes already drifting shut again.

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“Mmm,” I hummed. “Okay, scratchies on the left side? Harder, please. Oh, that’s great. Thanks
Mimi."

"'Course," Miyuki said. With her right hand she ran a stiff brush through my hair and with her left hand she dug her nails into my scarred scalp hard enough that I could feel it with my intact nerves beneath the melted skin. I was laying back against Sho, her dad’s wolf, halfway dozing in the afternoon sun. Miyuki had draped herself across Sho from the other side, leaning over him so she could play with my hair.

Ostensibly Miyuki was grooming away a bad case of bed head with that brush of hers, but she was spending just as much time running her hands through my hair with her eyes drooping shut, all blissed out. Hyuuga hair was like catnip to her. Our clan had won the genetic lottery there, we were all naturally blessed with heavy thick hair as soft as silk and Miyuki couldn’t keep her hands out of it. Well, she could. Her dad Bunta had worked with her really hard to get her to respect other’s physical boundaries. But she didn’t have to when it came to our family’s hair. We were all more than willing to indulge Miyuki’s soft-things obsession and she was very careful with us in return. Actually aside from my dad, Miyuki was the only person I trusted to touch my hair. Having my scalp touched was a huge trigger to make me feel asymmetric. But the two of them were very attentive to my OCD and they got it well enough that I could trust them to fix it for me when I said something felt wrong. Case in point, Miyuki scratching the left side of my scalp instantly offset any skin crawling feelings that had risen within me from the inherent asymmetry her hair brushing. And when the itch started back up anyway all I had to do was tilt my head and she got the message to move her scratchies to another part of my scalp, fixing the new itch.

Beneath us Sho rumbled, sending pleasant vibrations through our cores. I let a lazy smile creep across my face. Miyuki caught it and she smiled in turn. Today was good.

I drifted off beneath the soft pressures of the afternoon sun and Miyuki’s rhythmic brushing. Behind me she started singing softly, “Brushie, brushie, brushie, brushie~”. It was just a nonsense song without a tune, pulled out of the air because she wanted to sing.

I fell asleep with that lazy smile still fixed on my face, happy and content for the space of a day.

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Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Yeah it’s just gonna be gratuitous fluff like this for the next couple of chapters. Because I can do that if I want to.
Tonight was sleepover night and preparations were in full swing.

Dad was doing last minute prep in the kitchen, finishing up a dozen little treats for us. He had a stack of some rice-flour equivalent to crepes kept warm in the oven, alongside a flaky honeyed meat pastry which Dad had recently learned how to cook from a coworker. The whole house was filled with the smell of them, heavy and mouthwatering. There were half a dozen bowls of chopped fruit on the kitchen counter along with a jar of jam, a jar of honey, and a jar of spicy pepper flakes (for Tomomi, whose taste buds could be most generously described as eccentric). At the moment Dad was intently stirring a pot of pudding that required his full attention and occasionally checking on another pot filled with hot cocoa.

Neji was building a pillow fort in the living room out of every cushion and length of fabric in the house. He was going about it with all the focused determination of a ninja-in-training who’d been formally trained in building makeshift shelters and all the mad intent of a child working with pillows but seeing the grand pillars of a castle-to-be. That is to say, he was having a lot of fun and we’d probably have a lot of fun rebuilding it after first contact with ninja children destroyed his precarious grand vision.

Aunt Yuki and I were sitting at the dining room table mixing together green goopy stuff to make face masks. Aunt Yuki crushed dried leaves into powder with a mortar and pestle and gave them to me to mix in with a pre-made base she’d gotten from a Yamanaka friend. She claimed that face masks were a necessary part of bonding during sleepovers. She insisted that sitting back and relaxing with your friends as a face mask gently soaked into your skin was one of the best ways to pass time with a group of friends. And to give her credit, that did sound nice. On a more down to earth note though, I’d also recognized one of the herbs she was crushing as a mild sedative. Aunt Yuki was apparently not taking chances with us kids getting to sleep at a proper hour.

Which, y’know, fair.

Mom was off picking up the guests of honor, escorting Miyuki, Tomomi, and Tenten over to stay the night. Miyuki was invited because of course she was. She was practically our cousin by this point, connected to us by school and two different parental figures and a deep and abiding determination to touch Hyuuga hair. Tomomi was coming over because Miyuki was. Neji and I definitely hung out with them often enough to warrant an invitation, but really that was secondary to the fact that they and Miyuki simply did not do things like this separately. Where Miyuki went, they went.

Tenten being invited was a bit more unexpected though. When our parents first set up the idea of a sleepover night Neji had been adamant that we invite Tenten. As far as I knew the two of them just
talked shop a lot at school and occasionally sparred, but when I asked Neji when they’d become
friends and not just acquaintances he was appalled. How could I have missed that he and Tenten
were kindred spirits, a true union of ninja destined to be perfect partners, forged together in the fires
of youth? (No, Gai hadn’t gotten to him yet -thank the gods- Konoha ninja culture is just Like
That). So now Tenten was coming over so we could all get to know Neji’s ninja soulmate better
and she could be introduced to the rest of the family.

To make sure she wasn’t being left out, Dad had asked Hinata if there was anyone from her class
she’d like to invite. She’d demurred and said it was fine. Of course I was pretty sure that there were
at least a couple people she’d like to invite. She spent a lot of time at school in Ino’s orbit, mostly
talking to Sakura, so it wasn’t like she didn’t have friends. But Hinata could be pretty shy around
people who weren’t family, she might just not feel comfortable inviting people over.

And lastly, Hinata. She was out doing the most important task to ensure tonight went smoothly,
accompanying her father to a formal meeting with the Sarutobi clan. If all went well Hiashi would
be in a good mood and magnanimous enough to not pull Hinata out of the sleepover and ruin the
whole thing out of spite.

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Mom showed up with our friends before Hinata got back. I noticed them walking down the path
home before before Neji did, my eyes habitually kept brighter than his. Aunt Yuki smothered a
grin when I perked up and turned my head around, and didn’t bother hiding her laugh when Neji
shot out of the living room and out the door a few moments later.

I raised an eyebrow, inviting her to tell me what was so funny.

She smiled. “You two are very similar in some ways,” she told me, “but also very different. You’re
both so excited to see your friends but you show it in such different ways. You smile and relax
around people you love,” she was right, I was smiling, “and Neji-” outside Neji had just flung
himself full force at Tenten and rocked her back with an engulfing hug, “does that. You two are
very predictable in that way and it’s nice to see that some things don’t change.”

“And Hinata?”, I asked. “What about her? How does she show people she loves them?”

“Hmm.” Aunt Yuki tapped a finger on her chin. “You know, I couldn’t say. She’s much subtler
about that sort of thing than you two are.”

Dad interjected from the kitchen, “She shows she loves you by stealing food out from under you
while you cook.”

That got a scandalized laugh out of Aunt Yuki. “Hizashi! Don’t say that!”

“It’s true and you know it! How many times has she blitzed into the kitchen while you had your
hands full, grabbed whatever’s already washed or cooked, and had it stuffed into her mouth before
she’s even out of the kitchen?”

“Hizashi!”

“Back me up on this" little "Yuki”, Dad accompanied my name with the sign for ‘small’, “how
many times a week does Hinata make you and Neji run interference for her food stealing
missions?"

“At least once a week,” I deadpanned. “She pays me with sealing-quality paper filched from the Academy storage closets. Neji does it for free because he thinks it’s funny.”

“Yuki!”

“What? You already know this.”

“That doesn’t mean any of us should be encouraging it!”

Dad chuckled from the kitchen, with his back turned to us. “There’s no need to be ashamed of sweet little Hinata’s behavior,” bigger "Yuki. You should be proud of your daughter! She’s showing admirable leadership skills, and an aptitude for targeted raids!”

Aunt Yuki sighed. “You’re just saying that because she’s not here right now and not trying to steal those pastries out of the oven.”

*Those pastries do smell delicious, I thought to myself, she would totally try to steal them.*

“Unlike you, I appreciate Hinata’s wonderful initiative,” Dad retorted.

“The next time Hinata steals my breakfast I’m taking yours Hizashi.”

I interrupted before they could get too deep into their good-natured bickering, “Hey, Aunt Yuki, can you see if Hinata’s done with the Sarutobi meeting yet?”

“Hm? Of course, Yuki.” She flashed through a quick set of hand signs and looked out through brilliantly glowing eyes. “Hmmmm. Oh dear, it looks like Hiashi kept her for the after-ceremony.” She let the glow in her eyes fade and she sighed. “She’ll definitely be late.”

“Okay.” I turned to Dad. “Hey Dad, I’m gonna see if everyone wants to go play at the gardens for a while, okay? If we play around the house everyone’s going to get hungry and want to eat real fast, your food smells way too good. But I figure if we go to the gardens we can give Hinata some time to get back before we eat. Is that alright? Will the food keep that long?”

Dad blinked at me. “Yeah, sure” little "Yuki. The food’ll keep.”

“Great!” I hopped out of my chair and hurried over to the doorway, moving to intercept everyone before they could get inside and smell the food. “Love you Dad! Love you Auntie! See you soon!”

Behind me Aunt Yuki murmured to Dad in a low-murmur meant more for Hyuuga eyes than ears, “You’ve done a pretty good job raising that kid.”

Dad huffed out a laugh and murmured back. “We’ve done a pretty good job. It’s been a team effort.” A warm smile spread across his face. “After all, where do you think he learned it from, if not us taking care of one another?”

Mom and the kids were still outside, slowed down by Neji’s excited ramblings. I slipped on my sandals and ran outside to meet them. “Hey Mimi! Hey Momi! Hey Tenten!” I waved eagerly as I called out to them. I got an equally eager wave back from Miyuki, a warm smile from Tomomi, and a somewhat more nervous smile from Tenten, who already looked overwhelmed by the chatter flying back and forth between Neji and Miyuki.

Mom smiled to see me come running. She crouched down and held her arms out for a hug.
“C’mere Yuki.”

I jumped into her arms and gave her a big squeezing hug. Chakra pulsed along her spine and legs and pooled in the soles of her feet, anchoring her to the ground so I didn’t bowl her over. “Hey Mom,” I murmured happily once I was wrapped around her chest.

“Oof,” she replied. “Yuki you’re too big for that now.”

“Lies and slander.”

She let me down gently and ruffled my hair. “So, Yuki, you ready for your sleepover tonight?”

“Yeah! Speaking of which, there’s been a change of plans. Would you mind taking everyone’s overnight bags in? We’re gonna run over to the garden and play tag for a bit.” Four sets of ninja children ears perked up at the mention of tag. “Dad’ll explain, love you Mom, bye!” With that I turn and ran off.

The other kids were only marginally less surprised than Mom, but Neji smelled a race and he was after me like a flung kunai. Miyuki -and by extension Tomomi- readily ditched her overnight bag a moment later to chase us and, seeing the rest of us run off, Tenten only paused to apologetically hand her bag over to Mom before following.

Mom muttered something unflattering under her breath about pre-teens which I politely ignored.

Ninja tag is a loosely defined game, if you want to be generous about it. If you don’t, it’s a no-holds-barred bloodsport which only sometimes involves bladed weapons. We were all friends here, so the expectation among us was ‘temporary incapacitation only, and dogpile the cheating Hyuuga if they exploit their Gentle Fist too much’.

The way we played it worked like this. One person held a ‘tagging kunai’. That person, and whoever had last held it, were ‘It’. If the two of them couldn’t successfully tag someone, or if someone was just in the mood for a sudden and shocking betrayal, the person with the kunai could throw it at someone else to catch, changing up who was It. What constituted tagging someone was basically whatever left them unable to protest that they’d been tagged.

Oh and the tagging kunai could be stolen. By force, typically.

The whole thing was a lot of fun, fiercely competitive, and could absolutely be counted on to keep us busy for an hour or so while we waited for Hinata to come home. All at the low cost of only a few bruises and Neji getting inevitably buried under a pile of vengeful mini-ninjas. It was a sacrifice I was willing to make.

Also I was so gonna get that jerk back for last game.

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I did not get him back for last game.

On a related note, I wanted to be on Neji and Tenten’s team next time we did group exercises in class. Holy hells the two of them worked well together. After an hour of us mere mortals getting our asses handed to us by the reincarnations of Achilles and Patroclus we trooped back home
somewhat worse for wear and ravenously hungry, looking forward to showers and food.

We came home to a beautiful scene. Dad’s old record player was set up on the kitchen counter, soft upbeat music crackling forth from it. The dining room table had been moved and Mom and Dad and Auntie were dancing in the space it opened up. As we showed up Mom spun Auntie around and dipped her low, then flitted away from her into a wheeling set of steps and a kiss with Dad before spinning around and pushing him over to Auntie, whom he lifted into the air to the sound of her squealing laughter.

The five of us filed quietly into the house, milling about the sliding front door and watching them dance. None of us spoke up or made a move to walk past them to the shower upstairs. Miyuki smiled fondly and bobbed her head. Her father Bunta was the one who had taught Neji, Hinata, and I how to dance with a loud boisterous laugh and our feet on top of his; she was no stranger to dancing in her home. Tomomi grinned behind a high collar, foot tapping kikaichu buzzing internally in time with the music. Neji and I shared amused grins with one another.

And Tenten … Well, I wasn’t quite sure what that expression on her face was at first. I would have said surprise because of the way her jaw hung slack. But that didn’t seem quite right. That look in her eyes was … awe? No. Wonder. She stared at our parents dancing like a child seeing the lights of their first festival. Like she’d never seen anyone dancing before.

Tenten didn’t have a last name. In theory that could mean a lot of things in Konoha, which was home to a dozen competing civilian and ninja philosophies of clan structures and family ideals. But really, for a child Tenten’s age, it only ever meant one thing. The Kyuubi’s attack the year before I was born had left Konoha with hundreds of unidentified orphans, none of whom had family names to claim. I’d never had a reason to ask her about her home life but really, the odds were that Tenten didn’t have a home life.

She was likely one of too many children stuffed into an overcrowded orphanage who, going by what I’d seen of her at the Academy, found it easier to throw herself into schoolwork and training than to make friends. She might have never seen a loving set of parents before, or even seen people dance.

“Hey, Tenten,” I said quietly. I had to repeat myself to get her attention. “Hey Tenten.”

She tore her eyes away from the happily dancing trio. “Nuh?”

“From the looks of things we might be doing some dancing after dinner. Or before dinner. Or … during dinner? Rotating in between nibbling on food and dancing can be a lot of fun, so long as you don’t exert yourself too much or eat too much at once.”

A vague edge of concerned panic painted the edges of Tenten’s eyes.

“But um, yeah, I’m guessing you’ve never danced before? Yeah, didn’t think so. Well, we’ve only got the one shower so we’re gonna have to go one at a time. What do you say we let the others go first and the two of us will try to pack as much dancing basics as possible in while they’re off doing that? That sound good?”

“Yeeeeee-” I could see Tenten’s thought process written out on her face, as she started with automatic panicked acceptance, transitioned to desperately trying to figure out what she’d just agreed to, and finally settled on ‘I told myself I was going to go to this sleepover and enjoy it and that’s exactly what I’ll do’, ‘-eeeesssss. Yes. Let’s do … that.”

“Great! Alright first things first, we’re not going to try to do any of what Mom and Dad and Auntie
are doing. We’re just going to claim a corner of the room and start with the simple stuff first.”

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Hinata showed up as Tenten and I were experimenting with spins, and by experimenting with spins I mean having a lot of fun and laughing a lot but not, uh, actually doing that could reasonably called dancing. More just flinging one another back and forth while holding hands and vaguely stepping in time. Tenten was not longer nervous about dancing though, which was the important bit. (The adults did a very good job of keeping mostly straight faces and not laughing and making her feel self-conscious, which I was very proud of them for. We must have looked adorably silly from the outside.)

Hinata was still dressed in formal robes from her thing with the Sarutobi clan, which was just perfect. I grabbed her hand the moment she walked in the door and placed her hand in Tenten’s. “Hey Hinata, perfect timing. I was teaching Tenten here how to dance but Tomomi just got out of the shower upstairs and it’s my turn. Can you take over for a bit?”

A twin pair of blank “Uhhhhhhhh”s answered me.

“Right. Hinata this is Tenten, Neji’s friend and a cruel enabler of his worst tag habits. Tenten this is my sister Hinata. You two have fun.”

Tenten, drunk on the excitement of learning how to dance, dragged Hinata inside and immediately did her best to whirl Hinata into a spin. Hinata, for her part, eeped, stumbled into Tenten’s arms, and then blushed furiously and stammered incoherently as I exited stage right.

Honestly I hadn’t thought Hinata was all that shy. Sure she didn’t do well with conflict and she tended to crumple when facing authority, but that didn’t really apply to how she dealt with friendly kids her age. The capillaries in her extremities weren’t constricting though (they were actually dilating a bit, if anything) and there was a hesitant smile buried under all that stammering so I judged her to be surprised but not overwhelmed in a bad way. She could handle a dance-drunk Tenten for a few minutes. Probably.

Hinata was still on her feet after I rushed through a quick lukewarm shower and returned downstairs, so you know, awesome. Still blushing, though that was probably just exertion. Tenten was absolutely taken with dancing and incredibly enthusiastic, whirling Hinata around and laughing gayly. It actually took a bit of doing to pry them apart and send Tenten up to take her own shower.

Neji and Miyuki clustered around Hinata while Tenten was gone, eager to tell her about all the drama that had happened during tag. While they did that Tomomi pulled me aside and quietly told me that kikaichu were allergic to chocolate so they couldn’t drink the hot chocolate Dad’d made, but asked me if our parents would be okay if they still took a mug to smell and warm their hands with anyway. Dad didn’t even bother to wait for my response, calling out from across the room, “Of course you can Momi, don’t be silly!”

Sure enough, once Tenten had finished her shower and we were getting ready to eat, Tomomi got their mug of hot chocolate. And a blanket nabbed from the pillow fort, because it was autumn and
Aburame tended to get cold easily on account of having holes in them. They burrowed into their blanket with their mug and buried their nose right in it, smiling and wriggling so much that their happiness was obvious even behind their high collar jacket, their blanket, and their tinted glasses, even to those without the Byakugan.

They were even happier when, after a bit of a deliberation, it was decided that we could not actually fit this many rambunctious kids at the table and we’d have to eat on the floor, provided Tomomi was willing to clean up the floor afterward with their kikaichu.

A mildly unnerving fact I could have done without ever learning: An Aburame’s chakra connection with their kikaichu is so complete that their beetles will all simultaneously clean their mandibles in synch as their host licks their lips.

So we cheerfully dug in to Dad’s feast while sitting on the floor, careless of the mess. We passed crepes around and stuffed them with fruit, dug into jiggly pudding, and found out that those honeyed meat pastries melted in our mouths exactly the way their mouth-watering scent had promised. Tenten shocked and mildly worried all of us by actually matching Tomomi bite for bite, something which should absolutely not be possible for someone not hosting a colony of high-metabolism insects. She was definitely going to be laid out with a stomach-ache later, and with one look at her we collectively decided to maybe not do any more dancing for the night.

Later was later though. After dinner we all, by some miracle, squeezed into Neji’s magnificent pillow fort for story time. And then had some fun rebuilding it after packing six children and three adults did the inevitable and collapsed it. Neji’s complaints and insistence that the removal of Tomomi’s blanket had been at fault were tolerated with good humor and then eventually silenced by Tomomi pulling Neji into their blanket and falling on him, pinning him with their weight and using their kikachu to eat Neji’s attempts to use the Gentle Fist to get Tomomi off. The pillow fort ended up getting rebuilt around them, accompanied by our snickers and selective deafness to Neji’s protests.

Note to self: the Gentle Fist is an absolutely unrivaled martial art without any competition even remotely in its league, but it is also utterly useless against a chakra eater at grappling range.

We settled into the pillow fort, pushing in close and lying on top of one another to fit. Hinata sat in Aunt Yuki’s lap, who sat in Mom’s lap. Tomomi claimed an immobile and mildly chakra-deprived Neji as their throne to lounge on. Miyuki politely asked Tenten if she wanted to cuddle, and then latched onto her like a limpet the moment Tenten gave a bewildered, “Yesss?”. Personally, I claimed the coveted Dad lap, where I could lay my head against his stomach and listen to the rumble of his voice as he spoke.

I still told stories to my little lights almost every night, about every fantastical and mundane idea I could think of. But tonight was a story night, and everyone was going to tell stories. True stories, made-up stories, whatever anyone could think of.

We went around in a circle. Mom went first, with an epic story of generals and battles, wars and traitors. It had the feeling of a polished story and I wondered who she’d told it to before.

Aunt Yuki followed her with a fairy-tale about a giant that ate the moon and had to be tricked into spitting it back up.

Hinata told us about a family of foxes and a pair of crows who had taken up residence in the market district, and how the crows acted as lookouts for the foxes as they stole food scraps and refuse, splitting the loot afterwards.
Tomomi described -in exacting detail- daily life in a termite colony from the perspective of a worker, and for the life of me I could not tell if they thought it was a proper story or if they were having a private joke at us by pretending they thought it was a proper story.

Neji squirmed out from under Tomomi and retold a ghost story which had scared the heck out of Hinata last month, but fortunately seemed to have lost some of its impact since.

Tenten pulled out a small scroll and unfurled it, haltingly reading from it a story she’d written out beforehand. It was a story about a loyal ninja who fought an enemy ninja and won. It was frankly not the best story, but she’d clearly put a lot of work into it and had to push past a lot of nervousness to read it and that was good enough for us to applaud and congratulate her.

Miyuki passed. She wasn’t good at telling stories and was happy listening to us instead.

Dad told an over-the-top romantic story about a boy and a girl almost getting implicated for treason in their bid to find a private place to kiss away from the girl’s prying friends (and also do a good deal more than kiss, if I was reading between the lines correctly). It was absolutely too wild to believe but, if the mortified blush stretching from top of Mom’s chest to the tip of her ears and Aunt Yuki’s stifled chortles meant anything, also absolutely true.

*Note to self: warn Neji not to ever use this to needle Mom.* As fantastic as her reaction would surely be, I had the feeling he’d earn a hefty dose of petty vengeance for his impertinence. And *no one* did vengeance like our mother.

Lastly, it was my turn.

I didn’t have a story to tell. I’d had a story in my head for a week (for a lifetime), a story I’d been mulling over telling my family for some time. A story about a civilian born with more curiosity than sense, and the war that had killed him. But when my turn came to speak, I found that wasn’t a story I wanted to tell. Tonight was light and happy, and not the right night to mar with such a tale.

So instead I just smiled, as honest as I could manage, and told them, “I was born and loved, I loved in turn, and today I am happy.” And by the time I was done with that sentence, ‘as honest as I could manage’ was very honest indeed.

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Chapter End Notes

I’m sorry this is going up late, I hope I didn’t worry any of you. Guess I had to miss an update eventually. Grad school just about ate me alive these last few weeks, and then after that I had to help a friend through some stuff that made it difficult to get into the fluffy mindset this chapter needed. (On the plus side though, interesting research results and my friend should hopefully be safe). The next chapter will be going up three Saturdays from today, so a week after when I’d normally update if I hadn’t missed this one.
By the way sometimes I just put in like, really little hyperspecific setting details no one could possibly notice which are just there for me. Like, Tomomi’s parents didn’t tell Yuki’s parents about his Aburame-specific allergies when sending him over because in Konoha that kind of information -while not actually classified- just isn’t shared without specific cause. That kind of little detail. I mostly just include that stuff ’cus it helps me keep a more organic world in my head and ’cus I find it fun, but this time I wanted to share this specific little tidbit with y’all.

P.S. This chapter was actually supposed to have a less fluffy ending dealing with how Hiashi would react to Hinata having this kind of family moment with his brother but with my friend’s stuff fresh in my mind I just didn’t have the heart for it, even if it’d be a truer story that way.
Chapter 32: Hard Work

(13 years)

I idly rubbed my temples to ward off a coming headache. I tilted my head from side to side to crack my neck and twisted side to side to crack my back. Then I slumped in my chair and groaned. I’d been staring at this spiral array for hours and I still was not any closer to figuring out what was wrong with it.

The core of the array was a lightning isolator ring, a ground-breaking discovery that had the potential to revolutionize sealing and kickstart a new age of energy production. If I could. Just. Get it. To. Work.

I eyed the array. It was simple, only three parts. There was a lopsided two-armed generator spiral, meant to draw in chakra through its denser arm and feed it back out through its lighter arm. The generator spiral fed into a purifier, a set of three long parallel wiggly lines that looked kind of like a map-maker’s representation of water. Chakra fed into the middle line came out the other end flowing smooth and straight, much less likely to leak out of the ink. I’d discovered last week that adding a purifier did wonders for an isolator’s efficiency. Not that, you know, that actually fixed the problem with the damn array.

I took a deep breath.

Lastly, there was the isolator ring. It was just a simple loop-de-loop, a perfect circle with one edge intersecting a straight line of ink after the purifier. And that circle made lightning chakra. How it did that was pretty simple, at least in theory. Ordinary chakra could be split into five different elemental chakras: water, fire, earth, air, and lightning and -this was the important part- those elemental chakras didn’t always act the same way when passing through blood ink.

Fire chakra passing through a bend might just not follow that bend and stream straight back into the air, while earth chakra flowed along the same bend nice and neat. And that, that could be exploited.

Spirals, for some reason to do with their steadily changing slopes I didn’t quite fully understand yet, worked pretty much the same for all the elements. Ordinary chakra made out of the five elements went in, ordinary chakra came out. But for anything with a steady curvature it was different. For example, if you drew a bend wrong you could easily lose half your air chakra on accident, and that did weird things to whatever spirals were downstream.

Or, if you drew a loop-de-loop just right, you could lose all of your chakra except one particular element. Like, say, lightning chakra. Which is exactly what the lightning isolator ring was supposed to do. What it succeeded in doing. Ordinary chakra went in, its earth, water, fire, and air components got spun right out of the ring, and what was left continued on its merry way as pure lightning chakra.
For two centimeters. Then it disintegrated into a turbulent mish-mash of two parts yang chakra and one part yin chakra, a swirl of mismatched earthy and glittery chakra that immediately lost its cohesion and dissipated into the air along with all the other chakra lost to the isolator.

Why did it do that? Well …

I slumped down on Akito’s desk and gently banged my head against it a couple times.

I didn’t have the faintest godsdamn clue why it did that.

I mean, it wasn’t an insurmountable problem. If I could just hook up some kind of catalyzer to turn the lightning chakra into electrical current one centimeter after the isolator, like maybe a sliver of chakra conducting metal, it wouldn’t matter if the lightning chakra only stayed stable for two centimeters.

Except elemental catalysts needed a high minimum chakra intensity to function, and whenever I tried to pump that much chakra into an isolator ring at once I got a weird mish-mash of elements out of it instead of the pure element I needed. So getting that work would still require figuring out what the fuck was wrong with my isolator.

I pushed back from the desk. I need a break. “Akito!” I called out.

My mentor called back from the other room where he was lying on the couch reading an analysis of Iwa internal surveillance wards, “What is it?”

“I need to give Yuuna tummy scritches! My sanity is as stake!”

Akito’s chubby wolf perked up from where she was laying draped over him Decently sized for a wolf, she covered him from foot to chest and poor Akito huffed out a pained breath as her weight shifted. Yuuna’s tongue lolled out and her ears swiveled in my direction.

“Yes Yuuna, I said scritches.”

Yuuna didn’t exactly scramble off of Akito. In all the time I’d known her, she’d wholeheartedly embraced her role as a housebound emotional support dog for Konoha’s sealing researchers, and never bothered to do anything energetically that could instead be done with easygoing good cheer. Nonetheless, there’s no pleasant way for a fifty kilo wolf to stand up on your chest and hop off you, and the noises coming out of Akito’s lungs during the transition were of choked suffering and betrayal.

Yuuna plopped down next to my chair and rolled over, eagerly informing me that scritches would be accepted now, please and thank you.

I bonelessly flopped out of my chair and onto Yuuna, hands finding her stomach and beginning proper scritching procedures. My nails sunk into her soft fur and I gently clawed at her squishy tummy. I burrowed my nose into the ruff of fur around her throat and breathed in her musky scent. Mmmmmmm. Yes this is exactly what I needed after fruitless hours fighting with a spiral array.

Akito called out from the other room, managing to only cough once in the aftermath of Yuuna’s departure, “So, sealing’s not going well I take it?”

“Mmmmmrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.”

“That’s a no,” he said with a chuckle. “Hey have you considered-"
“Ah. Later then?”

I gave an answering “mmmmrrrrrrrr” and focused on sinking my fingers into the soft jiggle of Yuuna’s belly and the pleased noises she was making.

“Fair ‘nuf.”

I worked my hands under Yuuna’s back so I could scratch her shoulder blades. This was infinitely better than painstakingly redrawing a minor variation of the same array for the twentieth time. I could feel the stress leaking out of me. I needed to do this for like, at least the next ten minutes. At least.

…

Not ten seconds later my self control failed me and I asked, “Akito? What was your idea for fixing the isolator?”

“Ah. Well uh, have you thought about putting a purifier right after it? Just to see what happens?”

I let an explosive frustrated breath. “Yes! I have! I did that! You know what happens? The side-channels of the purifier pick up a small fraction of the yin and yang chakra and end up conducting imbalanced yin/yang chakra. Oh, and guess what?! The exact proportions of the imbalanced yin/yang chakra are steady so long as the array is running, but randomize every time I turn it on and off!”

“Huh.”

“So who the fuck knows why that happens! Gods, what I would do for an Uzushio textbook. Literally anything would be better than fucking trial and error, over and over again!”

“Oof. Uh, I’m sorry I brought it up. Yuki, maybe uh, just take a break and pet Yuuna for a bit.”

I let out a long exasperated breath. “Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck.”

Akito nodded sagely from the other room, familiar by this point with how he didn’t have to see me for me to see him. “Yup. Research is hell. Take a break and pet Yuuna. ‘n I can make you a snack if you feel like your blood sugar is getting low.”

I focused on the seal-clock Akito had inside his flak vest. Oh. Woops. Going by the time … yeah low blood sugar probably had something to do with how frustrated I was. “Akito. We missed dinner.”

“Huh? Whu-?” He searched through his many pockets, looking for the seal-clock. Eventually I directed him to his top-left inside vest pocket and he pulled it out. “Oh. Oops. Yooouuuu need to be home in forty minutes and I still haven’t fed you. Your aunt is going to kill me. Uhhhh,” He kipped up off the couch and then stood there for a moment. I could see the wheels in his head spinning as he tried to figure out how to get me both fed and home fast enough to fix his mistake. “Alright, Yuki how do you feel about grabbing some street yams on the way home? Does that sound good?”

“Does that mean I have to call it quits for today?”

“Yeah. Sorry I couldn’t give you more warning kiddo.”
I shook my head wearily. “No. It’s fine. It’s … yeah. I’m done for the day.”

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Cleaning up after Elder Taeko’s sealing classes was dangerous. Her main branch students knew it was my job to clean up after them and they turned what should have been a tedious job into what might as well be bomb disposal.

Technically, every student in her classes was supposed to fully dispose of every practice seal they created, wiping it out with a slash of ink and burst of disruptive intent. Technically, any seal with enough energy or complexity to react poorly to that was supposed to be taken to one of the main branch training fields and disposed of with a flame ward. Technically, my only job should have been picking up loose paper, taking out the trash, and sweeping up after kids who’d grown up a little too used to hired help.

Actually if I was going to be really technical my ‘job’ was to be fulfilling the Hokage’s directive and learning sealing from Elder Taeko, not fixing up the training hall she used for group lessons. But I was a branch family member who existed in her presence, so cleaning up after her class was my job.

A job which, because her other students were assholes and Elder Taeko herself was willing to turn a blind eye, involved cleaning up the practice seals her students had been working on during her class. Seals with unknown triggers and effects. Seals which may not even do what their creators intended. Or maybe even more worryingly, seals which might do exactly what their creators intended.

I eyed one particular seal the girl Himeko had left on her desk. She was two years from graduating and had a fair chunk of chakra to throw around, and the seal she’d left behind glowed with what must be half of it. More than enough to do some damage with the wrong intent. My scars itched just looking at it. I clawed my fingers down the side of one shoulder and then the other. It made the itching more symmetric, even if it didn’t go away.

My breathing was steady, if not calm, as I reached into the chest of my robes and pulled out my dispelling stick. My dispelling stick was an invention born of necessity. The first time I’d had to draw a dispersive slash of blood ink across a seal it’d taken me forty whole minutes to work up the courage to cross the training hall and touch it. The first time I’d had to deal with a seal with too much energy for that, I’d eventually had to get Neji to take it to the disposal ward for me. And that wasn’t … I couldn’t sustain that.

Also my private lessons with Elder Taeko technically started right after her group class ended, so every minute I spent cleaning was a minute I wasn’t learning. And it would be a cold day in hell before I let my fears and this petty bullshit stop me from learning everything Elder Taeko was supposed to teach me.

Hence, the dispelling stick. The dispelling stick - or as I referred to it in my head, the Nope Stick - had started its existence as a simple asp nabbed from Academy storage. A Konoha-standard metal extendable baton with a rubberized grip. But now it was so much more. A miniscule six-armed generating seal marked its base and fed three little lines of chakra that climbed the asp’s length. When the asp was collapsed, those lines were broken and the dispelling stick did nothing. But when the asp was extended, they fed into a three-dimensional spiral that wrapped around business
end of the asp. Ultra-dense blood ink marked three arms of loose loops at the middle of the asp which spun into tight loops towards its tip before turning around and climbing back up to the middle of the asp as straight lines of lighter blood ink. The result of painstaking months of trial and error, the Nope Stick was a work of art, and the greatest anti-seal weapon to ever grace the face of the earth.

The Nope Stick functioned in a pretty simple way. The generating spiral drove chakra through the 3D spiral along its length, enough to make the spiral flow but not enough to fill it. So the spiral picked up ambient chakra from its surroundings to make up the difference, especially from the front of the asp where the spiral spun tight and fast. Then the weakly confining straight lines pulled that absorbed chakra back up the asp and into the path of the dense, rapid flow of beginning of the spiral, which scattered and dispersed it back into the air. Basically, it grabbed at any chakra in front of it and then slurped it up and spat it back into air, with a range of about three feet.

I snapped it out to its full extension and then swore profusely as my right foot - which I’d briefly pointed the dispelling stick at - erupted with pins and needles. I did a bit of comical dance as I hopped around on my left foot, shook my right foot, scratched at my left cheek with my left hand to balance out the sensation of my foot falling asleep, and did my best to hold the dispensing stick away from my body with my right hand, all while reminding myself, “The dispensing stick is not a toy, the dispensing stick is not a toy, the dispensing stick is not a toy, owwwwww, fuck the dispensing stick is not a toy.” I’m sure I looked ridiculous, but to be fair the brief moment of pointing it in the wrong direction had disrupted the flow of every single surface level chakra capillary in my foot and it had **stung**.

The Nope Stick was sure death for any seal I pointed it at for more than ten seconds, but it was also sure discomfort for any poor little feet caught beneath it for a second.

Eventually I shook off the pins and needles and -after reminding myself for the fifth time this week to have Hinata help me find where I’d left my latest copy of *Ninja Tools and How To Use Them Safely* - I pointed the Nope Stick at the seal Himeko had left behind. Its chakra twisted and distorted into nothingness along with whatever hazardous intent it might have held, warped into a turbulent glowing mist that the Nope Stick greedily sucked up and vented back out past my hand.

There were two other twists of blood ink in the training hall that were gorged on trapped chakra and definitely seals, and a few dozen little lines of dim blood ink which could have either been low-energy seals or someone’s really bad handwriting. All of it was fed to the glorious Nope Stick. Nothing exploded and I didn’t have psych myself into approaching any pulsing seals with a trembling inkbrush.

Woo. That’s what victory felt like.

Then, with the dangerous part of my job done, I picked up and swept up after the main family. Which felt a little less like victory.

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When I finished cleaning up and got to Elder Taeko’s private workshop, I had about 75 minutes of our tutoring session left.

After powering through the assigned reading she handed me -which I could only pretend to
accomplish in time because I made a habit of guessing which scrolls she might pick out for me and reading them all beforehand— I had 40 minutes left.

After I answered all of her questions about the reading I had 35 minutes left.

Then I demonstrated this week’s sealing I was supposed to learn: the ability to set a friction trigger that differentiated between static and kinetic friction, the ability to imbue a timing function into a storage seal to prevent it from being repeatedly used faster than it could tolerate without relying on a separate timing seal, and the ability to quickly write out wall-sticking seals that used gravity and raw kinetic force to accomplish the same effect in rapid succession without getting sloppy with my intent. I had 15 minutes left with Elder Taeko when that was finished. 10 minutes after she oh so studiously examined my seals and hmm-ed and hah-ed over them.

Finally, I was given permission to ask questions while she scribbled notes on her own seals that she’d been working on while I’d read and instantiated seals.

“Elder Taeko,” I inclined my head differentially, “how does one manipulate lightning chakra with seals?”

“By being born with a lightning affinity.”

Wait, what? Aw, no~

“Is it impossible to use seals to control lightning chakra without an affinity? There are ninja who utilize lightning jutsu without a native affinity, yes? Can the same workarounds be applied to sealing?”

“No. Converting one’s chakra to another element with formalized seals is different from being able to internalize the feeling and true nature of an elemental chakra that doesn’t come naturally. You’d have to be able to perform sealless jutsu with that element, at the very least. It has been done before, by each of the Four Hokages for instance, but—” her shoulders moved in a faint shrug, “- whenever the Hokages are the most salient example of a talent, it’s best not to get one’s hopes up.”

She raised a finger at me without lifting her hand and said, “And no, before you ask, you do not have a lightning affinity. Hyuuga are water aligned, occasionally air aligned.” She scowled faintly twisted her mouth. “Given your father’s unfortunate decision to sire children who aren’t true Hyuuga however, you might have a fire affinity. That’s your mother’s affinity, if I recall.”

“Yes Elder Taeko. That is her affinity. Her parents’ as well, before they died honorably serving in the First Shinobi War.”

“Mm. I assume this question is about that project you’re pursuing? Converting ambient arcane chakra to electricity?”

“Yes Elder.”

“Well. At least you’ve begun attempting to find common ground between the two sealing arts. I’m glad to see my time with you has born some fruit. You’re looking in the wrong place however. Elemental sealing is not the solution to whatever issue you’re having with those Uzushio seals.”

I closed my eyes and suppressed a frustrated breath. Fuck.

Elder Taeko raised her head a fraction. “My son is calling for me. Here—” she placed a scroll on the table, “this is the next set of seals for you to learn.” She pushed herself up from her worktable. “Clean up before you leave. I’ll see you next week.”

“Yes Elder. I’ll see you then.” I fixed a pleasant half-smile to my face and maintained it for her as
she left.

*Damnit.*

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(Twenty-five days later)

I watched lightning chakra flow smoothly through a half-meter long channel of blood ink, and very intently suppressed my urge to jump up and down and dance and cheer and cackle madly like the kind of crazy person who has just fought the indifference of physics and won. Instead I slowly and deliberately placed another thick sheaf of paper over the working array and very carefully replicated the exact spiral array I had just drawn. Then I separated the arrays and tested the copy. Then I made a third copy, tested it as well, and placed it on a shelf on the other side of the Inuzuka workshop just in case I spilled ink all over the desk or something.

Then I did a little tippy-tapping dance in place because I absolutely could not hold my excitement in any longer.

“Akito,” I said with a shrill whine of excitement in my voice, “it wo~orks.”

Akito body flickered into the room behind me in a whirl of braids and childlike excitement. “It does? Are you sure?!”

I nodded vigorously and did my best not to grin too much. “Okay, so first things first, I have no idea why it’s working. At all. But it’s definitely working. We have a functioning design we can experiment and play with, I promise.” I pointed at the new spiral array, which was much the same as the design I’d been working on for almost a month, with one crucial difference. “Okay, see how there’s two isolator rings now, sandwiching the channel?”

“Uh, yeah? I thought you tested this design three weeks ago though? You did, right? Like, I totally remember you doing not just sandwiched rings, but sandwiched rings followed by a purifier, and followed by a split channel, and a whole lot of stuff. Did we mess up testing those designs or something?”

“Nope,” I said, popping the p. “I messed up this design.”

That earned me a confused set of blinks and a ‘go on’ roll of Akito’s left hand.

I scratched my left leg (for some reason that hand-roll bugged me) and continued enthusiastically, “Yeah so I was frustrated as heck and figured I’d go back to some old designs to see if I could learn anything from them. But, well, I was frustrated and rushing and sloppy, so I messed up. Take a look at the top isolator ring. It’s too big. It’s not passing lightning chakra through like it’s supposed to -actually it’s barely passing any chakra at all- instead it’s passing through a weak mixture of equal parts lightning chakra and earth chakra.”

My mentor tilted his head. “And therefore you ... get a stable lightning chakra output from the other ring?”
I bobbed my head up and down. “Yeah! And get this, I can’t see any trace of the earth chakra in the output. It looks just lightning chakra and only lightning chakra so far as I can tell at a glance. But I can’t see the earth chakra dissipating anywhere along the channel, it’s like it just vanished! Or got absorbed into the lightning chakra or something.”

“... huh.”

“I know right? Now please help me figure out what the hell is going on so I can celebrate. I don’t want to jinx it until we know why this works, but seriously Akito, I am looking at a working lightning chakra generator and I will freaking explode if I don’t get to use my confetti seals today.”

Akito absently reminded me, “No confetti seals in the lab, remember? And no glitter. Your mother made me swear to never let you have glitter again after the dispelling stick celebration.”

“Uhuh, sure sure sure. Now help me figure this out.”

“Well …” He stared at the spiral. “Huh.”

“That’s not helpful Akito. Be more helpful.”

“No I’m just thinking, what if we try this with other mixtures of chakra in the second ring? What happens if you do lightning-fire, or earth-water, or just a little bit of plain air?”

I did some quick mental math, my good cheer rapidly evaporating into horror. “Akito that’s like fourteen arrays to test. And there’s no way I’m going to get all these new isolator rings right on the first try.”

“Yup. That’s research for you.” Akito nodded with good cheer.

I stared up at him. “Okay. Well, you” I said, thrusting the original spiral array at him, “are going to copy all of this array but the second isolator ring thirty or so times, and I’ll work on getting the second ring’s proportions right.”

“Sounds like a plan kid.”

---

Three hours later, we had our results. It was earth. Adding a little bit of earth chakra to the mixture stabilized the pure lightning chakra, creating something that wasn’t quite pure lightning chakra but looked that way to all but the closest inspections. That little bit of earth bonded to the lightning made a huge difference though, giving us an elemental chakra that was actually stable enough to work with.

We checked out the other elements too. We’d seen (well, technically I’d seen) the same instability in the other purified elemental chakras too. It wasn’t just lightning chakra that was unstable in its pure form, the others all dissipated away after a couple centimeters too. But with the right touch of another element to balance it out: a little lightning added to air, a little air added to fire, a little fire added to water, and a little water added to earth, we could create stable elemental chakras.

I was exhausted though. Three hours of carefully tuning blood ink densities and drawing slightly differently sized circles had not been fun. I dragged a hand over my face, letting my right eye fall
shut and not bothering to reopen it. “We figured it out. Yay.” I sighed. All that jittery energy I’d been so ready to throw into celebrating was gone. “Akito, why don’t I feel excited anymore?”

“Aw,” my mentor smiled and ruffled my hair, “You want the long answer or the short answer to that Yuki?”

“I didn’t mean it as an actual question.”

“Humor me on this.”

“Okay. Short.”

“’Cus that’s how research works.”

I sighed again. “Eugh. That’s a crappy answer. Fine, give me the long answer.”

Akito gave me a faint lopsided smile and shrugged. “Because … that’s how research works. No really,” he raised his hands before I could do more than open my right eye and glare at him, “I’m serious. Learning is fun. So much fun. I mean, I’ve seen how giddy you get when something I’ve told you about sealing clicks in your brain. Gods know I’ve listened to you babble about whatever your study topic of the month is with your aunt. Whenever the Academy teaches you something about chakra you’re ecstatic. Learning is the freaking best Yuki! Except assigned readings, those always suck no matter what, that’s just a fundamental truth of the universe.”

Akito coughed into his hand. “Anyway, back on track. What we’ve been doing so far with the Uzumaki spiral sealing method? That’s been learning. You’ve been playing in a sandbox, where every single new thing you do gives you something new to play with and try to understand. It’s fun. Soooo much fun. Gods I still remember the first time I got to just go to town on a set of Iwa alarm seals and throw stuff at them to see what happened. Days of entertainment right there. But that’s not research. Research is what comes after, the stuff you do with purpose. Like trying to figure out how to get past the Iwa alarm seals. That was … not fun. Because it was hard. And because I didn’t know how I’d do it. Heck I didn’t know if I could do it at all.”

“Eventually I had this moment, this amazing moment where I thought I figured out how to get past the alarm seals. And it worked. Kind of. Most of the time. But just most of the time gets good ninja killed. So I had to spend the next month figuring out how to get it to work all the time. And that month was exhausting.”

“Akito,” I interrupted, “are you going somewhere with this?”

“Ah! Yes. Um, sorry. I am, I promise. Look, Yuki, learning is fun. Every moment you’re learning you understand something a little bit better, getting a little bit closer to really getting it.” He grinned at me. “And once you finally do get it, it’s awesome. A little piece of the world clicks into place and you see everything that much more clearly. And then you move onto the next thing you want to learn.”

“But research isn’t structured like that. What you’ve decided to do with this electricity generation idea? That’s not learning, that’s real research. With research you’re fumbling around in the dark a lot of the time, and that’s frustrating. The real problem though -and this is the kicker- is that research doesn’t end when you get your flashbulb moment of ‘oohhhhh, so that’s how that works’. That, Yuki, is where the grunt-work starts. And it’s work with no real assurance of satisfaction at the end either. Seriously, think about how much we’ve got left.”

Akito held up his hands and starting raising his fingers as he rattled off research objectives, “We
need to figure out how to either increase the intensity the isolator rings can manage to the point where their output can catalyze electricity, or figure out how splice together outputs from multiple rings. We need to successfully catalyze lightning chakra to electricity without any intent involved. We need to control the voltage, amperage, and modulation of the output. We need to figure out if it can actually produce a decent amount of electricity. We need to see how efficient the conversion rate is and if the ambient chakra can sustain the kind of electricity generation we want. We need to determine how long the array will last under constant use, how it holds up against environmental conditions, chakra surges, feedback, static shocks, stuff like that. We need to simplify the final design as much as possible and determine how much electricity can be generated per genin-hour spent copying the array. And that’s just the problems we know we need to solve. Guess how many problems we won’t see coming, like this dissipation problem? And I mean, that’s assuming we can actually get all of that to work. There’s every possibility that this just isn’t doable. Or that it’s doable but just not cost-effective or scalable in the way we want.”

“Akito…” I looked at him dismally.

“Hey, look, the reason I tell you this isn’t to discourage you. Kind of the opposite actually.”

“Well your encouragement sucks then.”

“I- yes, actually you know what all that was a shit way to say this. But the point I’m trying to make is that you can’t expect research to always end in giddiness and excitement. You can’t rely on that to be your motivation. You’ll wear yourself down if you do. The thrill of discovery will still be there, and it’ll always be the best part of doing research. But you’ve got to learn to take pride in a job well done, you know? Not just in your own personal enjoyment.”

Akito gained momentum and enthusiasm as he continued on. “So you’re not excited anymore? Well, okay then. You don’t have to be. You did good work and you should be proud. It can be a tired ‘I just want to go home and sleep’ kind of proud right now, ‘n that’s alright. I mean, seriously, you just set out to solve a problem no one in the entire world knew the answer to and you did it! On accident, sure, but that accident happened ‘cus you were persistent!”

I sighed. “Akito, look, I’m kind of tired right now ‘cus I just spent three hours drawing almost but not quite identically sized circles, but I’m not existentially exhausted by research or anything. I was just griping and I don’t need a pep talk.”

Akito shook his head, braids flying about. “No, no you definitely do. You need the pep-talk now, before you burn out. Because otherwise you will burn out eventually. Well. Okay you’ll burn out eventually no matter what, it happens to the best of us. But you won’t know how to handle it when you do. You shouldn’t try to handle burnout or exhaustion by recapturing that sense of joyous wonder which gets buried under the work, that’ll just make you more burned out when it doesn’t work. You handle it by putting what you’ve done in perspective and being proud of it. Make sense Yuki?”

I tilted my left hand back and forth. “Yes? I guess? I still don’t think I was headed towards burnout or anything.”

“Well let’s keep it that way then. Today, you made a breakthrough on something you’ve worked on for almost a month. You should be proud of that. What do you want to do to celebrate that? That’s not confetti seals, I mean. You don’t seem in the mood, and besides-”

“No confetti seals in the lab,” I said in time with him. “I remember.”

I thought for a bit. Well … what do I want to do? “Um, your sister has a bunch of bean paste buns
in her freezer. Do you think she’d be okay if we went over to her place for a low-key celebration and ate a bunch?”

“Sure, she likes you. Let’s do that.”

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Chapter End Notes

I’m not really happy with this chapter, but eh.

Next week is a chapter I’ve been waiting to do for a loooong time, and then after that we’ll be moving right along into plot stuff and new developments.
Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Impersonal discussion of wartime atrocities, including torture, murder, and rape.

Chapter Note: While Konoha authority figures should be assumed to be unreliable narrators in general, all factual information presented in this chapter is an accurate depiction of human psychology to the best of my knowledge. Details are in the end notes.

Read Before Commenting: If the psychology information presented here feels unbelievable to you and you feel the need to reply with how it's wrong, I strongly urge you to check the cited sources first. Or if you cannot access them, then do what research you can without or open up a dialogue with me using questions before issuing a rejection. If you leave a comment which begins with "I didn't check the citations but I feel like this is intuitively wrong because of-" I guarantee you I have heard it before and highly recommend you reconsider.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 33: Killing Them Softly

(14 years)

Our whole class fidgeted nervously. I fidgeted double-time, running my hands up and down my pants as symmetrically as I could. Our class was having a special guest speaker today and, frankly, I was not looking forward to whatever the hells they’d be teaching our class.

“So,” Morino Ibiki spoke from the front of the classroom, “I assume your teachers have told you who I am?”

Scattered nods and hushed affirmative whispers answered the head of Torture and Interrogation. I gulped. I hadn’t remembered Ibiki being so tall when I’d read Naruto. He was huge. He was a couple centimeters taller than our teacher Misao, and she was a veritable giant. And like Misao, he had a voice to match his size. Unlike Misao though, he didn’t bother projecting any warmth or openness with it.

“Good. Now, what is needed to kill a person?”

The fidgeting stopped. The classroom full of nervous teenagers was instantly as silent as a grave.

“That was not a rhetorical question. Who can tell me what is needed to kill a person?” Ibiki cast his gaze from one of the classroom to the other, looking over every student. “Anyone?”

No one raised a hand. I shrank back into my seat and did my best to suppress the sudden OCD
“You.” He pointed at a civilian child in the first row. “Tell me how you would kill a person.”

“Uhhhh,” the kid looked panicked, trapped, “A kunai to the throat?”

Some of the other students laughed nervously. Most didn’t. Ibiki inclined his head. “Not inaccurate. But incomplete. You,” he pointed to another civilian kid, “can you elaborate?”

“Ahh, uh, stabbing someone with a kunai in, uh, a lot of places would do it?”

Ibiki raised his eyebrows and looked around the rest of the class. A Yamanaka spoke up, “Poison? Poison would also work.”

Ibiki looked at the Yamanaka child. “You’re right. Poison can kill a person. As can blood loss. However neither is strictly needed to kill a person, as the other will suffice. So. Can anyone tell me what is needed to kill a person?”

Tomomi raised their hand and spoke up when Ibiki nodded at them. “Organ failure,” they said. “To kill a person you induce organ failure.”

The head of Torture and Interrogation paused for just a moment. His lips might have twitched. “What is your name trainee?”

They stiffened. “Tomomi, sir. Tomomi Aburame.”

Now Ibiki was definitely smiling. “A good answer Tomomi. You’re not wrong. But that’s not what I was looking for. Does anyone else care to guess?”

I very carefully tried not to stand out. I wanted absolutely no part of this. No one else volunteered either.

“No one? Really? Hn. You’ve all got some work to do before you can call yourself ninja. Well, I’ll do you all a favor and point out the obvious hint. I am the person talking to you about this. Not your teachers, or an ex-ANBU assassin, or a bingo-book jounin. I am a non-combatant who runs the bureaucracy of an applied psychology division and I am talking to you about this.” He looked us over again. “Why?”

Fuck. I knew what answer he was looking for. What ninja idolized and revered. And I really didn’t want to be part of this conversation.

He looked straight at me. “Yuki. Do you know?”

Fuck!

I smiled queasily and answered, “Killing intent, sir. You need killing intent to kill someone.”

*Fuck! I smiled queasily and answered, “Killing intent, sir. You need killing intent to kill someone.”

Can I be literally anywhere else? Literally anywhere other than listening to this sadist talk about how glorious it is to kill people?*

“That is correct,” Ibiki told the class. “Yuki is exactly right. To kill someone you must first make the conscious decision to kill them and carry out the act.”

*Wait, how did he know my name?*

“The reason I am speaking with you here today is because most of you will not be able to kill another human. You will never be able to. And that is nothing to be ashamed of.”

Any thought of how he knew my name flew straight out of my head. *Wait. What?!!*
The imposing man looked over the room, eyes resolute. “I couldn’t do it. I had a chance to kill my enemy in war and I could not do it. I put my kunai down. Because of that, I was captured and I was tortured.” He flexed stiff gloved hands. “My captors cut off three fingers. Beat me. Whipped me. Burned me. Bound me. Shocked me. They scarred me for life. I’m in constant pain, I have joint problems, and I have kidney damage. I need regular attention from chakra doctors to survive.” He smiled mirthlessly. “But I have never regretted sparing my enemy’s life. If I had the choice to do it all again I still wouldn’t kill them.”

He- I- what? I stared at Ibiki like he’d grown a second head. We all stared at Ibiki like he’d grown a second head.

“The data is difficult to analyze, but Intelligence’s best estimate is that under ten percent of trained combatants are capable of killing an enemy. And that’s with projectile weapons at a distance from one’s opponent. Up close the numbers drop even lower. So in your class of thirty students that would be…” he pointed at Miyuki and her neighbor, a scrawny Nara boy, “you two who are capable of killing. Though I wouldn’t bet that either of you could do it up close. And the odds are that one or both of you would be crippled psychologically by the experience, regardless of how you did it. The rest of you,” he waved at us, “can’t kill at all, and we need to talk about that.”

“This may come as a shock to some of you—especially given that many of you may have been under the impression that you would be expected to kill in the line of duty. That is understandable, given that we’ve spent the last eight years training you how to use and fight with lethal weapons. The truth though is that we do not expect any of you to kill. ANBU will happily snap up those of you who can, but as a whole Konoha’s ninja force is designed around the assumption that we cannot expect our forces to kill the enemy.”

“Trust me,” he said with a laugh, “this admission is not for lack of trying. There are those who have been working on ways to train this reticence out of ninja since before ninja villages were a thing. None of them have worked reliably. At least, not without serious caveats. We’ll get to that later.”

“The simple reality of the situation is that most humans have an innate mental block which prevents us from killing other humans. This isn't because humans are innately moral or loving. Nothing stops us from hurting one another or being cruel. But when humans try to kill one another something stops us cold, and assholes are as much bound by this restriction as saints. It is just a fact of our existence. Humans are shit at killing one another.”

He barked out a laugh. “Come on, say it with me. Humans are shit at killing one another.” A few people mumbled it along with him. “Again. Humans~” he drew the first word out until most of us had repeated it, “are shit at killing one another. Good.”

I mouthed the words along with the rest of the class and just … stared. I’d spent my whole second childhood trying to avoid thinking about the fact that I would be called on to kill people and then … this.

“Of course Konoha’s enemies aren’t about to let a little thing like intrinsic human limitations prevent them from doing their godsdamn best to kill us. They want us dead and they will do anything to achieve that goal. So who wants to hear how they do it?”

I don’t think many people nodded, instead staring intensely at Ibiki, leaning in to hear and dreading his next words. I couldn’t say for sure though, because my focus was entirely on the man in front of me. The rest of the classroom had long since faded into the back of my mind.

Ibiki gave a curt nod. “Right. I will begin with Kiri, the Village Hidden in the Rain. I’ll start with
them because they are the exception that proves the rule. They actually did it. I know I just told you it can’t be done, but they did successfully inculcate a high kill rate into their ninja. Over 90%.”

Ibiki’s face became somber and stony. “And gods save them from themselves, because that is not a good thing. The methods they use to make killers are not to be admired or emulated.” He raised his voice, “Kiri ruined itself in the pursuit of more effective fighters and Mist Country has broken under the weight of their sins.”

Ibiki’s voice became short and clipped. “Kiri ninja graduate at fourteen years old. Three years before the other ninja villages. For their graduation exercise they are placed in a line. A line of petty criminals is set bound and kneeling before them. Each student is given a blade and told, one by one, to slit the throat the criminal before them. It is made clear to them that the criminal’s crimes do not warrant execution, they have merely been selected as sacrifices for the exercise. Those graduates who will not do the deed are placed in line and slaughtered by their instructors.”

He took a deep breath. “The specifics of the exercise have changed with time, but the foundation is always the same: the forced murder of those who do not deserve it.”

He frowned. “See, while it is very difficult to reliably get soldiers to kill in combat, it is possible to push soldiers to kill innocents out of combat. Outside of combat you can engineer scenarios which slowly ramp up the atrocities expected of a soldier, one new horror at a time, backed up by incredible peer pressure, social expectations, and the threat of death. The graduation exercise is not the first horror expected of Kiri’s students. Over the course of their education they are forced to aid in torture, dispose of bodies, blind forgers and maim thieves, so that by the time they are called upon to kill they are long familiar with death.”

“The successful graduates are not given time to mourn what they have done. Afterward their instructors celebrate their last step as students, cheering the accomplishment of those who survived, flooding them with praise and camaraderie and treating them as equals. Then they are sent into the wilderness to celebrate, given drugs and explosives and tools of violence to play with, and told to make the most of them. They spend the next three days with no company but each other and their guilty consciousnesses. Together they bond over the horror of what they’ve done and the shared conviction that no one else in the world understands them. Unable to find moral justification for their actions and unwilling to admit cowardice, they convince each other and themselves that might alone justifies what they have done.”

Ibiki gave us a long look before continuing. Seeing his face, I almost thought he might be regretting what he was about to tell us.

“And murder is not the last atrocity expected of them either. When the graduates have returned and recovered, after they have spent the last three maddened days celebrating their atrocities and convincing themselves that they don’t regret what they’ve done, their instructors tell them there is one more step to true adulthood: sex. Any who say they have already had sex are laughed at by their instructors and disbelieved.”

“The graduates are told that, as Kiri ninja, the citizens of Kiri exist to serve them and that they can take from them whatever services and goods they want without charge. They are directed to brothels and told to, as groups, demand free service from the prostitutes there. Only after the graduates have committed this final act of rape, thinly veiled behind justifications hinged on the same reasoning the graduates need to justify the murders they’ve done, are they accepted as full Kiri ninja.”

Ibiki stopped speaking. I wanted to throw up. Without moving my head I turned my vision away from him, looking anywhere but him. Neji was stone-faced, nails biting deep into his palms. Miyuki was hunched over with one hand pressed to her stomach. She looked like she was going to
cry. Tomomi sat rigidly in their seat and stared at Ibiki, but in their chest I could see their heart beating rapidly and their Kikaichu buzzing.

“This is how you forge killers,” Ibiki resumed, “You do it by forging monsters. You take people and you push them so far over the line into atrocity that their moral compass breaks and they can’t see a future in which they will ever be accepted by anyone other than those bonded to them by the trauma of what they’ve done. And, to an extent, it works. Kiri ninja are pound-for-pound the most lethal—and therefore dangerous—ninja you will ever encounter.”

Ibiki paused for effect. “Of course by age twenty most of them will be dead. The plurality of those by suicide. Drug overdoses, suicidally reckless combat, murderous in-fighting, and recklessly untreated illness and injuries are responsible for the rest. Eventually the death rate does taper off, around the mid-twenties. As Kiri’s ninja grow older though, so too does their defection rate. Their defection rate is so high that Kiri alone accounts for over two-thirds of all missing-nin. In fact to the best of my knowledge Kiri doesn’t have a single loyal shinobi over the age of forty.”

“Worse, Kiri’s ninja are unable to be at peace. Having convinced themselves of their identity as killers, they do not know how to be anything else. Between wars they constantly raid their neighbors, accruing massive casualties in the process. And when deprived of a target they find a target. Kiri recently went through a bloody purge in which it fell upon itself and slaughtered its own bloodline users, citing blood purity and the inhumanity of those with bloodline powers. In doing so they decimated their population and destroyed some of the most powerful bloodlines outside of Konoha, permanently ruining their military power.”

“So,” Ibiki finished, “I may have lied a bit earlier about the impossibility of manufacturing killers. Systemically overriding the killing revulsion of one’s soldiery can be done and we do know of one method which does the trick. Does anyone think implementing that method is a good idea, though?”

A civilian kid in the back row threw up a little bit in their mouth. I almost did the same. Those with stronger constitutions fervently shook their heads.

“Good. No one else does either. The rest of the world’s techniques for getting past this block may be far less effective, but Kiri is alone in their methods for good reason. The rest of the world sticks to working around the block, rather than breaking it down entirely.”

“Iwa, the Village Hidden in Stone, focuses on distributing responsibility. Their ninja function in organized units trained to operate in combat formations and attack as one. They use massed exploding kunai, jointly performed jutsu, and other group attacks. The diffusion of responsibility allows them to convince themselves that they, individually, were not responsible for any kills. Furthermore they operate under the command of an officer who does not fight directly, but rather performs the function of yelling orders to attack and engage. In this manner Iwa’s ninja are insulated from responsibility for the decision to kill and are burdened only with its execution. Their entire society is designed around this concept, their ninja live with no clear distinction between the unit and the individual and their day-to-day lives are rigidly controlled by authority figures they are expected to obey unquestioningly.”

“They get perhaps a ten to fifteen percent kill rate.” Ibiki shrugged dismissively, making it clear what he thought of such a paltry increase. “Next.”

“Kumo, the Village Hidden in Clouds, has decided to solve this problem by focusing all of their efforts on the small fraction of their ninja who can kill. They tell their ninja that rank is all that matters and that combat prowess is the only way to attain rank. Their ninja are blooded early, with those unable to kill sidelined and dismissed as weak, while the small fraction who can are praised
and heaped with honors and wealth. Their killers are trained to the exclusion of all others, given the best of everything. And this works somewhat. Their killing rate is not actually higher than normal, but that fraction of their fighting force which can kill is incredibly powerful and devastating on the battlefield.”

“However their leadership is mostly made up of muscle-headed idiots and suborning their lower-tier ninja is pathetically easy. Their intelligence departments are laughably underfunded and our administrative ninja run circles around them for fun when there’s nothing else to do. Next.”

“Our current ally Suna, the Village Hidden in Sand, has come up with some surprisingly effective solutions to humans’ reticence to kill. But before I tell you what they are…”

“Tenten!” he called out. The bun-haired civilian girl jolted straight up. “You recently wrote a paper for your teachers on the weapons methodology and efficacy of various ninja villages, as part of a request for additional off-hours training and tutoring and admittance to sparring sessions with some of the older students. You paper was excellent, well thought out, and very insightful, but it contained some serious errors. If you think you can, would you like to name and correct those errors before your paper is judged?”

Tenten straightened her spine and thrust out her jaw. “Yes sir, I would!”

Ibiki smiled. “Excellent! Stand up Tenten. Now tell me, what do you think was your first mistake?”

The civilian girl pushed herself out of her seat and stood at rigid attention in front of the ninja commander. “I heavily criticized Suna’s method of chakra-controlled puppet combat in my paper. I cited the high skill threshold required to use them, the high upkeep cost, the low physical performance of puppets relative to ninja, their fragility, and their vulnerability to several well-known techniques which counter chakra strings as underperforming factors. However my most salient criticism of them was that they could be better. I posited that a cloud of orbiting parts and directly wielded weapons held around a ninja as a form of combat augmentation would outperform puppets in combat.”

This earned a nod from Ibiki. “And why was this incorrect?”

“Based on the information you have given us so far, I would guess there is a psychological advantage to be gained by fighting with a puppet, particularly humanoid puppets. I suspect that the technique creates a mental disconnect with the combat one engages in, enabling Suna puppeteers to more readily engage in combat than if they used their chakra strings to directly wield weapons.”

The grin on Ibiki’s face could only be described as delighted. It was creepy as hell. “Your next mistake?”

“My criticism of their poisons, sir. I heavily criticized their widespread use of slow-acting paralytic and muscle seizing agents, in particular the degree to which they employ curable poisons. I acknowledged that such poisons are useful for capture missions and reduce the rate of accidental deaths among Suna ninja, but stated that Suna’s practice of using them almost universally is ridiculous, citing Tsunade’s rescue and curing of sixty-two poisoned ninjas during the second Shinobi War as a reason why the practice has more drawbacks than benefits.”

“Do you still believe that?”

“No sir! I would guess that ninja wielding the slow acting poisons are more likely to strike their enemy than those wielding fast acting or instantaneous poisons, off-setting the effect of cured enemy combatants.” She remained standing at attention after she finished, staring at Ibiki.
Ibiki chuckled darkly. “You don’t know how right you are. I don’t fault you for not knowing this when you wrote your paper, you haven’t reached this point in your history courses yet, but Suna did employ instantaneous poisons in the first Shinobi War. Every kunai, shuriken, senbon and sword they used was coated with a poison that caused instant death on introduction to the bloodstream, to which all Suna ninja were rendered immune by regular ingestion of a counter-agent. It was an amazing feat of chemical engineering and it was also the single greatest strategic fuck-up of recorded history.”

“Suna’s kill rate was almost nothing for the entire war. Typically, even ninja who can’t kill will at least *fight*. Most ninja find it difficult to thrust at an enemy with edged weapons, but they’ll at least slash with their kunai and try to bloody their opponent. It’s not uncommon for ninja to get nicked somewhere vital or bleed out regardless of how seriously the ninja attacking them is trying to kill them. Combat is dangerous to the point where it can be difficult *not* to kill your enemy sometimes, even when you’re not really trying to, and the casualties from that rack up. But when Suna equipped their ninja with those poisoned weapons? Gods, nothing on this planet could get them to so much as prick their opponents. The number of Suna ninja with confirmed melee kills during the first Shinobi War can be counted on one hand. And I’m pretty sure at least one of those ninja got onto that list because she fumbled her blade during a fight.”

“It was *pathetic*. It was the worst wartime performance anyone had ever heard of. So after that Suna changed tactics. Now every blade was coated with slow acting poisons. When Tsunade made her debut as a healer during the second Shinobi War, Suna actually *talked up* her miraculous healing skills to its ninja. Every Suna ninja knew that an opponent they cut would be off the battlefield with convulsions in moments and out with muscle damage for months but would likely live to see another day. And they were *grateful* for that. They would fight like demons to protect their comrades and sleep that same night with clear consciences.”

“Of course what Suna didn’t release to its general soldiery was that Tsunade lost one hundred and thirty eight poisoned ninja as she tried to heal them.”

Students hissed breaths in through their teeth.

Ibiki nodded grimly. “Far more ninja died to Suna’s poisons than were effectively cured. Far, far more. But if you ask Suna’s veterans, almost all of them will cheerfully tell you that they never killed a single person the whole war. Never sent a single soul to meet the shinigami.” He spoke into the stunned disbelief pervading the classroom, “Suna’s methods for bypassing one’s resistance to kill are *very* effective. I won’t tell you their exact kill percentage as they’re allies at the moment and that information is classified, but it’s better than Iwa’s I can tell you that.”

He looked back up to the girl standing proud and tall at her seat. “Tenten. You have much to learn. You made a huge mistake when analyzing Suna’s tactics. While you couldn’t have known any of this information when you wrote your paper, you still made a very arrogant mistake by assuming that Suna’s tactics were simply foolish. That is never an assumption a ninja can make. We must always assume that our foes know what they are doing and err on the side of caution, asking if their apparent foolishness might really be our own ignorance. However, you did an admirable job correcting your mistakes before the class. That takes a strong heart and swift mind. I’m sure your teachers are very proud of you. You may be seated.”

Tenten nodded firmly and sat down, smiling resolutely and brimming with confidence. I saw Neji giving her an appraising look from the other end of the room.

Continuing, Ibiki said, “There is one more smaller component to Suna’s killing tactics. The wind affinity most of their ninja are born with enables devastating short-range cutting jutsu, but Suna
doesn’t systemically train its ninja in that for what I hope are now obvious psychological reasons. Instead they focus on long range wide area cutting jutsu, pushing jutsu, projectile deflection jutsu, and flight jutsu. All of which are valuable and useful jutsu without too much psychological baggage.”

“The reason I bring this up is because this is why Konoha does not teach elemental jutsu as a matter of course. Almost all Konoha ninja are born with a fire affinity and unless you’re very skilled and have access to a wide range of techniques, fire is simply a shit tool for not killing people. At the very least it causes horrific agony and damage which is almost as difficult for a ninja to inflict as straight up murder. So we don’t make fire jutsu part of the curriculum. It will be incredibly rare for any of you to fight alongside a fellow ninja who uses fire.”

And as he said that, he nodded at me. At me. He bobbed his head a little and looked right at me. I swallowed. There was a lump in my throat. I … I didn’t know how to respond to that. I wanted to cry. I wanted to thank him.

I really wanted to cry. Good tears, probably.

The lecture didn’t stop. Ibiki started pacing back and forth in front of the class. “Which brings us around to Konoha. Tell me, with all I’ve told you so far, how do all of you think Konoha ninja deal with this problem? After all, if our enemies won’t leave us alone we have to fight back somehow.”

Hesitantly, slowly, Neji raised his hand.

“Yes, and your name is…?” Ibiki called on him as he paced.

“Neji, sir.” Neji chewed on his tongue. “Sir, I don’t think I have to kill. The Gentle Fist style doesn’t need to be lethal to be combat effective. I can incapacite or paralyze an enemy as easily as I can kill them, and once they’re down I can shut down all their chakra pathways. So … I don’t have to kill.”

There was that creepy smile on Ibiki’s face again. He nodded slowly. “Anyone else?”

A Nara spoke up. “It’s pretty hard to kill with my clan’s techniques. Anyone who touches our shadows is immobilized and we can force them to mirror our motions, sure, but it’s kind of complicated to kill someone like that. We’re basically unbeatable in melee combat but it’s actually pretty hard for us to kill anyone.”

Tomomi followed up without waiting for Ibiki to speak up. “The Aburame’s clan techniques are much better suited to incapacitation than murder. Kikaichu insects can eat flesh, but they much more effectively devour chakra. And enemies will fall insensate from chakra loss long before they die of it.”

“Our clan’s genjutsu is unbreakable if we have time to set up.”

“The Inuzuka are mostly tracking or search and rescue. We have a lot of combat medics too, our wolves are good for getting people off the battlefield and watching our backs. And our fighting style is mostly slashes and grappling.”

“We use chakra draining techniques.”

“My clan is literally all chakra doctors. Most of us don’t do combat, and those who do just touch people to take them out of the fight.”

Ibiki had begun pacing faster and faster as more students spoke up. “Yes!” he cried out, “Yes! This
is how Konoha fights! By not having to kill at all! The first Hokage, Hashirama Senju, planned exactly this when he brought together the clans which make up Konoha. Konoha is entirely made up of clans with effective non-lethal techniques, or whose techniques supplement those with non-lethal techniques. Of course, the best part is where my department comes in.”

*Oh. Here we go with the sadism now.*

“I just manage Torture and Interrogation for the most part, I’m not an actual interrogator. Because we don’t need interrogators. We’ve got the goddamn Yamanaka.” He laughed. “We have the goddamn mind-reader clan. You can’t ask for better synergy with a village of non-lethal capture specialists than that. Any enemy we defeat in battle, Konoha immediately knows everything they know. Every technique and piece of intel they’ve got. And to be fair the Yamanaka aren’t bad at non-lethal capture themselves, their possession techniques are pretty good, but that’s secondary to their function as the lynchpin of how Konoha fights.”

“And for those of you civilian kids who are worried about being left out in all of this, there’s no need to worry. We’ve got you covered. Our recent alliance with Suna has given us access to all kinds of nonlethal disabling poisons, we’ve got genjutsu specialists by the cartload, and after my capture I personally went on to design dozens of non-lethal restraining jutsus. Which if you’re interested in learning, I teach a supplementary jutsu class on them to first-year members of the Genin Corp each Thursday. I’ll be passing around a sign-up slip at the end of class, your teachers have given you permission to skip end-of-the-day social classes to come sit in on them if you want to.”

*Okay, but what about the torture? Seriously, he’s the head of Torture and Interrogation, is he just going to gloss over the torture part of T&I?*

“Sir?” I raised my hand before I even realized what I was doing. “What about the ‘torture’ in your department name? Where does the torture come into the interrogations, if that’s just handled by the Yamanaka?”

I got a flat disappointed look directed at me for my question. “Yuki, you’re a clan child. You should know better than that.”

Uh, what? Not sure what you mean by that, but okay. I rolled with the rebuttal in spite of my confusion though. “Yes sir. But not everyone here is from a ninja clan and I thought there might be some confusion that ought to be cleared up.”

Ibiki gave me a look that I was pretty sure meant he’d seen right through me but was humoring me anyways because I had a point. “Right. First of all not all interrogations are handled by the Yamanaka. Sometimes interrogation means forging relationships, not breaking into people’s minds. But to answer your question, Konoha doesn’t torture prisoners of war for information. Some of the other villages do, as you can tell by looking at me. But much like how murderous violence is a less effective tool of war than we would wish it to be, so too is torture.”

Ibiki sighed. “Humans are both incredibly resilient and fragile under torture. On the one hand we rarely give honest information while being tortured and rarely cooperate with torturers for more than a brief instant at a time. Torture does amazing things to stiffen one’s will. On the other hand, human memory is ridiculously fragile and the stress of torture often makes people straight up forget the information they’re being tortured for. I can tell you without exaggeration that when I was being tortured I would not have given up my comrades’ location no matter what … but that it also didn’t matter because I couldn’t fucking remember where our goddamn base was. Literally could not remember for the life of me. Eventually I made something up and lied to them, which is another problem with torture, that interrogators are shit at identifying lies. And yes, there are lie-
detecting jutsus out there, but if you have one of those then you probably have better options for ferreting out information than torture.”

“The long story short is: torture doesn’t work as a method of acquiring information so Konoha doesn’t use torture for that. No, in Konoha torture is only used to give traitors the deaths they deserve. Fortunately Konoha ninja are loyal, and it’s a rare day that I’m called upon to mete out such a punishment.”

The head of Torture and Interrogation clapped his hands. “So, any other questions? I’m sure you all have a lot.”

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Chapter End Notes

I'd love to hear thoughts and comments on this chapter, and heck, if you have any questions that *you* would want to ask Ibiki about this, I'd be happy to answer them in the comments.

If you want to learn more about humans’ inability to kill in general (and the conditioning militaries and other violent organizations use to circumvent it), a great book to start with is *On Killing* by Lt. Col. Dave Grossman. (Note: Grossman is a very reliable educator when he sticks to compiling scientific research others have performed, but when he has some personal suppositions which are unfounded by research it's best to be skeptical. That's mostly relevant in his professional life outside of *On Killing*, but I figured it merited mentioning.) Information on torture and a wide variety of primary and research sources about torture can be found on the ScriptTorture tumblr.

Modern militaries actually are very good at conditioning soldiers to kill, with a success rate well over 90% that doesn’t require the use of atrocities. However, I don’t think ninja are well approximated as infantry and I don’t think modern conditioning methods would work on them at all. I think ninja are actually closer to fighter pilots with regards to how they fight. And fighter pilots (from before the era of automated targeting systems) don’t seem to benefit from modern conditioning techniques. US-Vietnam war pilots (post-conditioning) have the same kill-statistics as WWII (pre-conditioning) pilots. This is likely because you can’t effectively dogfight without predicting your enemy’s movements, and the neural mechanism governing empathy that infantry conditioning works around is the same mechanism used to predict an opponent’s movements. So I’m treating ninja as if they wouldn’t benefit from modern military conditioning for the same reason.

Side note: Less than 2% of pilots account for over 50% of all kills, and there are reasons to think that’s not just a skill difference. It seems to be because very few pilots can actually bring themselves to kill and the need to predict enemy pilot movements to fight effectively precludes standard conditioning techniques, so most kills end up being done by the vanishingly small fraction of pilots who are both killers and decent
pilots. History has also produced some notable monster pilots who were the right intersection of murderous and highly skilled and ended up with hundreds of credited kills. Lastly, it’s not uncommon throughout history to see planes of vastly different technological quality and capability on the same battlefield. All of which seems to closely mirror how ninja combat is shown in Naruto, so I’m grabbing this underlying rationale behind how ninja combat works and running with it.
Good Morning

Chapter Notes

Just a reminder, I've pushed up the graduation age for my story. For my purposes the standard Konoha graduation age is 17.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 34: Good Morning

(16 years)

Misao started class with a thunderous **clap** of her justu-enlarged hands, quieting the early birds in the class and jolting awake those of us who had maybe stayed up a bit late fine-tuning the gain profile of a lightning amplifier.

“Good morning class!” she boomed. “Today is a very exciting day!”

Nope, it is not. **Going back to sleep now.** I flopped my head back down and damped the chakra in my eyes as far as it’d go, ignoring the disapproving look Kazue was shooting the back of my head. Neji and I had figured out how to expel chakra from every tenketsu last year (well, Neji had and I’d learned from him) and I no longer feared the wrath of our diminutive living hive of an instructor. I could fry any nibbling kikaichu she put on me without batting an eye.

…. okay that was a lie. There was still plenty to fear about Kazue’s wrath and I was definitely going to pay for this during physical conditioning later. But she couldn’t use her kikaichu to bite me awake at this exact moment and present-me was plenty willing to borrow sleep now at the cost of future-me’s pain and suffering.

I tuned out whatever lecture Misao was starting the day with and settled in for a good nap. Before I could properly drift off though Miyuki -who was sitting next to me- jabbed me in the side. “Hey,” she signed at me silently. “This sounds important. Wake up.”

I shot the nap-traitor a glare, sparing an extra disdainful look for the sleeping puppy nestled in the collar of her jacket atop her breasts. **He** got to sleep in, why didn’t I? I sighed resentfully and resigned myself to being awake and paying attention.

**Stupid ninja world not having coffee beans. What kind of desolate hellscape doesn’t have morning coffee?**

“-among the new students joining us this year-” I blinked rapidly, trying to catch up to what Misao was saying, “-will be Nozomi Ishi, Goro Inuzuka, Eriko, Naruto Uzumaki-”

**WHAT?!**

“-and Kaisei Nohara. Treat them as cherished comrades. They’re working hard to become full ninja
just as you are, and I expect you to give them the same respect you give to your fellow students that you’ve been working with up until this point.”

_Whoa whoa whoa, back up. Naruto is joining our class?! Why?! What did I change?! Isn’t he supposed to be in Hinata’s class?! The hell is going on?!_

I snapped my head around to Miyuki and gave her my best ‘I wasn’t listening and I know I should have been but now I’m lost, please help’ look. It was a well-used expression. As was the ‘I resent you for being like this and still getting better grades than me, I ought to just let you flounder’ expression she gave me in return.

It wasn’t a serious look though and, like always, she relented and caught me up. “They’re the students from the year above us who failed the graduation exam. They’re retaking the last year with us,” she signed to me as subtly as possible. (Which was quite subtly. Konoha Sign favored hideable hand movements over the broad gestures of sign languages from my old world).

_Okay but … what? That doesn’t explain anything! Naruto is in Hinata’s year! He graduates with Hinata! He was definitely in Hinata’s class at the beginning of the story when he- Oh. Right. - when he failed the graduation exam. For the third time._

His story never actually showed him with a different Academy class than Hinata’s, but to end up in her class after failing and retaking his last year twice he would have had to start two years ahead of her. Which was a year ahead of Neji and I, which meant he’d briefly be in our year after he failed the exam the first time.

_Huh. I can’t believe I forgot about that. Woops?_

Well. It didn’t really matter that much. Naruto, frankly, was just not that important to me. His life turned out alright in the end and I had absolutely no interest in using him to affect the future. So far as I was concerned, any situation which could actually _benefit_ from the Kyuubi’s power unleashed would already be fucked up beyond my ability to influence. No, I was good without ingratiating myself into Naruto’s life. Having him be around for a year would be a bit weird and unexpected (and from what I could remember of his classroom antics, probably kind of frustrating too) but ultimately kind of unimportant.

_Alright, I decided, the verdict on Naruto being in my class is: surprising, not life-changing. Not need to do anything about it. Well, maybe I’ll dress him down about unwanted romantic overtures or something though, Sakura did seem pretty upset by his advances in the story and the world could always do with less of that shit. Hmm. Hinata knows Sakura, right? Don’t the two of them talk? Maybe I should have the same conversation with Sakura too, get her to be more considerate of Sasuke._

“Remember class,” Misao continued, “by this point we’ve already taught you everything you need to know to be a ninja. This last year isn’t about learning new material, it’s about refining what you know, repairing gaps in your knowledge, and completing your mastery of any techniques which you may be struggling with, particularly the basic three jutsu. Most of you still struggle with at least one of them after all, this year will be a time to focus on mastering them.”

“Please keep in mind, when you meet our new students, that most of them merely failed to complete one of the basic three before the end of their last year, and that this is _normal_. Everyone’s chakra networks develop at different rates and while some of you may have been casting clan jutsu since you were nine—” Misao shot a glare at an utterly unrepentant Yamanaka prankster who’d picked up genjutsu at an unfortunately formative age, “-some of you may simply have to wait another year or two for your chakra coils to finish developing.”
“Yosh!” Rock Lee shouted from the back of the room. “This will be the year that my chakra blossoms and I master the ninja arts!” (No, Gai hadn’t gotten to him yet either. Konoha ninja culture really is just Like That). Admittedly Lee was a little extra, but not so much that Misao didn’t just ignore his outburst and move on.

I winced though. I knew that Lee’s chakra coils wouldn’t ever properly develop. Whatever the problem was though, I couldn’t see it and I hadn’t figured out a believable way to tell him that his hopes were misplaced. The best I could do for him was wait for him to get whatever medical verdict he’d get, and then do whatever I could to make doubly sure he ended up getting mentored by Gai.

Eventually Misao finished impressing on us ‘don’t make fun of the held-back students, you could easily be one of them next year’ and Kazue slipped off to bring them from wherever they’d been waiting. The class erupted into speculation about what the new students would be like and I did my best to tune it out and go back to sleep. I was foiled by Miyuki though, who once again refused to let me nap in peace and poked me in the side.

“Hey Yuki,” she said, out loud this time, “what’s so interesting about the incoming students?”

Huh? “What’re you talking about Mimi?”

“You freaked out earlier when Misao listed off the new-” Miyuki paused, tilting her head thoughtfully. “Are they new students? Or are they old students? Hmmm.” She dropped the tangential train of thought a moment later and shook herself, hair forming a fluffy cloud around her head. “You freaked out when Misao listed the new students. Why?”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “Oh?”

She tapped the new Inuzuka tattoos marking her cheeks, which pulsed in time with the identical tattoos of the puppy sleeping in her collar. “My smell’s finally started to synch up with Ren’s. You absolutely freaked out when you heard who was joining our class. I could smell it. So. I want to know why.”

I gave her a flat stare. I wanted to go back to sleep.

“Um,” Miyuki grabbed hold of a tuft of her fluffy hair and ran her hands over it, “did you actually freak out? I thought you did but I could have been wrong …” She looked almost vaguely queasy and I could see her heart rate picking up a little.

I grimaced. Miyuki had been taking extra people-reading lessons these last couple years, on account of being really bad at reading social cues. Like not just ‘you shouldn’t be an infiltrator’ bad, but ‘this is kind of a problem’ bad. And well, the classes had done her a lot of good. She really had gotten better. But she was also aware that ‘better’ was not ‘good’, and now she was all kinds of self-conscious about misplacing social cues. So while I didn’t particularly want to talk about why hearing Naruto’s name had jump-started my heart, I also didn’t want to let Miyuki think she’d made a mistake when she’d in fact pegged my reaction perfectly.

“Nnyeeeceeehh,” I dragged out. How do I want to play this? “Okay, look, this information is technically I stressed the word, “not classified for me. It is classified, under pain of death, but only for people who were around for the classification decree. People who are told after the fact are explicitly allowed to tell other people. The idea is that there’s one person who’s supposed to be able to spread the information to those they trust to spread it further, but like, the way it’s all worded means that anyone born after the fact who finds out can tell anyone regardless of the way they learned it.” I left the implied lie ‘and I know this information because of my super awesome x-
I continued as Miyuki’s hands stilled on her hair and her nostrils flared, “It’s not even a secret though. Every adult in the village knows it and so do all our enemies too. I wouldn’t even mention this if I thought I was breaking the village’s confidence by doing so.” As Ibiki had told us, traitors in Konoha died ugly deaths. “It’s just, y’know, not the kind of thing you tell someone without making a show of being reluctant to tell them.”

Miyuki blinked twice. “That’s dumb.”

“Which part?”

“If you’re going to tell something you should just tell them, but the rest of it too. Classified should be classified.”

“So do you not want to hear it?”

“No! Of course I want to hear it! You can’t say all that and then not tell me! I’ll have Ren bite your ankles.” She softly pet her sleeping puppy’s head. “It’s still stupid though.”

I shrugged. “I mean, I don’t disagree with you.” Well, I did understand the Hokage’s logic, why he’d banned people from telling Naruto about his status as host of a demon god. Agreed with it even. Given that most jinchuuriki went a little mad with power (or a lot mad with power), trying to give your jinchuuriki a normal ninja childhood was pretty sensible. Besides, the logic probably went, you can always tell your jinchuuriki about their powers later, but you can’t untell them. No harm done in waiting. And all things considered “child grows up isolated without knowing why” is probably better than “child grows up thinking that everyone rightly hates them because they’re intrinsically a mass-murdering monster”. I just didn’t see much of a point in all the secrecy now, at this point in the game.

“Alright,” I said, “Naruto Uzumaki is the Kyuubi jinchuuriki. And I feel like I should stress, I didn’t freak out because I’m scared of him. By all accounts I’ve heard,” i.e. supposedly by existing in proximity to the Hyuuga grapevine, which was an absolutely fantastic cover for all sorts of knowledge I wasn’t supposed to have, “Naruto is a socially inept prankster, a bit of a jerk, and a bad student. So not a bijuu-dominated monster, I think I would have heard of his latest rampage before I heard about his latest prank if that were the case. It was just weird to realize he’s going to be in our class. A bit of a reminder of the Kyuubi attack, y’know?”

“Huh.” Miyuki tilted her head. “Does he have special jinchuuriki powers?”

“Uhhh, no? Other than having more chakra than I’ve ever seen in a person? I don’t think so?”

Miyuki harrumphed. “Doesn’t each jinchuuriki get a special power from their bijuu though? Like there’s the flying one and the acid one and the sand one and the magma one-”

“Um. No? Well, yes, I guess the others do. But I don’t think Naruto does. I mean he still can’t do jutsu yet so who knows, but I’m pretty sure the previous Kyuubi jinchuurikis didn’t either.”

“Really? Why not?”

“Why would I know?”

Just then Tomomi leaned over the desk behind us. “Why would you know what?”

Miyuki leaned back to look at the Aburame. “Hey Tomomi. One of the new students is the
Kyuubi’s jinchuuriki—she looked back at me, “Naruto, right?” she turned back to Tomomi, “-but
Yuki says he doesn’t have a special bijuu power and that can’t be right.”

Uhhhhhhhh, I stared at my two classmates now talking about Naruto the Jinchuuriki.

Tomomi called over to Tenten. “Tenten, you wrote a paper on bijuu hosts once, yes?”

“Yeah?”

Miyuki shouted across the classroom. “We need you to prove Yuki wrong!”

Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh .

“About what?”

Wait, fuck, maybe I didn’t think this through.

“One of the new students is the Kyuubi’s jinchuuriki but Yuki says he doesn’t get any special bijuu
power from it.”

Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck. I could see Misao’s jaw slacken just a little bit as she turned her head and
stared right at us.

“My paper was on how Konoha has classically combated jinchuuriki, and we favor sealing teams
over host to host combat, so I didn’t study up on Konoha’s Kyuubi host. Wait, wait wait wait, the
jinchuuriki is one of the new students? Who?!”

An Inuzuka who’d apparently been eavesdropping (and damnit I should have noticed the hearing
jutsu woven through his ears) answered her off-handedly. “The Naruto kid. Hey!” he called out,
“Anyone know anything about jinchuuriki?”

Ah. So this is what accepting the inexorable force of events spiraling out of your control feels like.
It’s very zen. I can only hope Misao finds it in her heart to accept this same feeling when it comes
time to assign blame later.

This was, of course, the moment Kazue re-entered the classroom, followed by a short line of
students, including one short blond-haired boy with a blazing spiral seal inscribed on his stomach.

“Hey!” the Inuzuka kid yelled out, “Which one of you is Naruto?”

Naruto jutted his chin out and squared off. “Who wants to know?”

“Eiji Inuzuka! Now, new kid, what’s it like to be a jinchuuriki?”

“A what?”

“A jinchuuriki?”

Naruto narrowed his eyes. “Are you making fun of me or something?”

“Huh? No.” Eiji turned to Tomomi and stage-whispered to them, “That is the right pronunciation,
right?” At Tomomi’s nod he turned back to Naruto. “Yeah. You know, living sacrificial vessel for
the demon nine-tailed fox. That’s you, right?”

“Uhhhh, no?”
Maybe there’s still hope-

Neji butted in. “He has bigger chakra reserves than a sannin and a seal on his stomach that’s pumping a chunin’s worth of chakra into him each minute from summon space - and it looks like his seal’s flow might be at a low ebb. It’s definitely him.”

**Damnit Neji.**

“Eh? I’ve got a what on my stomach?”

Eiji chimed in again, somewhat exasperatedly. “A jinchuuriki seal. A container for the Kyuubi’s spirit, the demon god that nearly destroyed the village, what, seventeen years … actually, no wait, the day you were born. What, do you call it something else?”

“Okay, now I know you assholes are yanking my leg. Hey Teach-” Naruto turned to Kazue and stopped when he saw the stricken look on her face. “Teach?”

“I swear Hokage, sir,” I mentally composed, “I had no idea that Naruto wasn’t supposed to know he was the jinchuuriki. I am but a poor innocent child to whom it never occurred that Naruto would be kept in the dark about such a crucial aspect of his life. I shared the knowledge I did only out of ignorance of the specifics of a law I was never told. I swear I didn’t fuck up your plans for the life of Konoha’s only jinchuuriki simply because of a sleep deprivation induced forethought deficit.”

“NO FREAKING WAY!” Naruto shouted after a short hushed exchange with Kazue.

*Ohhhhh, I done fucked up.*

Chapter End Notes

It’s okay Yuki, the rest of the fandom forgets Naruto didn’t start out in the Rookie Nine’s year too. You’re not alone. Seriously though, it’s so universal in fanfiction for Naruto to start out in the same year as the other Rookie Nine that I completely forgot he didn’t actually grow up alongside them until I went back and reread parts of Naruto as a refresher for this story. I can't think of a single fanfiction I've ever read which actually places Naruto in the canon age group.

But oh let me tell you, did I get ideas when I realized that this meant Naruto would share a year with Yuki. :D
Chapter Notes

Having finals and getting sick have resulted in this going up a day late, but haha, I still got it done.

I wish I’d had more time to edit this, but I’m happy with what I got done.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 35: Feather On A Scale

The Hokage, I decided, has a sick sense of humor.

The Hokage had a busy schedule. I got that. But I was now on hour three of sitting in a waiting room at the bottom of the Hokage’s tower and if I had to wait any longer the stress was going to make my heart fucking explode.

When word had come down from Misao that my little slip of the tongue had been kicked all the way up the chain and now the Hokage wanted to talk to me … well, okay in retrospect this was obviously silly but in the moment I’d kind of expected to be whisked off to see the Hokage right then and there. I hadn’t really been expecting an appointment to see the Hokage four full days later. I hadn’t really been prepared to wait four days to see him.

I’d had half a week to imagine exactly what a personal meeting with the Hokage would entail after I’d blown an S-rank classified secret to the one person in the entire world who was specifically not supposed to know it. Half a week to realize that I had not just maybe crossed a line, but flagrantly and blatantly torn up a personal directive of the Hokage on the barest technicality. Half a week to come to terms with just how serious my silly mistake was.

I’d had to soothe Dad’s sharp worry, justify myself under Mom’s disappointment, own up Aunt Yuki’s reminders of the responsibility of an all-seeing eye, tell Misao and Kazue that I understood just how bad a slip of the tongue like this looked in my final year, and explain to Neji and Hinata what had gone wrong and why I might be in trouble. Having to confront the way my mistake mattered to the people around me had made me realize just how worried I should be.

But facing that had been … good, in a way. I’d had to manage everyone else’s worries for me and only then deal with my own growing fear. I’d filled the space useless panic would have grown in with other’s concerns, postponing my worries until the last moment when there’d be no time for them. And it’d worked.

But now? Three empty hours after the moment I’d steeled myself for? Well, let’s just say I’d gained an intimate lesson with what it sounds like when one’s own heart cannibalizes itself.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck, I fucked up so badly. I really could get my security clearance revoked for this. I mean I’m a Hyuuga, security permissions are more of a suggestion for us than rules, but officially Akito can’t teach me sealing unless I have a security clearance. I could lose my apprenticeship
over this couldn’t I? No, nononono. Without sealing I’m just a Hyuuga with an abnormally short Byakugan range, and branch Hyuuga who can’t spy get put in front-line suppression squads! My stomach twisted and I had to swallow bile at the thought. Fuck what if the Hokage just revokes my security clearance without even thinking about it? I could lose everything in a moment. No, no, nononononono-

I was not exactly handling the wait well.

Of course it had occurred to me that maybe this was part of my punishment. That the Hokage knew exactly what went through the minds of people who were waiting on him for a judgement and incorporated that into their reprimand. That this could be the meat of an otherwise minor punishment, making me live out my fears of what could happen. It had also occurred to me that maybe I was overthinking things and he really was just too busy for me, in which case he might decide what to do about my indiscretion with haste, in which case I might be facing some very serious consequences.

But the moment that I knew it was the former, that I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt the Hokage was intentionally keeping me waiting to fuck with my head, was the moment Naruto walked into the room.

“Hey!” The shorter kid yelled at me as soon as he walked into the waiting room, waving from across the room. “What are you doing here?! You’re Yuki, right? Or are you Neji? Eiji told me which one of you had the scars but I forgot, heh.” Naruto rubbed the back of his head sheepishly.

I turned and blinked at the exuberant teenager bounding over to me, absolutely not in the right state of mind to deal with that energy. “Yuki.” I answered flatly. “Neji’s the pretty one.”

“Eugh, I know right? All the girls in class think he’s so pretty. Just ‘cus he’s got fancy hair and high cheekbones and long fingers. Why do girls always think guys with long fingers are pretty?”

The response which immediately sprang to the tip of my tongue was, ‘I don’t know, I’ve got long fingers too and people don’t think I’m pretty’. Which could just as easily serve as a subtle reminder to Naruto that he was touching on a sensitive subject, a more serious reproach, or a vindictive way to make him squirm, depending on my tone. But I just wasn’t in a state for any of that. Instead I returned an ambiguous grunt of plausible agreement and returned to trying to swallow down my sour panic, hoping Naruto would take the hint.

“So what’re you doing here?” Naruto asked, jumping into the chair right next to mine, facing my scarred side. “I’ve never seen another student waiting for the Hokage before. I mean I’m in here all the time ‘cus the old man likes yelling at me, but I didn’t think he yelled at anyone else too.” Naruto froze as a thought occurred to him. “Uh, you are in trouble, right? You’re not here for some fancy special noble ninja thing, are yah?”

I turned back to Naruto again and blinked. “No, I’m in trouble. And I’m not a noble.”

“Heyyy!!!” Naruto crowed and slapped me on the back, rocking me forward. “I knew you were cool! Oh. Oh wait!” Naruto’s eyes grew wide. “I’m here for a fancy special noble ninja thing! The old man had a talk with me about the whole jinchuuuur-” Naruto drew out the word, clearly not knowing how to pronounce it, “uh, demon thing, a few days ago right after that whole thing in class. But he wanted me to come back so we could talk about it more, and like, hosting a demon god kinda makes me a noble, right? Or something, right? Hah! So now I’m here for a special noble ninja thing and you’re the fancy noble but you’re here ‘cus you’re in trouble!” He ended with another laugh. “Hah!”
I really wasn’t in a mood to respond to any of that, but … “I’m not a noble.”

“Eh? But you’ve got the weird creepy white eyes. Eiji said they let you see my demon and stuff. Isn’t that ‘cus you’re a Hyuuga?”

“I’m branch family Hyuuga. It’s not the same.”

“But-”

“It’s not.”

Naruto was clearly looking to push the issue when, finally, one of the Hokage’s attendants poked their head in the room and called out, “Yuki Hyuuga? The Hokage will see you now.”

Oh. I swallowed and blanched. I suppose we’re doing this then. Hopefully the Hokage doesn’t upend my entire future, I guess. Panic roared through my chest and I suddenly found my thoughts slippery and distant as an urge to pull back and dissociate from this whole thing hit me. I called back to the attendant with a voice that I distantly recognized as too empty, “Thank you. I’ll be there in just a moment.”

I turned to Naruto to say … goodbye? See you in class? I wasn’t quite sure how to act around him or what to say, and the slippery balance I was maintaining between pulling away from my panic and not dissociating so much I couldn’t function wasn’t helping.

But Naruto suffered from no such issue. He grinned widely and clasped my scarred shoulder. “Hey, good luck Yuki! And don’t let the old man yell at you too much, okay? You’re too cool for that.”

“Oh, sure.” I responded automatically. Too much emptiness in my voice. I couldn’t be this distant with the Hokage. I shrugged Naruto’s hand off my shoulder so I could rub my right hand over it and then my left hand over my right shoulder, grounding my self just a bit in the sensation of balancing my body. I backed up towards the attendant who was waiting for me. “Hey, um, thanks though. For the luck. Really, I think I’ll need it.”

Naruto grinned broadly at me. “Yeah! See you later Yuki!”

“See you later Naruto,” I said as I left.

Naruto kept grinning until the door shut between us. Once I was out of his line of sight his smile faltered. That bright bombastic personality of his dimmed, before coming back full force a moment later as he pulled his head up and smiled forcefully.

For a brief moment part of the messy whirlwind of my mind wanted to stay and see what was up with him, but then I was being led up to see the Hokage and I didn’t have room for anything else.

The Hokage’s office sat atop the tallest tower in the village, a spacious room with broad windows granting him a sweeping view of the city below. It was designed with a very open feeling in mind, made to be easy to work in, while the chairs for supplicants were set at a remove from the Hokage’s desk, transforming the Hokage into a distant figure framed against the full sweeping beauty of Konoha.

Of course its windows were actually intricate illusions of woven light sealed onto plate steel and the room had an open plan so it could comfortably fit four invisible ANBU and an invisible wolf, which kind of ruined the effect for me. I imagine the room would be much more pleasant for people who didn’t realize they were locked in an airtight steel box with recirculation seals and ANBU looming within striking distance.
I gave a very small wave to the pair of ANBU flanking me, hoping it would make them feel less intimidating.

It did not.

Also, what the fuck? The slippery almost-dissociation of my thoughts fell apart in shock as I took in the rest of the room. Was that an Uchiha ANBU standing behind the Hokage? With their Sharingan inactive Uchiha eyes were barely distinguishable from ordinary eyes so it was hard to tell. Even I had to strain to see the distinction and my Byakugan had exceptional detail definition. But … no, the woman standing behind the Hokage was definitely an Uchiha. There was no mistaking that trace optical scarring from the chakra surge when her Sharingan had activated. The rumors were true. Some Uchiha on missions outside the village had survived.

Except … I looked at the Hokage, this hardened old ninja who led Konoha, whose eyes hadn’t left me since I’d entered the room. Was this a test?

“Please, Yuki,” the Hokage invited me, “have a seat.”

Oh gods what if this was a test? To see if I could keep my mouth shut about a surviving Uchiha? But no, I’d just proved I couldn’t be trusted with secrets. There couldn’t be any real stakes to this test, no real possibility I’d spill an actual secret. Which meant …

Which meant that I wouldn’t be allowed to leave this room without having confirmed I could be trusted with such a secret. And the first step to keeping something secret is knowing that it’s a secret. So if I wanted to pass this test and survive this meeting I had to acknowledge-

“Sir, before I take a seat, I want to say that I appreciate what it means to be trusted with an Uchiha’s survival and I—” everyone else in the room grew very still, “-I -I,” Oh no did I fuck this up? What did I do wrong? “-I swear I will not make the same mistake with a loose tongue again. Her existence is safe with me, I promise.”

There was a long empty silence before the Hokage let out a long breath and pulled a pipe out of his sleeve. “Please, Yuki, do be seated.” He filled his pipe and lit it with a spark of fire chakra while I sat down. He drew in a deep mouthful of smoke and held it as I fidgeted. When he eventually released it it was with a deep sigh. “Yuki,” he asked, “you can perceive Chinatsu’s inactive Sharingan?”

“Um. Yes? Sir?”

“Is this level of perception common for Hyuuga, would you say?”

“Uh, is this a test too? Am I supposed to refuse to answer this question?”

“No, it is not. As your Hokage I am simply asking for clarification, is such perception common among your fellows?”

I glanced sidelong at the Hokage’s ANBU, but I wasn’t exactly in a position to question their trustworthiness. “No, I don’t think so. My twin, Neji, can see the same level of detail I do. We both hit certain milestones for precision vision when we were exceptionally young, but I don’t really know how we measure up to adults with fully developed Byakugan. We’re better than most students our age, I think?” I shrugged apologetically. “The only metric anyone really cares about is ‘can you see tenketsu’, anything past that isn’t really talked about, I’m sorry.”

The Hokage sighed. “Well. Assuming that your elders have in fact told me the truth, congratulations Yuki, you and your brother have the most powerful Byakugans in living memory.
“Uh-” I interrupted. “We definitely don’t. Sir. We have terrible range. Our eyes are actually quite weak in that regard.” I met the Hokage’s flat stare and gulped. “Sorry. Just, uh, don’t put us down as having super-Byakugan eyes or something. We don’t.”

“Noted.” The Hokage responded to my interruption with a flat look. “That said, Yuki, thank you for your candor and promptness upon recognizing Chinatsu Uchiha’s status. Her presence was not a test of your handling of sensitive matters but had it been you would have,” he paused, “passed. Partially. In the future I suggest you hint around such matters before blurting them out.”

“Yes sir. Thank you.”

“No ‘sirs’ please.” The Hokage favored me with a steady smile. “Such formalities are for nobility whose authority rests in mere titles. A kage does not need sycophancy to be strong.”

“Now,” he continued, “I would like to hear from you Yuki, in one sentence, why you revealed Naruto’s jinchuuriki status.”

Oh. Hah. One sentence. Fuck. There goes, uh, three hours of prepared rambling. I took a breath.

Alright. Here goes. I went to class sleep deprived and acted with enough thought to be dangerous but not enough thought to be safe.” There. That was it in a nutshell. I admitted responsibility, didn’t try to deflect blame, and made it clear I knew what I needed to do to not fuck up again. (Sleep more and think enough to make up for the fact that I totally would not actually be sleeping more).

The Hokage nodded, as if he had expected my answer all along. Then he followed up with a complete non sequitur. “Yuki, you are in your last year of schooling, correct?”

I blinked. “Yes?” I just managed to bite off a ‘sir’.

“So then you’ve already been through entry-level infiltration training. Tell me, do you recall the primary methods by which ninja extract information from unwitting individuals?”

Oh. I thought I knew where this was going. “Yes.”

The Hokage leaned forward, fixing me with a serious look. “And they are?”

I raised my right hand (ignoring the asymmetry) and ticked points off of my fingers. “Convince the target you have clearance you do not, convince the target that secrecy is unimportant, or alter the target’s state of consciousness. Typically the latter is used to augment the first two.”

That earned me a measured nod. “And what did you do with classified information?”

I swallowed. “Decided its secrecy wasn’t important while in a lower-functioning state of consciousness.”

“At a point in your education where you should have known better than to make such a decision at all, let alone while impaired,” he said pointedly.

“Oh.” I really messed up didn’t I? “I understand.”

The Hokage leaned back in his seat, blowing out a long stream of pipe smoke. “No Yuki,” he said wearily, “you don’t.” The old ninja before me met my gaze, and for all his strength and poise there was something tired in his eyes. “Yuki, four days ago I almost signed your death warrant.”
He ... what?

I slumped, clasping the arm of my chair for support. My breath quickened. I was suddenly intimately aware of the invisible ANBU behind me, the kunai sheathed on their hips and the masks which marked them as ninja capable of taking a life.

“The secret of Naruto’s jinchuriki status was given an S-rank classification. Think about that for a moment Yuki. You’re smart. Our enemies would have to be incompetent in the extreme to not know Naruto’s nature, it is not classified for that reason. Naruto cannot use his own chakra well enough to graduate yet, let alone wield the Nine-Tails’ chakra; this was not kept a secret to prevent an adverse jinchuuriki event. This secret was not classified in the interest of our village’s security, and yet” he put weight behind that word, “it was classified at the highest possible level. Would you care to tell me why?”

That’s right. I have no idea why it’s classified so highly. I’d assumed the classification was silly, or some left-over order that no longer served a purpose. But what was it that Ibiki told Tenten? A ninja must always assume that apparent foolishness is actually their own ignorance. I’d assumed that the Hokage made a mistake, or overreacted, or forgot about it or … or something. I’d assumed he was foolish. I’d assumed a Kage was foolish and so I broke silence on a fucking S-ranked secret without knowing why it was put in place! Oh gods.

As it became clear to me that four days of worry and three hours of panic about this had actually not been overkill, and as a matter of fact had not been nearly enough self-flagellation, I found my voice enough to respond. “I, uh, I don’t know. Why it was classified. I’m not sure.”

“Good!” The Hokage’s voice snapped out like a whip. “That’s the first unambiguously intelligent thing you have said so far. You. Do. Not. Know. And as a ninja of Konoha, you do not care to guess. I know you are a curious child Yuki, but Konoha’s survival depends on all of its loyal ninja doing as they are told.”

I nodded fervently. “I understand. I really do.” Konoha is a military dictatorship and “I thought-” followed by literally anything is not an acceptable excuse.

“I hope so,” the Hokage responded gravely. “Yuki, I made the decision to keep Naruto’s status from him so he could have a childhood in which he grew up without seeing himself as a monster on a leash. I did so as a personal favor to his mother on her deathbed, who sacrificed much for Konoha and deserved all of our respect. However,” the Hokage’s brow furrowed with frustrated recollection, “not everyone saw the situation as I did. It was a terrible time, and some believed we should have a jinchuuriki whose bijuu state could be unleashed on the battlefield as soon as possible, no matter the cost. The prohibition I placed on informing Naruto that he is a jinchuuriki was political in nature, and I gave it an S-rank classification to remove any,” his brow furrowed again, “temptation, to deny Naruto a more human childhood, no matter how well-intentioned.”

Oh fuck me. This is a politics thing. And I’ll bet diamonds to coal that Danzo was one of the people advocating to turn Naruto into a weapon. No wonder the Hokage took the time to talk with me personally. I just blundered into a seventeen year old political minefield and starting setting off ordnance.

“And,” the Hokage continued, “one of individuals who supported Naruto’s weaponization was your late grandfather, the Hyuuga clan head of the time. And this position was even more ardently
supported by your uncle Hiashi, who had been clan heir at the time and was recently elevated to
serve the current Hyuuga clan head.” The Hokage took a puff from his pipe and steepled his hands.
“Yuki this looks bad. Clan heads are held responsible for the behavior of their pre-Genin ninja,
ensuring they don’t make missteps like this, and even moreso with the Hyuuga clan and its branch
family.”

“At best, this looks like your clan head just used you to score a symbolic blow bucking the
Hyuuga’s subservience to Konoha. That would be bad enough. But if this truly was a mistake on
your part it looks even worse. It looks like the new head of the Hyuuga clan failed to teach his own
nephew how to properly handle secure information obtained with the Byakugan. It looks like he
failed to do so so badly you violated a personal S-rank directive of the Hokage with political
ramifications. It makes him look inept, something a clan leader can ill afford.”

The Hokage let out a deep sigh, rising up in his chair. “If I were so inclined, Yuki, this would be
the perfect pretext on which to introduce more oversight into how the Hyuuga manage their
youths. Particularly branch family youths. And after my first retirement I did, as a matter of fact,
call for the Hyuuga to spend more resources educating their branch family. It would be entirely
expected for me to seize on such an opportunity to dilute the Hyuuga’s educational autonomy.”

“So, Yuki,” he said, “what do you think would happen if I did that? Or if Hiashi even thought I
might?”

Oh. “Hiashi would kill me.” Of course.

A deep sadness washed through the Hokage’s eyes. “Indeed. It is the responsibility of the
Hyuuga’s head to preserve the clan’s autonomy. Labelling you an unsafe individual who had failed
the clan and executing you to show the Hyuuga’s commitment to Konoha’s security would be the
only guarantee of that. He would be forced to do so, even though you are his own family.”

I couldn’t help it. I let out a sharp bark of disbelieving laughter. As if Hiashi would hesitate for a
second to murder a twig who made him look bad.

“Yuki?” The Hokage raised an eyebrow.

Oh, right. Couldn’t badmouth my clan head to the Hokage. That would be disloyal. “I’m sorry
Hokage, I couldn’t help myself. It’s just, well, that’s politics isn’t it?” The lie slid effortlessly off
my tongue, greased by a lifetime of self-preservation.

The Hokage relaxed, some of that sadness still lingering in the creases around his eyes. “Indeed.
The responsibilities of leadership are a burden I would not wish on anyone.”

My eyes, not limited by the narrow focus of mortal vision, caught a reaction from the Inuzuka
ANBU. I hadn’t really focused on them up until now, they and their wolf were lurking invisibly in
the far corner of the room which made them a little less important to me than the two invisible
killers in imminent stabbing range right behind me, and they were a simple Inuzuka pair which
made them practically irrelevant compared to the living breathing Uchiha behind the Hokage.

But now I noticed them. Because up until this point the ANBU had all been stoic pillars of
professionalism. Their only reaction to me outing Chinatsu Uchiha had been hands edging to kunai,
and everything else had been met with attentive indifference. At the Hokage’s statement though,
the Inuzuka ANBU snarled. Behind his mask his face twisted into an silent grimace, his upper lip
twitching as he held the expression. And while beside him his wolf maintained an outwardly
indifferent appearance, I could also see her heart beating faster in time with his and her mouth
flooding with saliva as it would in preparation for a bite.
And then, just as suddenly, they were indifferent again.

*What the hell was that?* I didn’t twitch my head a centimeter in reaction, sure they wouldn’t want me reacting to an expression that only I could have been meant to see. I desperately itched to respond to them, to twitch my fingers into a confirmation that I saw that or a request for clarification or … or anything. But there were three other ANBU and the former God of Shinobi looking at me, who clearly hadn’t been meant to see that.

Speaking of whom-

“-which brings me to the final political necessity of this unfortunate breach.”

*Oh shit fuck what did I miss?*

“There will be no consequences for your slip of the tongue.”

... *come again?*

“Our fault in this matter opens up a political vulnerability to the Hyuuga clan which Hiashi would need to close at the cost of your life. But even in spite of this recent lapse in judgement you are worth more to Konoha alive than dead and,” the Hokage’s face softened, “it would break my heart to see your life wasted so needlessly when you yet show such promise.” The Hokage shared a wry smile with me. “Thankfully this political quandary has a simple solution: you did nothing wrong.”

... *uhhhhh.*

The Hokage pulled a small scroll out of his desk and placed it on his desk, unrolling it so I could read it more easily. “So far as the rest of the world will be concerned, I wrote this memo a week ago, directing one of my assistants to set a meeting with Naruto the day before he would join your class. I intended to tell him the truth of the nine-tailed fox and the heavy responsibility he bears in the hope that it would motivate him to work harder as he studies and practices for his second graduation exam. The memo also held a directive that the S-rank classification would be lifted and Naruto’s jinchuriki status set as merely private information, not to be spoken of lightly but not formally restricted. A formal announcement on the matter would be made later, whenever it was convenient.”

He let out a theatrical sigh. “Unfortunately an emergency forced me to reschedule that meeting, an unavoidable but ultimately inconsequential delay. At least so it seemed until it turned out that some Hyuuga child had seen the memo while passing by the tower and a couple of days later -with no way to know the meeting had been postponed- mentioned to his classmates that Naruto was the Nine-Tails jinchuriki. A completely guileless action on his part, but one that nonetheless caused some story-worthy chaos at the Academy and a bit of a logistical nightmare here at the tower as we further rescheduled to fit in meetings with both Naruto and the Hyuuga child as soon as possible.”

“I will joke later at a council meeting about how well this demonstrates the curse of bureaucracy, that even when one makes no mistakes the nature of bureaucracy is still barely controlled chaos. And when next I see Hiashi among his fellows I will rib him good-naturedly about just how hard his people’s unparalleled vision is to work around, even when they’re all handling information security exactly as they’re supposed to.”

“And so you will not be at fault, Hiashi will not need to execute you, and later you will laugh with your friends and family about just how overblown you made this whole meeting out to be. Is that understood?”
"Uhhhh…” Say yes, say yes, say yes right now- “Yes. I understand. And … thank you. For this. You could have…” I trailed off. Could have what? Let me be killed by the narcissistic slave master you permit to own me? I didn’t voice the startling bitter thought, doing my best to keep it off my face. “Thank you, sir.”

“You are not getting off the hook because you do not deserve punishment Yuki. This was a terrible lack of judgement on your part, one that could just as easily have seen Konoha ninja dead on the battlefield. This was not an isolated incident either; you have a history of acting without thinking. That would be a worrisome trait in any ninja, but in a Hyuuga, in a seal expert, it is potentially catastrophic. The only reason I’m not ordering your work with Uzushio seals put on hold is because that would be rightly seen as a response to this event, and likely be my signature on your death warrant.”

The Hokage put his pipe down on his desk with a clack. “Yuki, you must do better. One of these days your mistakes will catch up with you. You have been burned before and survived,” he said, pointedly looking at my scars, “but you will not always be so lucky. You have burned only yourself so far, but it is never a guarantee that your mistakes will not burn those you love.”

“Yuki,” he said harshly, fixing me with a harsh stare, “Do. Better.”

I swallowed uncomfortably and nodded. “I will.”

“You must.” The Hokage picked his pipe off of his desk and raised it to his lips, taking a couple quick breaths through it to rekindle its ember. “You are dismissed. Send Naruto in on your way out, will you Yuki?”

“Of course,” I replied automatically. Are we done? Oh thank gods, we’re done.

I levered myself shakily out of my chair and saw myself out, nodding to each of the ANBU as I left. No sense being impolite to scary murderers. Or would it have been better form to not acknowledge them, given that they went to the trouble of being invisible? Was there an etiquette for this?

I stumbled down the the stairway of the Hokage’s tower, emotionally drained and wishing I had the mental energy to keep these flitting, intrusive thoughts out of my head. Because as I walked down the stairs to get Naruto, one particular thought kept rolling through my head, a thought I frankly didn’t need and didn’t want to have.

I’d bet my right arm that Danzo proposed putting a control seal on Naruto. One with a self-destruct too, in case Minato’s son proved to be a liability down the line.

I wonder what the Hokage had to say about that?

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Mom was in her worry chair when I got home, facing the door and waiting for me to walk in. “How did it go?” Mom asked the moment I walked in. “What did the Hokage say?”

“Oh,” I told her, “it turns out it wasn’t a big deal. Just business as usual so far as the Hyuuga are concerned.”

And I wasn’t even lying. A twig’s life had been placed on the scales of politics, measured,
weighed, and judged. I’d survived. The next twig might not. No big deal though. It happened to us all the time.

Chapter End Notes

Why do these things always end on a more depressing note than I initially intend them to?

Right, because I chose to write a story about the Hyuuga branch family.
A Good Idea

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: Description of gender dysphoria and related discomfort.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 36: A Good Idea

No such thing as a day off for ninja. I thought to myself, coughing and rubbing my throat.

Yesterday I’d been put through the emotional wringer dealing with a mistake that had brought me within a hair’s breadth of death. And because “emotional recovery” and “long-term psychological well-being” meant precisely nothing to ninja, today I’d joined the rest of the class in being brought within a hair’s breadth of death again, this time in a much more immediate and physical manner.

Konoha was a big believer in the principle that combat skills should be practiced in live-fire situations. Wherever possible they augmented our training with genjutsu for realism, but some things just had to be experienced in the flesh. So today they’d had a few older medical-nin students come in and choke each of us into unconsciousness one by one under carefully controlled conditions. Repeatedly, until we learned to keep the presence of mind to fight back intelligently through the pain and the panic. Because there just really isn’t any way to learn how to keep your head while in a chokehold other than getting choked out. Repeatedly.

Thankfully Misao and Kazue understood the concept of breaks, even if proper vacation days were a foreign concept to ninja, and they’d let us all out for a long lunch. I staggered my way out of the Academy, followed by Miyuki. It was just us today, Neji and Tenten had elected to stay inside and keep practicing submission holds because they were gluttons for punishment, and Tomomi had stayed home for some clan thing, the lucky bugger.

Miyuki coughed, sitting down heavily in the grass outside. “That was awful,” she groaned. “Ow.”

I flopped down on the grass next to her. I would have agreed with her, but I was too busy trying to cough that awful rough dryness out of my throat. The healers had been professionals, they’d done proper chokes that compressed our carotids and jugulars and cut our brains’ oxygen supply directly rather than blocking our airways and slowly waiting for us to run out of air. But hell if I didn’t feel like they’d crushed my throat anyway. Ow.

Miyuki’s young puppy, Ren, squirmed out of her arms and onto my chest, licking at my face and whining. I coughed out a laugh and half-heartedly tried to keep him away, but ended up settling for just turning my head back and forth to keep the licking as symmetrical as I could. The poor little guy had freaked out each time Miyuki had been choked unconscious and I didn’t have the heart to stop him from worrying over me, no matter how sticky and smelly the experience might be.

Miyuki took pity on me though, picking up her excitable puppy and letting him lick her face before his good intentions sent me into an even worse coughing fit. I smiled at the sight. Ren might one day grow up to be a massive wolf, but right now he was just a little ball of fluff and too-big paws. It was cute seeing Miyuki interacting with Ren too. Every time they touched I could see the newly-tattooed Inuzuka seals on their cheeks beat in time with one another and watch Miyuki try to
control the too-big emotions which spilled over from Ren’s side of their bond and into her. Right now that took the form of a cheek-splitting smile that took over her face, even as she struggled not to laugh and agitate her own throat.

Eventually their bond would grow solid enough that they could feel and influence each other’s emotions from dozens of kilometers away, and share sight and hearing and smell over hundreds of meters with the right jutsu. They’d influence one another in passive ways too. Miyuki’s hearing and sense of smell would become more pronounced over time and she’d grow taller than normal, putting on weight and muscle more easily than most humans if she tried. Ren would benefit from their bond too. He’d grow up influenced by Miyuki’s human intelligence, gaining an almost human mind with time and possibly even the ability to speak (though that was rare).

All these things I knew about the Inuzuka clan were clan secrets, but I knew them anyway, because how could I not? Even with an absolutely terrible Byakugan range (I struggled to see past fifty meters on a good day) I’d still picked up these things while working with Akito in the Inuzuka compound. Just by being who I was and existing, I picked up others’ secrets. Secrets which I now had to acknowledge I did not treat with the greatest care. Last week I might have asked Miyuki how her bonding was coming along, not even thinking about the possibility of being overheard, that I might accidentally hint at some secret detail.

I knew to keep Hyuuga secrets secret. I knew how to dance around them, how to make up little misleading lies that’d cover up the holes of what I wasn’t saying, how to turn a true reality into a false reality the still made sense. I’d had that drummed into me before I’d even been allowed to attend the Academy and I was good at it. But I didn’t really make an effort to extend that to the other secrets I picked up.

I watched Miyuki transition from holding Ren away from me to playing with him, shoving him around and letting him joyfully wrestle with her hands, and I let my thoughts drift.

Miyuki put so much care into such a small thing. She so carefully kept her hands away from Ren’s mouth, so he didn’t learn to associate biting with play. When he snapped anyway she would pull her hands back, pausing play until he realized what he’d done wrong and came back to butt his head against her hands with his mouth closed. Each time Ren remembered not to bite I could see the pulse of chakra in Miyuki’s tattoos as she buried her hands in the ruff of his fur and sent a wash of warm pride down their bond. And when she shoved Ren about she never overpowered him, always being careful to push him to the side in such a way that he could resist if he would only just plant his weight right.

And it wasn’t just that she cared so much with Ren, who would be her lifelong partner and her Inuzuka inheritance. Miyuki put this much thought into everything she did. Even- especially with the things she struggled with.

The Yamanaka counselors were talking about giving her a formal diagnosis. Low-Grade Social and Somatosensory Cortical Misalignment. The term didn’t directly translate to anything I’d ever heard of in my old life, but my guess was that it meant autism. Miyuki had always had trouble processing facial expressions and automatically presenting emotional cues, she didn’t really learn physical reflexes the same way the rest of our class did, and she said her arms felt floaty and unreal when she sat still for too long without something soft to touch (which was apparently horribly distracting).

But she worked with it. She really worked . She took those extra people-reading lessons, even though getting them at the level she needed meant sitting in a class with a bunch of much-younger social butterflies training to be infiltrators, kids who were not always kind to the older kid who
struggled with what came so naturally to them. She’d struggled so, so much with learning hand skills like combat and writing when she was younger, until she’d figured out that small tiny movements just didn’t make sense to her and she had to focus on the bigger picture of what she was trying to do to make it happen. She could follow along with that stuff in class now, but really that problem had never gone away. She just added on an extra step to every single exercise we did, translating the teacher’s instructions from what worked for the rest of us to what worked for her.

And just as mapping everyone else’s mental experience to her own demanded extra work from her, the same applied to her body. She didn’t talk about being trans much, except with Tomomi and her dad, but from what I’d overseen her dysphoria was bad. Even with Konoha’s hospital supplying hormones and chakra sculpting to shape her body, she still had problems. She wouldn’t be able to get surgery to change her genitals until her body stopped growing and that … messed with her. She was private about it and I tried not to pry as much as was possible when I could see through walls, but I knew sometimes she’d cry when going to the restroom. She didn’t get to just have nice days where nothing went wrong, because the body she lived with still needed more work for that to be true. Every day demanded a little more from her, took an extra emotional toll, just because of who she was.

Every single thing she did, physical, social, existing, took a couple extra steps of translation for her to turn it into an experience she could live with. If she wanted what came naturally to others, she had to work for it. And that was how she’d come to define herself: as someone who put in the effort.

I … didn’t.

I had the best grades in class, sure, but I hadn’t exactly had to push myself to make that happen. I was the second-best fighter in class too, but that was because the Gentle Fist is absurdly overpowered and because I had to train with the best fighter in the class - Neji - every day no matter how much I’d rather be reading a book. I was a talented seal expert and regularly made new discoveries with Uzushio spirals and I was justly proud of that, but, well, that’s what happens when you study something regularly for a decade. I loved my work, it fascinated me and I was fully capable of sinking my teeth into a hard problem because I didn’t want to let it go … but it wasn’t quite the same as what Neji did with his love of martial arts. What Hinata did to satisfy Hiashi. What Miyuki did just to keep up with the rest of us. They had drives, innate, external, learned.

And their efforts? They were paying off. Akito said Miyuki’s bond with Ren was strengthening incredibly quickly. Hinata was proud of herself. Hiashi wasn’t proud of her (because he was an asshole), but she’d worked herself to the bone until she was proud of herself and given the circumstances that was a hell of an achievement. Neji … was Neji. These days only jounin outclassed him in hand-to-hand, and even that was close sometimes.

Me? I’d tripped and fumbled over basic information security and almost gotten myself killed. Because to be frank, I was not taking being a ninja seriously. My former life’s education made me a genius even by the standards of most of Konoha’s educated elite and my bloodline gave me power and information. I didn’t have to take most things seriously to make do. Surviving the main family was something I had to take seriously, absolutely, but in a ‘keep my head down’ kind of way, not an ‘I need to do better’ kind of way. For the most part I had the luxury of only caring about what I wanted to care about.

Right up until I didn’t. Because I wasn’t actually living in the world of the Academy, of tests and spars and the occasional getting-choked-unconscious exercise. I was living in the world of ninja, where inattentiveness was a death sentence and lives were currency. The world map might as well be a blank page scrawled with Here There Be Monsters, of whom Hiashi and the elders were only
just a few.

So. What was I going to do about that?

Beside me Miyuki was still playing with Ren. I chuckled as best I could through my sore throat. That puppy always had boundless energy, right up until he didn’t.

“Hey Mimi,” I said abruptly.

“Yeah? Wait a moment- Ren, no! Sandals are not toys!” She pulled her foot and Ren’s attempted chew toy out of his reach. “Go on?”

“Do you think I’m lazy?”

“Yes.”

“...”

Miyuki rolled Ren over on his back, batting his paws back and forth with her fingers.

“So, uh, you want to elaborate on that verdict Mimi?”

My friend shrugged. “You’re lazy. You don’t pay attention in class, I’ve never seen you spar without Neji around, and if there was a way to do less work and still satisfy your curiosity about seals you’d do it.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Ren woofed and got back up on his little paws. He unsteadily headbutted Miyuki’s legs, backing up and then tottering towards her with his tail wagging so wildly it unbalanced him.

“Hey Mimi.”

“Yeah?”

“Is that really what you think of me?”

Miyuki looked up from Ren. “Yeah. You really are kind of lazy, Yuki.”

“Then-” I struggled with a pang in my chest “-why do you hang out with me?”

My friend shrugged again and said, just as nonchalantly as she’d called me lazy, “You’re a good person. You hate seeing people get hurt and you like seeing people happy, and you do stuff ‘cus of that. When someone is struggling you help them, when someone is hurting you patch them up. That’s been true as long as I’ve known you.”

Miyuki smiled fondly, picking Ren up by his scruff and depositing him in my lap. I shifted to accommodate the little guy as he curled up and began licking my fingers. “You don’t study hard but that’s never stopped you from helping me out with homework. You don’t spar on your own unless Neji nags you, but you’ve always had time to help me practice throwing kunai when I need it.” Miyuki rearranged herself, lying down on the grass so her head was propped up against my left leg next to Ren. “You’re always up for cuddles and letting me pet your hair too, which is nice. So yeah, you’re lazy. But that hasn’t stopped you from being a good friend.”

I tried to work past the lump in my throat. I-
“Oh, is it okay if I’m leaning on one side of you like this? Is it lopsided?”

Now that she mentioned it, yeah, a little. But I had a deep bag of mental tics and tricks I could use to compensate for it, and right now I wouldn’t tell my friend to go away for any reason at all. “Nah, you’re good Mimi.”

Miyuki hummed against my leg, breathing deep and slow. Behind her Ren flopped his head against her hers, clearly intent on playing a little bit more. As he touched her his breathing slowed to match hers though, their tattoos pulsing gently in time, and the excitement ebbed out of him. The exertion caught up with him and within moments the young puppy was drowsing in my laps, tucked up against his partner’s head. The sight made me smile. But-

“Mimi? What if I had a reason to believe that I’m not good enough? That-” an unfair lifetime of advantages, “-talent and my bloodline aren’t enough and I might get myself hurt because I haven’t taken being a ninja seriously? What if I might get other people hurt?”

“Mm. You should fix that then.”

“Mimi! That’s not helpful.”

Miyuki huffed out a laugh. “What do you want me to say? No, I’m sure you’ll be fine?” My friend snorted. “No. Absolutely not. If you’re worried you’re inadequate it’s either ‘cus you really are inadequate or ‘cus you’ve got some self-evaluation problem, and either way you should fix that. So fix that.”

“Yeah but how?”

“I dunno, don’t be lazy?”

“Mimi…”

“Well why don’t you start by telling me why being lazy is a problem for you. You’ve got the best grades in class and the Gentle Fist makes you a nightmare to fight. Why is that not good enough?”

“I mean, yeah, I’ve done well in class. I’ve learned everything I’ve had to learn. But I feel like I haven’t internalized a lot of it, if that makes sense? It’s like I learn these skills for class so I can prove I know weapon handling or urban stealth or information security or wound categorization or whatever, but then I go home without them. I’ve always felt like I’m a person who happens to be learning ninja skills because I’m supposed to, not a ninja learning skills because they’re the difference between life and death. And that caught up to me recently in a big way that made me think I ought to be taking this more seriously.”

“Hmmm. So like how Tenten does a weapons check every time she leaves a room but you still forget your ninja safety book everywhere?”

“Yeah. Like that, I guess.” I felt my right hip pouch to double check that the book’s storage scroll was actually there (and scratched my left hip to compensate). “And it’s books now by the way, plural. Misao decided I need to carry around all four volumes of Ninja Tools and How To Use Them Safely, since I know how to make storage seals.”

“Is that related to the seal-trap incident last month?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm. Okay you know the more I think about it the more I can see exactly how you being lazy
“I-” I automatically started to complain, but then thought back to just how sloppy I’d been with the safety margins on that seal’s timer, “-that’s fair.”

“Alright,” Miyuki said, “so you do need to be less lazy. Or … really you need to take ninja stuff more seriously, right? Actually do it and not just go through the motions?”

“Yeah. That’s what I need.”

“That’s easy then. Set up some regular ninja-stuff training for yourself and make up a reason that’ll get you to actually want to take it seriously.”

Well sure, when she put it like that it sounded so easy. Although … could it actually be that easy? I scratched my chin (first the right side and then twice as long on the left). “Yeah. Yeah that might work. We’re supposed to be reviewing old lessons during our last year anyway, right? So how about we set up a regular study thing? Me and you, and Neji and Tenten and Tomomi, heck maybe even Eiji -you know him pretty well right?- we can all do a study-slash-practice group. We could-“

“No.” Exasperation tinged Miyuki’s voice.

“No?”

“That’s not you not being lazy. That’s just you setting up another system of ‘I have to spar because Neji needs a sparring partner’. That’s matching other people’s motivation because they need you to, not actually having your own motivation.”

“Oh. Fuck.”

“Eh.” Miyuki shrugged just enough for me to feel it. “It’s good that you know how to get yourself to do work when you need to. But you don’t need a way to force yourself to study, that’s not your problem. You need motivation. You’re like a puppy who runs for treats but not for fun. You’ll get fat even if you’re good at running.”

“What’s wrong with being a fat puppy? I could go for being a fat puppy. Sounds like a pretty nice life.”

Because she was lying back against my leg Miyuki couldn’t glare at me, but she knew I could see her anyway so she narrowed her eyes into empty space and trusted me to get the message. “You’re missing my point.”

“I’m intentionally missing your point because I like the idea of being a fat puppy. Where can I sign up for that? It sounds idyllic. Seriously can you imagine being a soft, sleepy fuzzball all day? That would be wonderful.”

Miyuki growled, a deep resonant rumble in her chest that her body had definitely not been able to produce a few months ago before she got Ren. She did not like it when people ran away with her metaphors.

I coughed. “Ahahaha. Right. Where were we? I need motivation, yes?”

Miyuki continued glaring at empty space for a few more moments with that growl idling in her chest before relenting. “Yes. When you do stuff, you do work so the work can be done, right?”

“Yeah, that’s about the shape of it. Close enough for one sentence anyway.”
“Well, are there any situations where you don’t do work just so that it’s done? Where you wouldn’t want to stop even if someone told you you could stop?”

“Ehh. Sealing? I guess? But that’s more because the work never ends. If I ever finish one thing there’s always something more I need to get done. Makes it easy to get into a rhythm, but I don’t think that’s the kind of intrinsic motivation you’re asking for.”

Miyuki grunted. “Hn. Anything else?”

“Well-” Is there? Is there any time I’m doing ninja stuff and don’t want it to be over and done with? I don’t think there is- … oh. Wait. Maybe there is. “-yes, actually. There is. Teaching. I like teaching.”

Miyuki let out a loud snort, interrupting me.

I paused. “What?”

“Like? Yuki you love teaching more than any person I have ever met in my entire life. I once tried to take out a bet that you’d end up as an Academy teacher one day and not a single person in my clan would take me up on it. Not one Inuzuka.”

“... I haven’t even met all of the Inuzukas.”

“You have a reputation.”

“Hmm. You know they do say that the best way to learn is to teach.”

“Yup. So go find a litter of little Academy kids and set up a tutoring session. Be in charge of making sure they learn. Teach them the basics you know but haven’t internalized. That’s motivation and review right there. Go do it. Learn to be less lazy.”

“Yeah. Yeah I could do that. I-” I paused. An idea struck me. “-I … might have a better idea actually.”

“Oh?”

“It might also be a very stupid idea. Give me a few minutes to think about it so I can decide whether I’m being stupid or not. That’s another thing I need to work on.”

Miyuki muttered something under her breath which sounded suspiciously like “thank the gods”, which I graciously chose to ignore.

So I thought. I turned the idea over in my head, asked myself what the consequences would be, could be, might be. I took my time with it. Really mulled it over. And in the end I decided-

“Eh. Why not?”

Miyuki raised an eyebrow. “Mm?”

“Tutoring younger kids is a pretty good idea Mimi, but you know what’s an even more direct approach than that?”

“What?”

“Welllll, what if I could tutor someone who needs to learn the exact same stuff I need to internalize, who also has an endless supply of motivation that I’ll be forced to match with my own?
“Hey Naruto!” I tapped the brilliantly glowing boy on the shoulder just as class was letting out for the day.

“Eh?”

“You doing anything after school?”

“Uh, no?” The kid (I couldn’t seem to think of him as anything else, even though he was a year older than me) turned around. For a moment he seemed confused by my question, and then maybe even a touch suspicious. “Why?”

“Good. How do you feel about doing some work with me on the training fields and swinging by the archives afterward? I want to brush up on my basics, what with the graduation exam coming up at the end of the year. And hey, you’ve already taken the exam so I figure you both know what’s being tested and need to brush up on the same basics I’ll be working on. And you seemed friendly enough when we talked at the Hokage’s tower too, that’s a plus. So I think you’d make a good training partner.”

The normally exuberant boy blinked for a few moments, seemingly thrown off-balance as he processed that. “You … want to train … with me?”

“Yes, that is what I said.”

“Right now? You,” Naruto put a strange heavy emphasis on that word, “want to train with me,” again that same emphasis, “right now?”

“Well not just right now. It takes a lot of studying to get ready for something like the graduation exam, you know? If this works out I was hoping we train together regularly, a few times a week.”

Naruto was still clearly on the fence. No doubt other kids had approached him before under the guise of proffered friendship, only to twist the knife in when he opened up. Children could be incredibly cruel like that to those the adults made clear were ‘acceptable targets’. So I pulled on a connection I knew Naruto would absolutely not be able to resist.

I gave Naruto a lopsided grin (the only kind I could give) and quipped, “Besides, us troublemakers have to stick together, don’t we?”

That did it. I saw the moment flash in Naruto’s eyes when he decided for certain that this wasn’t some snooty clan kid approaching him, no, this was the cool kid with the messed up scars talking to him, and the cool kid was looking for a partner.

“Yeah!” He yelled out. “Let’s go! Oh, what should I bring? I don’t have that many training kunai but I have a bunch of smoke bombs, we can do a whole bunch of cool stealthy shit. We-”

I cut him off before he could really get going. “Just hand-to-hand safety gear for now, mouthguard,
hand-wraps, cup, the stuff you use for sparring class. We can figure out more complicated stuff later, but basics first, yeah?"

“Yeah! But hey when we’re done with the basics there’s this move the kid in the green jumpsuit does that’s awesome, do you know how he does it? It’s that move where he kicks at your leg but then-”

I almost laughed. Naruto’s enthusiasm was infectious. And honestly, what more could one ask of a student?

“-and right as he yanks on your leg with his foot his fist comes up and pow , right in the kisser. He did it to me yesterday in a spar and-”

I didn’t care how skeptical Miyuki was of this idea. This was brilliant. After all, who better to learn motivation from than the ninja who wanted to be the Hokage?

Chapter End Notes

Please give Wecantgiggleitsacrimescene a big thank you. They helped a ton editing this chapter, and caught a couple of things I’m very glad didn’t make it into the final draft. They continue to be a lovely, lovely beta and this story is much improved for their help.

And also, thank you so much to all of you who comment. Some of you in particular have left many wonderful comments telling me how this story makes you feel or about stuff you’ve noticed in it, and that is so incredibly motivating. It’s what makes writing this story a joy and I have so much to thank you all for.

P.S. Oh, and how could I forget the “Hiashi needs to die” comments. They’re practically a category of comments all on their own and I love them. Even if they are unreasonably tempting spoiler bait. XD
Chapter 37: Friendship

“So how’re we gonna do this?” Naruto asked excitedly. “Are we gonna count hits, or go for takedowns, or KOs, or what?”

“Mm,” I hummed noncommittally. I flexed my hand awkwardly under the cloth wraps binding my wrist and knuckles. I’d never gotten comfortable wearing handwraps. They weren’t necessary to practice the Gentle Fist, and it was easy to accidentally tear them up with some of the Gentle Fist’s chakra blasts besides. But I wanted to train with Naruto, not destroy him, so I’d be using the blunt force Konoha Standard style and needed to protect my fists. Once I was sure I’d wrapped them right I addressed Naruto, “Let’s not do anything that formal, okay? And, uh, definitely no KOs. We can do a casual spar at sixty-ish percent. I just want to get a feel for where you’re at, see if there’s anything that would make a good starting point for our practice.”

“Awwww, you sure you’re not just scared?” The way Naruto drew out the end of his sentence made me think he’d intended that to come off as teasing, but instead the mockery just felt … out of place.

He doesn’t have many friendly interactions with people does he? I figured he’d be expecting snark back though so I replied in kind, “Eh, I spar with Neji so … no, not really.”

“Oh?” Naruto smirked confidently. “Is Neji that good?”

“Yeah, best in the class.”

“O-oh.” He hid his reaction well, to mundane eyes, but I saw his throat swallow and his stomach clench. Then he clenched his fists, drew in a breath, and shouted back. “Alright then! I can’t hold back if I’m gonna show you what I’m made of! Let’s do this!”

“Please do hold back, sixty percent, remember?”

But Naruto had his blood up and he charged, running straight at me. So I mentally shrugged and settled in to meet him, making sure I settled into the broader-based Konoha Standard ready stance and not the narrower shuffling viper stance variant of the Gentle Fist I preferred.

It was not a long fight.

Naruto rushed right in and threw a heavy punch with his back hand straight at my face. I slipped it, stepping forward and to the outside of his punch, rotating my body just enough to move my head out of the way. I kept the rotation going as I finished the slip, sinking down onto my front leg and coiling up for a body shot. I was just about to slam my fist into his side when Naruto did something
completely unexpected.

He dropped down, threw his arms out, and tackled me about the waist.

*What?* For a second I froze. I mean, who in their right mind tackles a Hyuuga? But then Naruto’s hands clasped behind me and I reacted.

**BOOM**

A thunderclap accompanied the flash of chakra that blew out from my waist. I winced as Naruto went flying, tumbling backwards ass over teakettle across the training ground grass. *Fuck. Fuckfuckfuck. That was way too much power.* I rushed over to him and dropped to my knees beside his splayed out form. “Naruto?! You okay?! Come on say something.”

“Euuuuuuuuhhhhhhh.”

“Okay that’s good, better than nothing. Uh, any chance you could use actual words though?” Behind his fluttering eyelids his pupils looked fine and I couldn’t see any hemorrhaging in his brain, but I wasn’t a medical Hyuuga and I only mostly remembered how we’d been taught to check for concussions.

“Owww. Wuh was ttthh-” Naruto stumbled over the thick ‘th’ sound, “-dat?” Wuh was dat?”

Oh, right. His tongue would be numb. I coughed sheepishly. “Uh, that was the Gentle Fist. Sorry. I wasn’t going to use it but then you tackled me and I … yeah.”

Naruto shook his head, pulling himself into a somewhat upright sitting position. He asked, “The Gggg-” he worked his jaw and tried again, quickly shaking off the tingling sensation, “the *Gentle Fist*?”

“Yes. That was the Gentle Fist.”

Naruto blinked a couple of times and worked a pinky into his ear, wiggling it around. “Did you say ‘gentle’?”

I raised a hand to my mouth and cleared my throat. “Uh, yeah. The Gentle Fist. Did you not have any Hyuuga in your previous class?”

Naruto tried to leverage himself up off the ground and failed, arms not supporting his weight. “No?” His face soured and he glared at me. “And what does that have to do with the jutsu you hit me with?”

“Oh fuck that explains why you tackled me. Shit, I’m so sorry Naruto. That’s the only way I ever learned how to break a grapple, I never needed to learn anything else. And I’ve never had someone seriously try to grapple me in a spar before so that was kind of automatic and sloppy and rushed and I might have hit a little bit too hard. Oh and, uh, that wasn’t a jutsu. That was just the Gentle Fist.”

Naruto scowled and he scooted back away from me. His face twisted up, “Well there was nothing gentle about it, asshole!”

*This is not going well.* “Naruto I’m so sorry. This is why I said need to practice the basics; I’m bad at this. I know all these techniques, like what I used to blow you off of me, but I don’t have enough of a feel for combat to always use them appropriately. When I hit you like that, that was me fucking up and being bad at fighting. Not … well, not me being an asshole who brought you ought
Naruto didn’t look at me as he finally found strength in his arms and pushed himself up. (I eyed that critically and made a mental note. He needed to practice standing up only using his legs - a ninja who couldn’t use their hands to defend themselves while getting up was a dead ninja). Once he was upright Naruto sniffed and scrubbed away the tears forming in the corners of his eyes. But he still didn’t meet mine as he asked, “What is this gentle fist thing? That’s what hit me, right?” He muttered under his breath, “It didn’t feel very gentle.”

I took a deep breath and tried to plaster a soothing smile on my face. So far as first impressions went this was not exactly the best. “Well, the Gentle Fist is a taijutsu style my clan uses. We don’t properly hit people, not with punches or kicks. Instead we hit people with this.” I held my right hand out, palm up, and snapped out a wave of chakra from my palm, accompanied by a quiet *clap* of displaced air. I was intentionally sloppy with my control over the blast, letting a good chunk of the chakra escape as a flash of blue light (to Naruto’s eyes) before I pulled it back in.

Naruto blinked and stared, glancing briefly up to meet my eyes before looking back down to my palm.

“That’s raw chakra. No jutsu, no formalized intent, it’s just chakra being moved around. Except instead of moving it around in your body, like you’d use to give yourself the force to jump from roof to roof or the force to crack stone with a punch, we move it around in the air.” I fired off a series of thin spikes of chakra from the fingers on my left hand, accompanied by the rolling crackle sound of tiny firecrackers. “Instead of using chakra to help us hit things harder we just-”

I pulled a training kunai from inside my sleeves and tossed it into the air. As it came down I lazily reached out, swatting it absently with the back of my right hand. *Ping*. There was the sound of metal being struck by some great force and the kunai was smashed out of the air as if struck by the fist of god.

“-hit things with chakra directly. That’s why it’s called the Gentle Fist. We don’t need to hit people hard to do damage, just gently touch them.”

Naruto’s jaw was hanging open for reasons I suspected had nothing to do with any lingering numbness. “Is- is that what you hit me with?”

“Basically. I really did two things. First I fired off six spikes of chakra from my hips, into your wrists, elbows, and shoulders, hitting all three of the major nerve fibers in your arms at different points. That was to get you to let go and disable your arms. And then after that, yeah I just kind of swatted you with a big whump of chakra. Uh, harder than I meant to. Once again, sorry about that.”

“So…” Naruto drew out, “how do I grapple you then?”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re training, right? Tell me how I can tackle you without getting blasted.”

“Ohhhh,” I winced. Naruto was not going to like this. “You can’t.”

Naruto had that scowly look on his face again. “What do you mean, I can’t?”

How to put this? “Well, the Gentle Fist is considered to be the most powerful martial art in the world and this is why. Sure, if a Gentle Fist user so much as brushes you they can inflict horrific
damage and that’s scary. But the real game-changer is that we can hit your with our chakra if you touch us. Punch me? I can shatter every bone in your hand. Grapple me? I can paralyze every part of you that touches my body. Throw a kunai at me and I’ll blast it into the distance, swing a sword at me and I’ll turn it into shrapnel. Unless your attacks are too fast for me to react or you hit me with more attacks than I can counter at once, I’m literally untouchable.”

Now let’s see if I can spin this in a way that doesn’t prod Naruto’s inferiority complex. “That’s why I said I wasn’t planning to fight you with the Gentle Fist. I don’t want to be one of those assholes who beats up on other people for fun. I was actually looking forward to training with you. I get plenty of Gentle Fist versus Gentle Fist training with Neji, but I wanted to practice Konoha Standard for the exam with you. If I hadn’t been a dummy and freaked out when you tackled me, we just would have done that and this never would have come up.”

Naruto chewed that over silently. He was still tense, hands clenched and shoulders tight, but he didn’t look hurt anymore. Frustrated, maybe? I couldn’t tell. Despite how straightforwardly exuberant he’d been earlier, Naruto was a hard person to read.

Hopefully this works out.

Finally Naruto looked up at me, meeting my eyes. “Yuki,” he asked, “can you teach me the Gentle Fist?”

Okay, fuck, I should have seen that coming.

“Okay, fuck, I should have seen that coming. “Well,” I said slowly, “to learn the Gentle Fist you have to be able to see chakra. Like, you know how you can control chakra inside your body? Move it around, shape it, concentrate it, all that good stuff?”

Naruto nodded hesitantly. Right, if I remembered correctly from his story he hadn’t had the best grasp on chakra theory even after he’d finally graduated with two more years of schooling under his belt. I might have to dumb this explanation down a bit.

“Well, here’s the thing: there’s absolutely nothing saying you can’t move your chakra around outside of your body too. It’s not like chakra is controlled by your muscles or anything, it’s controlled directly by your brain. So long as there’s an unbroken path through your chakra to your brain, you can shape it however you want. Nothing says your chakra has to stay inside you.” I waffled a hand back in forth. “Well, kind of. For the most part anyway. The problem is that to do stuff with chakra you need to be able to feel what the heck you’re doing. Real quick Naruto, move some chakra into your right hand for me. Tell me what it feels like.”

Naruto looked at me like he still wasn’t sure if he could trust me, but he did as I asked. He closed his eyes and called up his chakra and -I sucked in a breath- it answered. Oh gods did it answer. His control was awful, he bled chakra into the surrounding air at a phenomenal rate as he moved it down his arm. It moved slow too, far too slow to be useful in a fight. (I made another mental note. He needed to practice speed as well as control). But once he was done … gods. What I would do for the amount of chakra he had in his pinky.

I nodded slowly, a little bit stunned and not entirely sure his hand shouldn’t be exploding right now. “Right. Like that. What does that feel like?”

“Eh. A little tingly?”

My working eyelid twitched. A little tingly he says. More chakra in his pinky than in my entire body and he says it’s just a little tingly. No wonder he has control problems. Can he even feel normal amounts of chakra? With an effort of will I wrangled in my chakra envy and got on with the lesson. Education now, pining about my mortal chakra reserves later.
“Right, your hand is tingly. So what do you think you’d feel if that chakra wasn’t in your hand, but outside of it?”

“Uhhhhhhhhhh.” That was a sound I’d heard a thousand times before, when a kid I was helping didn’t know enough about a topic to tell if I was asking them a real question or a trick question. Normally I’d dance around the answer with them until they found it on their own, but that wouldn’t do Naruto any good right now.

“Nothing, right? You’ve got nerves in your hand that react to chakra, so you can feel the chakra in your hand. But if the chakra was outside of you, well, of course you wouldn’t be able to feel it! You’ve got no nerves there! Oh and you can let go of the chakra in your hand by the way.”

I almost choked on my tongue when Naruto did exactly what I said rather than what I meant, letting go and releasing almost thirty times the chakra I had in my entire body into the air instead of reabsorbing it into his chakra coils. *Gods above that is not fair.* I bit down on a whine of envy when the spiral at the center of his jinchuuriki seal brightened a fraction and dumped enough chakra into his system to replenish the loss in *seconds*.

“Yuki?”

Right. Education now, pining later.

“Ahem. So. You can’t feel unformed chakra while it’s outside you. In theory you could push your raw chakra out there and play with it, but it’d be kind of like painting while blind. Like, it’s doable, there are people who have learned how to paint blind and there are people who have taught themselves the Gentle Fist without being able to see what they’re doing. But it’s *hard*. Most people can’t do it and it’s hard to get any good at it even for those who can.”

Naruto frowned. “So ... how do you do it?”

“Well,” I tapped the skin beneath my right eye and then pried up my left eyelid so Naruto could see my left eye (and shifted my feet to make up for the imbalance), “see how funky my eyes are? No pupils, barely any iris? That’s because my eyes aren’t normal. I can see chakra. All Hyuuga are born like this, it’s our clan thing and we call it the Byakugan - the all-seeing white eye. That’s how we use the Gentle Fist and why it’s often thought of as our clan’s technique; we can actually *see* what the heck we’re doing with our chakra outside of our bodies.”

“It’s not the only way to control external chakra, obviously. You can use ninjutsu to tie your chakra to a formalized intent and then expel it. With enough meditation and the right affinity you can bind your awareness to an element and control elemental chakra even without a proper jutsu. Medical ninja send out little pulses of chakra from their hands and use practice and amplification seals to ‘read’ the chakra that comes back, which allows to merge their chakra with other people’s and manipulate it. That requires a lot of concentration though, I can count on one hand the number of people who have ever been able to do that in a fight.

“Oh, and some Fire Country monks meditate so deeply their chakra merges with the flow of natural chakra and that lets them do something kind of like Gentle Fist. Or so I’ve heard. No idea how it works though, I’ve never seen it. And Suna puppet masters can bind strings of chakra to their nerves somehow, which lets them feel what they stick their chakra strings to and manipulate those things like, well, like puppets. Whatever technique they use can’t replicate the Gentle Fist though, thank the gods.”

“And … where was I going with this?”
“Uh, how you do the Gentle Fist?”

“Right! Sorry about that, bit of a digression.” _Gods, I’m becoming Akito._ “Well the important bit is that there’s a hundred and one ways to work with external chakra by binding it to your intent or merging your chakra with something that you can sense, but just about none of them will let you manipulate raw chakra in the middle of a fight with the level of control needed for the Gentle Fist. None except having the Byakugan so you can see raw chakra directly. So while it’d be fine for me to teach you the theory of the Gentle Fist—” _if not any of the specific Hyuuga fighting style built around it_, “there wouldn’t be much of a point. Not unless you’re willing to spend the next decade or so learning how to paint blind.”

“So! Enough talking about the advantages I was born with, let’s talk about yours!” At this point I figured sparring was out the window. Even if I used Konoha Standard any combat would just be grinding his face in the fact that I could crush him at any time. But I still did want to get some exercise in so— “How much has the Hokage told you about your special jinchuuriki powers?”

Naruto’s face went through a whirlwind of emotion: quizzical confusion, shock, awe, elation, and then _elation_ . His face lit up like the sun and he shone with excitement. It was a good look on him. I liked it a whole lot more than the wary hurt I’d managed to evoke in him so far. “I HAVE SPECIAL POWERS?! WHY DID NO ONE TELL ME?!”

“Mmhmm. Specifically you have regeneration. All jinchuuriki have crazy good regeneration. Being a jinchuuriki comes with other powers too, but most of them will take time and practice and patience to unlock safely and honestly I’m not a hundred percent sure what the Kyuubi’s special powers actually are. But all jinchuuruki have regeneration from the moment their bijuu is sealed inside of them.”

“WHY DIDN’T THE OLD MAN TELL ME ABOUT THIS THEN?! I HAVE SPECIAL POWERS?!” Naruto repeated his awed exclamation. The young teen glowed with excitement. Literally, he glowed. He flooded the space around him with so much loose surging chakra that he was surrounded by a glowing halo of joy.

And I laughed. I couldn’t help it. I hadn’t really been in the mood to appreciate Naruto’s enthusiasm when we first met, but seeing it shine through after accidentally crushing it was a sight for a sore soul. He was just so intensely joyous I couldn’t help but be happy.

Naruto smiled as wide as he could. “Tell me how to use it! Tell me, tell me, tell me!”

“Slow down, slow down!” I laughed. “It’s not that kind of power. Your regeneration is always on.”

That brought Naruto up short. “It is?” He blinked, puzzled. “I don’t feel superpowered though.” He lifted his right arm and - _oh gods is he really...?-_ sniffed his armpit. “Yeah I don’t smell like a super ninja.”

I blinked. Once. Twice. _Okay, moving right on past whatever that just was._ “Uh, yeah, so about your regeneration—” _Actually. Wait a minute. Can he actually smell ‘super ninja’?_

“Oh, Naruto,” I asked, “can you usually smell when a ninja is strong?”

“Uhuh!” He nodded proudly. “I’ve got a really good nose!”
I blinked again. “Like, you can smell how much chakra people have?”

“Yup! I’m really good at it.”

“Naruto,” I said slowly, “most people can’t smell chakra levels at all. Actually, so far as I’m aware no one can do anything like that except the Inuzuka. And maybe the Aburame too? But no, Naruto most people can’t smell chakra at all.”

“They can’t?”

“Yeah, no, Naruto this is one of those special powers. You have a super nose.”

“Huh.” Naruto rubbed his nose. “You sure?”

“Definitely.”

“… huh.”

“Also the reason you don’t smell like a strong ninja to yourself is because people can’t smell themselves in general. You actually have the most chakra of any ninja in Konoha, comes with being a jinchuuriki.”

Naruto frowned. His fists clenched and his eyes dropped to my feet. “But Instructor Banri told me I had bad chakra.”

“You have sloppy chakra control, which is kind of like having trouble painting fine details on a painting. And we can maybe work on that next time. But if we’re going by how much chakra you have, you have a lake’s worth of paint. It’s … a lot.” I eyed Naruto. There was so much free chakra boiling out of his chakra coils and obscuring the gaps in his chakra network that I almost couldn’t see through him. A lot was an understatement.

“Really?”

Gods, there was so much vulnerability in that question.

“Yes Naruto, you have a great deal of chakra. That will make you very good at ninjutsu once you get better control over it.”

“Oh,” he said quietly. He looked … uncomfortable? Naruto really was hard to read when he wasn’t projecting cheer. But it was telling how quickly that cheer cracked whenever his abilities were brought up. It was even more telling how his cheer was replaced by defensiveness and insecurity.

What had he said the name of his teacher last year was? Instructor Banri? I turned the name over a few times to keep it fresh in my mind. I could ask Mom about him later. We could have a nice little talk about Academy teaching practices.

“So,” I continued, with maybe just a little bit of anger seeping into my voice, “you can regenerate. Do you know what that means?”

“No?”

“It means you heal really fast.”

“I don’t-!” Naruto started to exclaim. He stopped a moment later. He rubbed his nose. “Eheh, how fast to normal people heal?”
“Well let’s see, have you ever broken a bone?”

“Yeah! Heck this one time I fell out of a tree and I broke my leg and the bone was sticking out of my leg and there was blood everywhere—”

“Okay, okay, I don’t need the details.” I swallowed a bit of nausea. Naruto really did not have a filter, did he? “How long did it take to heal?”

“Well the doctors put it in this cast just like always and told me to leave it on for like, forever, but it sucked. It was so hard to walk around! I had to use these metal sticks which attached to my wrists and eugh, I fell down so many times trying to use them. I wore the cast and used the sticks for a couple of days, but my leg wasn’t hurting at all, so I pried the cast off and it was fine. Falling ‘cus of the cast and the sticks hurt more than my leg did. Shows what the doctors know.”

“Yeah no, the doctors knew what they were talking about. Naruto, the typical healing time for a broken bone is not two days. It’s closer to two months.” To myself I wondered: Had he even taken two days to heal? Just how long had his leg been fine under that cast?

“Really?!”

“Yes.”

“Whoa.” There was awe in his eyes.

“Uhuh. So why don’t we make use of that regeneration today?”

“Yea-!” Naruto started to cheer and pump his fist before abruptly stopping. “Wait! Are you going to break my bones?!” I had to stifle a laugh. His appalled voice sounded more appropriate to learning about a gossipy scandal than fearing I was going to break his bones.

“No, no I’m not going to break your bones Naruto.”

“Stab me?” He curled in on himself, eyeing me with exaggerated mistrust.

“No-” I was mostly sure he was playing with me though so... “-welllll, maybe just a little.”

“No!” he exclaimed theatrically, “I knew it! You’re one of those crazy scientists who experiments on people!”

I laughed. “Hahahaha, ahem, I mean: bwahahaha! Yes, you have discovered my secret plan. I will stab you a little bit and discover the secret of jinchuriki regeneration and use it to take over the world!”

Naruto doubled over laughing. “Nooooo, please, not that. Not being stabbed a little bit!”

I couldn’t help it. Something about that phrase was just too ridiculous. I cracked up, hands on my knees and wheezing with laughter. “Just-” I panted out, “-just a little?”

“Nooooooooooooooo-”
We didn’t end up getting much training done that day. I’d brought up regeneration so I could explain to Naruto how rapid healing could help him build muscle faster (I was pretty sure it would work), and even do some workouts with him and show him the results in real time if he healed as fast as I thought he did. But in the end we never did get around to it.

Instead we ended up talking about … stuff.

....

“-and that’s why you need to hold your whetstone at the same angle on each stroke when you sharpen your kunai.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, go back to the part where knives have tiny little teeth on their edges. What?!”

...

“Nu-uh, eggplant are gross .”

“I swear! Seriously, Naruto, bread them and fry them and they’re not squishy or nasty at all, they’re all crispy.”

“Eeeuuuughhhhh.”

...

“-so see, that’s how Kumo’s internal advancement structure works and that’s why it was so easy for us to arrange for spies to be promoted through their logistics structure. And of course once they figured it out, we started using the same mechanism to get them to think their own best people were spies. Mom’s super proud of that one.”

“...”

“Okay tell me where I lost you.”

...

“No. Naruto you did not . There is no way the Hokage’s guard just stood by and let you do that.”

“Hehehe. I’m just that sneaky.”

“Okay first of all, no one is that sneaky, second of all, how did the Hokage not punt you straight off the Tower?”

...

“-and that’s when Hinata, with an absolutely straight face, tells Neji and I that the only solution is for us to break into the Inuzuka compound and steal some of their dog food.”

“Ha! Really?”

“Yes. But you know what the worst part is? The worst part is that she actually got me to do it. I mean in all fairness the guards know me and thought I was supposed to be there, and when they asked why I was carrying an armload of dog food I just told them Akito gave it to me, so it wasn’t exactly hard, but still .”

...
“Uhuh. That’s why I killed my landlord’s plants. Asshole.”

“Holy hells. That’s really fucked up Naruto. Did you ever report him or anything?”

“For what, being lazy?”

“... yes. Yes, absolutely. One sec let me unseal a pen ... there’s this guy my mom knows in Civilian Development, I’m gonna write his name on your hand—”

...

“Why do stars twinkle like that?”

“Like what?”

"Like that.”

“...”

“Yuki?”

“It’s atmospheric disturbances. The air is wobbling so the light wobbles.”

“It’s pretty.”

“... yeah. It is.”

...

---

Later that night I rested in companionable stillness with Miyuki and Tomomi in Miyuki’s home. I was sprawled out sideways on her father’s recliner, humming a half-remembered tune. Miyuki lay on the floor beneath my head, watching my hair gently sway back and forth with the faint rocking of the recliner. Tomomi lay next to her with Ren snoozing on their chest. Tomomi had one hand reaching out to just barely touch Miyuki’s leg, with little kikaichu marching up and down their arm carrying tiny bits of Miyuki’s chakra for Tomomi to snack on.

After some time Tomomi asked, “Yuki. Mimi told me about your plan to tutor the jinchuriki. How did it go?”

I thought about it. There were a lot of ways I could answer that. “It could have gone much worse. It would have been very easy to accidentally hurt Naruto and damage his ability to trust me.”

“Hn.” Tomomi’s kikaichu buzzed and clicked. “My step-brother was in his class. He said Naruto was a very happy person. Is that not so?” They lifted their head to see me better.

“Mmm. No. I don’t think that’s quite right. Naruto tries very hard to be a fun kid. But I don’t think he’s a happy kid.”

“Oh.” Tomomi laid their head back down and thrummed unhappily. “That’s sad.”
“Yeah. It is. We talked a lot though. I think it was good for him.”

Miyuki perked up from where she lay beneath my hanging hair. “Speaking of talking a lot…”

“Oh?”

“Didn’t you say that you were going to spar with Naruto today? And then study with him at the archives? Because I don’t smell any sweat or old-book smell on you.”

“Oh. Heheh. Right. I did say that didn’t I, Mimi?”

“Yuki…” My friend glared up at the back of my head, a faint rumbling growl underscoring her words. “Picking motivation from the hyperactive over-excitible kid in class does not work if you corrupt him with your laziness first!”

“Ahahahahahaaaaaa,” I scooched across the recliner, nervously putting some distance between myself and her. “Look it really wasn’t like that, okay? He’s a really vulnerable kid. I don’t want to just- I don’t know, use him. I promise I’ll actually start training with him soon, okay?”

“You better!” Miyuki insisted. She paused after that though, for a long second. “Is it really that bad? For him?”

I sighed. “Yeah. He’s really lonely.”

“Oh. He’s one of the orphan kids, right?”

“Yeah. Never got adopted either. I don’t think the Hokage would have let that happen, what with the whole jinchuriki thing. Didn’t mention any friends either, while we were talking.”

“Oh.” Miyuki’s face fell. Then she smiled sadly and reached up through my hair, scratching behind my right ear. (I rotated my left foot). “You’re a lazy person Yuki. But you’re a good person.”

I smiled and relaxed further into the recliner. “Thanks Mimi. And you’re a good friend. I’m glad to have you around. And you too Tomomi. You’re good company.”

Miyuki smiled and Tomomi buzzed contentedly.

Then, a few heartbeats later- “Hey Yuki?” Miyuki asked. “Is Tomomi eating my chakra right now?”

Every bug on and in Tomomi froze in lock-step unison, and Tomomi’s eyes widened behind their sunglasses. They threw me a pleading glance.

I sold them out with absolutely no remorse. “Yes. They are. Again.”

The companionable stillness shattered rather quickly as Tomomi swore and tried to gently extricate themself from under a sleeping Ren and still get up as quickly as possible, while Miyuki roared and shot to her feet - and then promptly fell on the numb leg Tomomi had been leeching chakra from. “Again?!” Miyuki yelled. "Really?!!"

“I was hungry! My hive is having another growing season!”

“So get Yuki to draw you a spiral!”

“You’re tastier!”
With a (mostly) all-in-fun roar Miyuki finally got to her feet and chased her friend out of the room, a bleary-eyed but excited Ren yipping and following at her heels. Tomomi scampered out of the room with all the speed of a ninja and all the coordination of a growing teenager (to interesting and mixed results). And me? I lay back and laughed.

It was good to have friends.

Chapter End Notes

Let’s give Wecantgiggleitsacrimescene a big thank you for betaing this chapter! They helped a lot, and even gave this a last edit after doing their freaking end of the year exams and being all worn out. They’re a gem.

Also, I have an Aburame headcanon that they always wear sunglasses because bonding with the kikaichu gives them photosensitivity. I mean, they’re literally making their bodies into hosts for an insect colony, I figure that’s got to have a fair chunk of side-effects.

Also not entirely sure how I feel about this chapter to be honest. Naruto is a really hard character to write.
Just Deserts

Chapter Notes

It apparently actually is “just deserts”, not “just desserts”. It’s an archaic usage of ‘deserts’ from the French root deservir meaning ‘to deserve’. I was pretty surprised.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 38: Just Deserts

Finding where Naruto lived was too easy. All I had to do was ask Hinata to look for the biggest chakra signature in the village and just like that I had an address.

As I silently leapt from rooftop to rooftop towards his apartment through the chill of the pre-dawn air, I idly wondered if this counted as a violation of privacy. When you lived in a village full of people who could so easily ferret out your every secret, did that change what a reasonable expectation of privacy was? Or were we all just supposed to keep to some polite fiction that you actually could keep a private life in the presence of so many ninja? My education as a Hyuuga had been heavy on operational security and rather light on social mores so I wasn’t actually sure.

I mean, internally the Hyuuga clan’s concept of privacy was perhaps best summed up by incredulous laughter followed by a deadpan “no”, but I wasn’t actually sure if the rest of Konoha knew that and accepted it, knew that and very much was not okay with it, or just tried not to think about it.

Ah well. It was kind of a moot point anyway. Using questionably invasive methods to find Naruto’s home may or may not be rude, but using that information to bang on his door before the birds were even up definitely made me an asshole.

A sleepy sentry chunin camouflaged against a nearby chimney tracked me as I leapt onto the second-story railing outside of Naruto’s house. She widened her eyes and tensed as I landed, fingers tracing the edge of an explosive tagged kunai. I waved at her and signed in Konoha Tactical Sign, You, identifying marks: tattoos, left hip, thorned rose. Right collarbone, gears. Left and right shoulder blades, unfolded scrolls. Combat pack contains: one soldier pill, two medication bottles, five kunai braces-

The sentry relaxed as I signed and waved me on. Any infiltrator worth their salt could impersonate a Konoha ninja to get close to the jinchuuriki. But no one other than a Hyuuga could do what I’d just done, and my forehead wrappings clearly marked me as a sealed Hyuuga. No need to worry about where my loyalties lay.

The sentry did raise an eyebrow when I started banging on Naruto’s door without even having the decency to let the sun rise though. Which, you know, fair.

I kept the banging up until Naruto had rolled out of bed and was clearly on his way to answer my incessant knocking. I took a cautionary step back as he approached the other side of the door. He did not exactly look happy.
“What?!?” my irate classmate snarled as he yanked open the door. His gaze landed on my face and he blinked, snarl frozen in confusion on his face. “Yuki?”

“Hey Naruto.” I chirped. “How are you doing?”

“I- you- what the fu-”

I pasted the friendliest smile I could manage on the working side of my face and lied through my teeth. “Oh I go on an early morning run most days, and I felt bad about inviting you out for training yesterday and then not really doing any training, so I figured I’d invite you on my run with me today!” I whipped out a pair of lunchboxes and held them out in front of us, the smell of freshly steamed rice and freshly grilled fish wafting from within. “I even made some extra breakfast for you for after the run!”

This was, of course, utter bullshit. Neji went on early morning runs. I had spent several months mastering the art of getting up before him and finding a garden outside the range of his Byakugan to go back to sleep in before he had gotten the hint that I did not want to go on early morning runs with him. Early morning runs were not my thing.

Unless, I was learning about myself, they came coupled with that exact appalled look on Naruto’s face. My grin broadened. Getting myself up before dawn to do exercise had not and never would be something I enjoyed. But getting up early in the morning to torment someone else with the threat of vigorous exercise for their own good? I took in a deep breath of the pure early morning air, letting its smell linger in my nostrils. Ahhh. This I could come to love.

“C’mon Naruto, run inside and get changed out of your pajamas, breakfast will be best if we finish the run before it gets cold. And we’ll be running a full lap around the village, so every second counts.”

Choked, indignant, horrified noises tried to make their way out of Naruto’s mouth. He looked over my shoulder to where the sun would eventually rise, then back at me.

“Do you not like fish and rice? I can make something else next time. Maybe ramen? I heard you like ramen, is that right?”

“Next time?!” My appalled tutee finally got out.

“Yeah! We need to be in good shape for when we graduate! Ninja run absolutely everywhere on missions!” I carefully did not mention that Neji had been telling me the same thing for years and I’d never actually managed to take his advice to heart before. The more I locked myself into playing this role of the chipper tutor who goes for more morning runs the more thoroughly I’d be locking myself into actually doing them and that could only benefit me.

“So come on,” I told him. “Get changed, daylight’s a-wasting.”

“.... the sun isn’t up yet,” he managed.

“Eh. Details.”

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To Whom It May Concern,

I write this letter in the expectation of my near and certain death. Soon, I expect, I shall collapse and perish and leave this mortal coil. I have been foolish and overconfident and now I suffer the just deserts of my hubris.

The first week of training with Naruto went well. As expected Naruto does little physical training outside of Academy hours and my years of intensive training, lesser to Neji’s that they might be, had still blessed me with significant physical advantage over him. Even Naruto’s enormous endurance and regenerative capacity did not grant him the lung capacity or conditioning to keep pace with me during our morning runs. Many of the exercises I showed him after class were foreign to him, and his initial performance was poor, if committed and dedicated. We forged a strong bond of tutor and tutee, strengthened by my respect for his resolve and his grudging respect for the impossibility of revenge-pranking a Hyuuga admiration of my training methods.

I should have known better by the second week. I should have seen the future written on the wall. Yet when Naruto kept actually kept pace with me, out of breath, panting, body so flush with lactic acid I could see it in the texture of his vascular chakra yet nonetheless running beside me, all that filled my mind was pride. Pride for this young student who had not only pushed himself into the ground trying to match me but who went beyond and also spent his evenings running so he could improve even faster. When during our after-school workouts Naruto collapsed after forty pushups only to try again a few minutes later and manage forty-two, I cheered, such a fool was I.

Weep not for me, I should have known.

On the third week Naruto outpaced me. Kicked harder than me. Leapt farther. He had caught up to me in only a few short weeks, as I thought his regeneration might allow him to. But oh, the irony of a Hyuuga being so blind. For I only thought in terms of Naruto coming to match me. How prideful, how arrogant, to assume he would not surpass me.

Gods above, what madness possessed me to shackle myself to this runaway train?

Soon I shall perish. My legs will give out one morning in the early dawn, the sun’s revitalizing warmth insufficient to keep me apace with my student. My arms will fall off as we practice a Konoha Standard sequence for the dozenth time without pause. Surely my merely mortal vessel cannot take much more.

Some nights I find myself wishing that my body truly could take no more. That there will be an end to this torment, even if only in the sweet embrace of death.

Do not mourn me long my family, my friends. This is all my fault. I should have known.

Yours, faithfully and in agony,

Yuki

I handed the letter over to Hinata, who politely interrupted her study session with Sakura to take it. Her eyes flared with the effort of reading it -only a little, I’d used mildly bloodied ink for her- and her eyebrows raised.
“Yuki,” she asked with a wince in her voice, as if regretting that she had to ask, “is this what you’ve been writing for the past twenty minutes instead?”

Sakura leaned over Hinata’s shoulder. “Can I see?” Hinata handed the letter over to her … friend? study partner? acquaintance? Hinata hadn’t actually bothered to tell us what Sakura was to her, just suddenly showed up with Sakura in tow one day to study Tactically Applied History before dinner. It was uncharacteristic as heck, Sakura Haruno was the only classmate Hinata had ever brought home, but for exactly that reason none of the rest of us wanted to ask what was up and potentially break the spell. Instead we just laid out an extra placemat for dinner every other day and accepted her into our home.

In this case, accepted her snarky and totally unasked for commentary on my deep expression of anguish. “This,” she said slowly, “is the most overdramatic thing I have ever read.” She looked up at me and then over to Hinata. “Is your brother always like this?”

Hinata ducked her head into the collar of her robe and groaned. “Yes. We’ve tried to change him. It never works. You learn to deal with his theatrics.”

Ohhh, Sakura really brings out the snark in Hinata. I like it. I wonder if it’s because they’re both part of Ino’s circle of friends?

Sakura shook her head in disbelief. “I had to read some of Lord Tobirama’s teenage poetry for an assignment last year and I thought that was the most over the top angst I’d ever have to read. But this is somehow even worse.” (In the kitchen I saw Aunt Yuki snort and nudge Dad. “He takes after you.” “And I regret ever showing you my old poetry.”)

“Yuki,” Hinata pleaded, “aren’t you supposed to be writing an essay on proper mission packing? Not being embarrassing in front of Sakura?”

Sakura chimed in, “She’s right, this is pretty embarrassing.”

I sighed mournfully. “And here I thought I could earn some sympathy from my dear loving sister. Can’t you see I’m suffering? Every part of me hurts.”

That got me a skeptical look from Sakura. “Is this Naruto kid really that bad?”

“I wouldn’t call him-” I started

“Naruto is-” Hinata also began.

I waved at Hinata. “Go on.”

Hinata turned to Sakura. “Naruto is an S-class regenerator in Yuki’s class. He failed the graduation exam last time around and Yuki decided to help get him in shape and prepare him for the next one. Except Yuki is a lazy cat who only wants to work on his seals all day and Naruto is a puppy on soldier pills who just found a new friend and apparently only knows how to be friendly by badgering Yuki into more training. It’s not really Naruto’s fault, Yuki is just a dummy who should have seen this coming.”

I flopped onto my left side and groaned pitifully. “Indeed, I should have! But now every part of me aches, and soon I shall die!”

Hinata pegged an eraser at me. “No! I thought your theatrics were cute when I was a kid, but not anymore!”
I peered up at her and sniffed, giving her my best puppy dog eye. “But Hinata! I’m dying. Can’t you spare some pity for your brother in his final days?”

Her lips twitched but she soldiered on. “Yuki you’re going to be an actual ninja soon, this is beneath you.”

“Oh but soon nothing shall be beneath me, for my ashes shall be beneath the earth, all because my sister could not find it in her heart to pity me in my time of need!”

Sakura watched our exchange with a growing smile as Hinata responded, “No. No we are not doing this! Not in front of Sakura!”

I wriggled around so my scalp was facing Hinata and persevered. “Please Hinata? I think I know what might save me from a terrible exhausted death. Can I please get some head scratchies?”

Sakura let out a laugh as Hinata’s face flushed bright with blood. “You give your brother head scratches? That’s adorable!”

Hinata pressed her face into her hands, blush climbing up past them to her ears. “Yuki I hate you.”

“Nooo,” Sakura gleefully joined in, sensing weakness, “but if you don’t give your brother head scratchies he’ll die! Why would you do such a terrible thing?!”

Hinata desperately shook her head in her hands, trying to deny any of this was happening.

“Orrrrr,” I mused from where I lay on the ground, “maybe you’re just denying me head scratchies because you’re envious that Mimi hasn’t come around and done your hair recently.”

Sakura gasped. “There’s someone Hinata lets do her hair? Who?! Hinata never even lets us braid it! What’s their secret? Oh Hinata’s got such gorgeous hair, you have no idea how long I’ve wanted to play with it.” She brushed a finger against a stray lock of Hinata’s hair, letting it glide smoothly over her skin. “Your hair really is so pretty Hinata.”

Hinata squeaked and curled up even more. Her blush was so bad now it covered half her upper body and I was mildly worried about what that was doing to her blood pressure. Not, you know, enough to stop teasing her, but it’s the thought that counts.

“Mimi has been a friend of the family for a long time,” I told Sakura, “and she’s really careful with people’s hair. But hey, you’re the first school friend Hinata’s ever brought home. Maybe next time Mimi and Hinata have a hair day they’ll let you join in. Oh and here’s a tip, if you decide to turn it into a full spa day, Hinata loves finger massages. Just loves them.”

Hinata pulled her shirt up over her head and groaned. Sakura laughed, high and delighted and with maybe just a little bit of teasing glee. She leaned in to wrap an arm around Hinata and cooed to her sympathetically, “Aww, Hinata, don’t be shy. I think it’s cute. Do you want a finger massage right now? We have been writing all day.”

Hinata shook her head under her shirt.

“Are you sure? I’d be happy to. You have such lovely fingers. They’re so long and delicate and graceful-”

With that Hinata’s blood pressure finally lost the fight for continued brain function. She swayed slowly back and forth and then whump keeled right over on her side.
“Hinata!” Sakura cried out. “Are you okay!?”

“She’s fine,” I answered in my sister’s stead. “She’ll be up in a minute or two.”

Sakura whirled on me. “She fainted! I know fainting isn’t dangerous most of the time, but you could at least try to sound a little concerned!”

“Okay,” I said, raising a finger to object, “first of all, I really appreciate your concern for my sister. It’s nice to see someone outside the family caring for her so much. But I can see her brain and cardiovascular system and she’s fine. We just teased her too much and her blood vessels dilated too far and her blood pressure dropped No harm done. Second … I was only kind of joking earlier. Every part of me really does hurt. Now that I’ve laid down I’m not actually sure I can get up again.”

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Chapter End Notes

The next one or two update cycles (I typically update every third Saturday) may be interrupted. I’ve got PhD qualifying exams I need to study for coming up mid-August and I’m moving at the beginning of August too, so I’m gonna be really busy and I don’t want to make any writing promises during that time.

See you all again as soon as I can though!
Hey, it's been a couple months. Unfortunately I failed my qualifying exams this time around, so I'm gonna have take them (and some time off) again next year. And failing even after I studied so hard was just really rough emotionally, so it's been hard to get back into the swing of things. This chapter certainly didn't help by being long and difficult.

That said, I'll do my best to get back to the once-every-three-weeks update schedule, probably updating on Sundays now cus that just works better with my new schedule. There may still be some disruptions to the update schedule the next couple updates just so y'all know, I'm still kind of emotionally off-kilter, but long-term the goal is to still keep up regular three week updates.

With that said, please enjoy Root Causes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Chapter 39: Root Cause**

“Euggghhhhh!” Naruto ran his hands through his already messy hair and groaned. “Why do I need to know this stuff?! I’m gonna be a ninja, not an accountant! Why do I need to know algebra?”

That last sentence pitched up into something approaching a whine.

Mom looked up from where she was seated in the living room, peering with narrowed eyes over her book at this kid who had just implied accountants weren’t real ninja. I winced. This was perhaps not the best impression for Naruto to be making the first time he came over to our house.

“Naruto,” I said calmly, “let’s say you’re leading a team of ninja on a long mission. You’re going to be stationed at a village in the Land of Rice and you need to purchase supplies from the local while you’re there. How are you going to know how much money you need to requisition while you’re there? You’re going to need to know how much food your team eats a day and multiply that by the time you’ll be there and what the local food costs are, you’re going to need to do the currency conversion from Konoha coinage to Rice coinage, you’re going to need to multiply all that by a safety factor in case the mission runs long or prices change, all of that stuff. And if it’s a classified mission you won’t be able to ask anyone to help you out or do the math for you.”

“I know!” Naruto exclaimed. “I know. I just …” he shook his head and let out a frustrated growl. “Grah! I’m not going to use this stuff. I’m dumb, I get it, I’m never going to be able to do math. I don’t have to be the one packing the mission bags, I can just fight.” He let out a heavy breath and muttered. “You don’t need to know math to be a weapon”

I took in a breath and resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of my nose. Studying with Naruto was always like this. “Look, Naruto, this stuff is on the graduation exam and it’s there for a reason. You need to know it to pass. You’re at the level of basic ordered operations right now and you need to make it to at least algebra before you can graduate.”
“Look, I get it, I’m dumb! I’m gonna fail the exam again this time, I get it!”

I gave into my frustration and rubbed the bridge of my nose. I really did want to help Naruto, I did, but I didn’t know how to help him when he got like this and it was so frustrating. Naruto needed to graduate this year. Sasuke’s inability to keep up with his demon-fueled teammate had -would-exacerbated his Itachi inferiority complex and made it that much easier for Orochimaru to manipulate him. If Naruto ended up in Sasuke’s class again Sasuke would-

“Hey.” Mom interrupted us softly but firmly, walking over and putting a hand on the back of Naruto’s seat. “Mind if I butt in for a moment?”

I blinked up at her, train of thought momentarily derailed.

Naruto turned his head to look at her, a sheepish and uncomfortable look on his face. “Oh, um,” he grimaced, “sorry for bothering you Mrs. … Hyuuga?”

“It’s just Keiko, Naruto. Yuki’s father and I are married but I didn’t marry into the Hyuuga clan and I don’t have a clan name of my own.”

“Oh. Okay. Um, Keiko.” Naruto fumbled awkwardly over her name.

Mom nodded. “Good. I’m sorry I didn’t introduce myself earlier. You and Yuki seemed so engrossed in your studying and I didn’t want to interrupt.” She smiled.

I blinked. That … was not a normal smile. That was the same fragile half-smile she used to hide her rage when Hinata talked about training sessions with Hizashi. Did I miss something?

“Naruto,” my mother said softly, “earlier you said ‘You don’t need to know math to be a weapon’. Can I ask you real quick who told you that?”

“Uhh, Instructor Banri? When I used to ask him for math help he said it wasn’t important ‘cus you don’t need math to fight.”

“Did he say you don’t need math to fight or what you said earlier?”

“Huh?”

“When he sent you away, did he use those exact words ‘You don’t need to know math to be a weapon’?”

Naruto nodded his head, clearly a little confused. “Uh, yeah. Every time. It was his thing. History too, especially.” His voice dropped, imitating an older man “It’s fine Naruto. You don’t need to know how Tobirama concluded the First Shinobi War to be a weapon.” Naruto’s face soured and he muttered under his breath, “Every damn time.”

Mom’s smile widened a bit even as it became more brittle. “And this was Instructor … Banri? Would that by any chance be Banri Shimura?”

“Yes?”

“Okay. I just wanted to know.” Mom took her hand off of Naruto’s chair and seated herself at the table with us, next to Naruto.

Naruto flicked his gaze over desperately to me, then back to my mother, then back to me. I gave him a shrug. I didn’t know what this was about anymore than he did.
“So, Naruto. I hear you’re having some trouble with math. And I overheard Yuki telling you earlier that you need to know math to be a good ninja.”

Naruto flinched at that, looking down at the table. “Yeah.”

“Well, Yuki is kind of wrong about that.”

Naruto did a double-take, swinging his gaze up to meet Mom’s. I sat up a little bit myself. *Uh, I’m pretty sure I’m not.*

“You don’t really need math to be a weapon, that’s true. For people like Yuki and I, our usefulness as ninja is totally dependent on our academic skills. And most field ninja do use a fair amount of math, for navigating if nothing else. But yes, it is possible to be a weapon and fight without really needing to know math, just taking orders and doing what you’re told.”

Mom gave Naruto a long look I couldn’t quite identify. “But you’re not a weapon, Naruto. You’re a ninja. That means you’re a person too. And knowing math helps people. For instance, once you start taking missions you’ll get paid for them. You’ll earn money beyond just your living stipend, right?” She waited for Naruto to nod. “You’ll get paid that extra money because you’re a person who will have a life off the battlefield. The reason you’re learning math at the Academy, why it’s not just an after-school class for the nerdy ninja, is so you’ll know how to manage your money once you’ve graduated. It’s to help you live as a person.”

She continued. “This isn’t something where if you have trouble learning it you’re a bad ninja.” Mom accompanied that statement with a reprimanding scowl in my direction. I scratched the side of my chin (and then my opposite elbow) sheepishly. “It’s something Konoha teaches because it cares for its ninja as people, off of the battlefield. It’s for you. It doesn’t mean you’re dumb if you don’t get it, it just means that we all need to work harder to give you a little extra help, so Konoha can make good on its promise of giving you a life as a person, not just as a weapon.”

“Oh.”

Mom kept up her brittle smile, as if she didn’t hear the heartbreaking uncertainty laced through that one simple word, ‘oh’. As if she was just giving Naruto the time of day, telling him a fact so plain it couldn’t possibly merit an emotional response. But under the table I saw her hands clench and over Naruto’s shoulder her eyes flicked up to meet mine for a moment.

Naruto swallowed heavily and looked back down at the math problem we’d been working on to avoid meeting Mom’s eyes. As he did Mom signed to me under the table in the furtive stealth variant of Konoha Sign, “Yuki. I understand you want him to be better at math. You’re like me, you see someone struggling and you want to make them better at it. But math isn’t what your friend needs to learn right now. He needs to learn how to feel human. Do you understand?”

I nodded hesitantly. I could do that. But still-

*What did I just miss?*

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Mom called a family meeting later that evening.
We clumped together in the living room. Mom, Dad, and Neji filled the couch. Aunt Yuki squeezed onto the wide reading chair with Hinata, her daughter almost in her lap. I lay stretched out on the floor, one hand brushing up against my aunt’s seat and my feet just touching my parents’ couch. And, unusually for such a get-together, we were quiet.

It was Mom. She looked … pensive. Serious? I couldn’t pin down exactly what it meant, the way her shoulders hunched up and her brow bunched together. But whatever mood had taken her it felt wrong to interrupt it, to push her to speak before she was ready. The rest of the family must have felt it too, because we waited in silence for almost a full minute before she spoke.

“I,” she began, “have two things I want to ask of all of you. But before I ask I need to say that there are some risks to what I am asking and that any of you can say no to any of this, for any reason. The first thing I want to ask carries some possibility of disruption to our family life. Particularly for you, Yuki—elder, she signed, “—and you, Hinata. I’m not sure how Hiashi would react to this and I don’t want to do anything that would disrupt your family life” give him a reason to get involved in it, went unspoken, “and the two of you already have so little time with him already” and we all want to keep it that way. “I’d like you to really consider what I’m asking. It’s important. I wouldn’t be asking if it wasn’t.”

“The second thing I want to ask of you is … selfish. In many ways, it is selfish. And it could potentially carry a great deal of risk for everyone here. If any of you feel at all uncomfortable with my second request, please tell me no.”

Mom looked around the room, meeting each of our gazes as we offered them to her as best we could, and relaxing a hair as she received our nods and murmurs of agreement.

“Good,” she said. “Alright, the first thing I would like us to do is informally adopt Naruto into the family.”

I choked, coughing on my own saliva. “What?!”. Neji looked straight up poleaxed. Dad hurried out a quick, “Wait like how Miyuki and Tenten are family or how Hinata is family?”. And Aunt Yuki … beamed? The look on her face was pure affection, like she loved Mom for even asking the question. It threw me for a bit of a loop to be honest, made me almost forget the question. I wasn’t used to anyone but Dad looking at Mom in that way.

“Um, why?” I asked. I sat up and gave Mom a quizzical look. “I mean, not to say he’s not a nice kid. He is. But uh, without being rude, he’s kind of more like Mimi’s wolf Ren than he is like Mimi.” Also, you know, Mom had just proposed adopting Naruto Uzumaki and I kind of needed a moment to wrap my head around that.

Aunt Yuki interjected before Mom could respond, smiling fondly at her, “Because you see people who are hurting and you want to do something about it.” A moment later Dad seemed to get what Aunt Yuki was saying with a soft “oh” and a fond smile of his own.

“Okay but what does that have to do with us adopting Naruto…?” I persisted.

“Well it would be more like how Tenten is part of the family than how Hinata is,” Mom clarified. “Inviting Naruto around for family dinners, taking him with us to festivals, having him around the house so we can teach him some basic life skills he might not have learned without parents. That kind of thing. I’d like for us to give Naruto a sense of what family means and why it matters. As for why …” Mom trailed off. She grimaced. “Well, that kind of touches on the second thing I want to ask. And why this may be a risk.”

Dad rested his hand high up on her back, rubbing small circles between her shoulder blades. “So
Mom took a deep breath. “Right. So Hizashi, Yuki,” elder “what do you two remember of the political restructuring right after the Nine-Tails Demon was unleashed?”

Dad responded immediately. “Absolutely none of it. Iwa was probing our defenses almost every night, me and every other Hyuuga were pulling triple shifts on the wall, remember? I was not following politics.” He chuckled, looking fondly over Neji and I. “Heck it’s a miracle you two ever got born, what with how busy we were.”

Aunt Yuki followed that up with a shrug. “I remember a little? I wasn’t invited to any of the meetings, but I showed up at plenty of functions on Hiashi’s arm. I wasn’t focusing much on the politics either though, most of the time I was helping make sulfur gas in case the raids turned into all-out war. Which they did, and then I was almost as busy as Hizashi.”

“Right,” Mom said. She took a deep breath. Looking over Hinata, Neji, and I she said, “And I don’t suppose either of you were ever taught anything about this?” She nodded as we shook our heads. “That’s what I figured.”

“Well,” she continued, “to break it down to its bare bones, the Third Hokage, after he retook the position following the Fourth Hokage’s death in the Nine-Tails attack, had a falling out with his former adviser Danzo Shimura. A lot of high ranking clan members took sides and by the time the dust cleared a whole lot of people who had backed Shimura lost their positions and their influence. Some smaller clans actually got disbanded entirely and even influential clan leaders were rendered toothless in the aftermath. It was really big. The logistics division was working overtime to prevent our enemies from exploiting the division and keeping everyone on a unified war footing. It was a nightmare.”

“The basic details are that Danzo, in the wake of the attack’s devastation, thought the best way to reassert Konoha’s dominance would be with preemptive bijuu strikes. On … everybody, essentially. He wanted us to sneak the new Nine-Tails jinchuuriki -Naruto- into enemy villages and have an Uchiha trigger a full bijuu transformation, with ANBU teams to hamstring the enemy response and the three sages calling their chief summons at secondary locations. He said that with everyone stripping defenses from their home villages to probe our defenses we had a chance to wipe out every other major village before they could respond. The Hokage vetoed it, immediately. From what I understand doing that to Naruto as an infant would have destroyed his mind and the Hokage drew a hard line at child sacrifice.”

Neji stared at Mom in open-mouthed horror. “Bijuu warfare was on the table during the Third War?” he asked disbelievingly. I mirrored his shock. Neji and Tenten had once presented a project to our class modeling the potential fallout of jinchuuriki waging war in civilian areas, and from what I remembered ‘total economic devastation’, ‘potential collapse of the industrial trade network’, and ‘possible continent-wide famine’ were about the jist of it. Danzo had thought he could control that?

Aunt Yuki drew Hinata into a desperate hug, her eyes far away with thoughts of what her daughter’s childhood could have been like.

“The good news,” Mom continued, “is that Bijuu warfare wasn’t ever really on the table. No one backed Danzo on that and I don’t think he was really going for it. But it got a discussion about Bijuu warfare going, and it reminded everyone that Konoha didn’t have a combat-ready jinchuuriki and that every single one of our enemies knew we were vulnerable to assault by a bijuu at that moment. What Danzo really wanted was to-” she hesitated for a moment over the wording, “-condition Naruto. He wanted Naruto to be capable of a full voluntary bijuu transformation by age
eight. He said he could do it if Naruto was handed over to his people in ANBU.”

Dad looked just about ready to vomit. “At eight?”

Mom nodded. “At first, I think, the Hokage didn’t want to seem weak. He’d come out of retirement to take the mantle of Hokage back up, sections of Konoha didn’t even exist any more, every single one of our enemies were probing for weakness, and there were serious questions about if Hiruzen was up for the task. So he didn’t immediately respond to Danzo with ‘fuck you we’re not Kiri’ like he maybe should have. Instead there were debates about the practicality of it, the long-term consequences of our jinchuuriki not attending the Academy. And there was this one particular phrase that Danzo and his supporters would use. I remember it really vividly, because it turned my stomach every time I heard it.”

Mom took a deep breath and frowned. “‘He doesn’t need an education to be a weapon’,” she recited, “that’s what they said.” Her lips curved up into a snarling sneer and she spat out, “As if that makes a fucking difference. We’re all fucking weapons. Every last goddamn one of us forges ourselves into weapons for Konoha but the pact we make is that Konoha takes care of us in turn. That we don’t just sacrifice and die for the lives of others, but for our own lives too. That we will have lives worth living off of the battlefield. Danzo wanted to throw that away for the exigencies of war. As if principles mean shit if you only adhere to them when they come without cost.”

I watched Mom rein herself in, pausing to control her breathing. I played what Naruto had said over in my head again, ‘You don’t need to know math to be a weapon’. Fuck, I swore to myself. I saw where this was going.

“But Danzo lost,” Mom continued, in a low dangerous voice. “He lost, the Hokage deemed him unfit to resume the advisory role he’d had during the Third Hokage’s previous tenure, Danzo supporters lost political favor -several promising political careers were utterly destroyed-, and Naruto got to have an ordinary childhood and an ordinary Academy education. Or at least that’s what was supposed to have happened.”

Mom looked up, meeting each of our gazes in turn as best she could. Dad, Neji, Hinata, Aunt Yuki, and finally me. “Today, while Yuki had Naruto over to study, Naruto said that his teacher told him ‘You don’t need to know math to be a weapon’. He said his previous teacher told him that all the time. About everything. ‘You don’t need to know this’ -whatever this might be- ‘to be a weapon’. And of course it just so happens, by coincidence I’m sure,” the sarcasm dripping off of her words showed what Mom thought of that idea, “that Naruto’s teacher for his prior time at the Academy was none other than Banri Shimura, Danzo Shimura’s grandnephew.”

Dad hissed in a breath. “No,” he breathed, “not even Danzo’s that bold.”

Aunt Yuki swore and asked, “Was the decision about Naruto’s education a formal edict from the Hokage?” At Mom’s nod she paled.

Neji twitched his head between Hinata and I, raising one eyebrow slightly. “How bad is this?” he signed.

Hinata signed back, “If Aunt Keiko is right, someone compromised one of Konoha’s military assets after being directly told not to.”

“Yeah but this guy’s a clan noble right? Is anyone going to care?”

“Clan heads have been deposed for less. Even Dad wouldn’t risk something like this.”
I bit my lip and stayed quiet. Danzo had done a hell of a lot worse than just this. At this very moment he was quietly operating a paramilitary force that ran unauthorized assassination and sabotage missions -sometimes even against Konoha’s allies- and collaborated with Konoha’s enemies without the Hokage’s approval. Spitefully sabotaging Naruto’s education was quite possibly the least terrible thing on a long, long list of Danzo’s treasonous offenses.

_Seriously though, I griped to myself, how the hell does Danzo get away with this shit? I’m justifiably scared to badmouth my uncle out loud, how does this asshole operate an entire fucking clandestine military operation without getting noticed?_

“So obviously,” Mom continued while I stewed internally, “I want to help give Naruto the education he deserves as a Konoha ninja. Yuki” _junior_“is already doing a lot to help him, but it takes a village to raise a child. And if the rest of Naruto’s life has been as thoroughly sabotaged as his education seems to have been, he’ll need a lot more than some simple tutoring sessions to make things right.”

“Of course we’ll help you with that,” Aunt Yuki assured Mom.

Hinata nodded along with her mom’s confirmation, “Yeah,” she said quietly, “this isn’t right.”

Dad nodded firmly, lacing his right hand in Mom’s left. “You know I’m with you, love. Forever and always.”

Neji nodded seriously. “Having Naruto around has gotten Yuki to actually stop half-assing his fitness and combatives training. It’s a miracle. I vote we bind the two of them together with restriction seals and never let them be further than five meters apart ever again.”

I sighed. “Fuck off Neji,” I returned. “I have been second-place in our class’s taijutsu rankings ever since the beginning. I have been doing just _fine_ without your insane training schedule.”

“We’re also the only two Hyuuga in the class.”

“Oh? And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re only competing with me and I say you’ve been slacking.”

“Was slacking,” Hinata interjected, “Yuki was slacking. As you said, Naruto’s been good for him, he’s been doing much better now.”

I reached into the chest of my robes and fingered my chakra disrupting Nope Stick, overdramatically glowering at my siblings. I mean, sure, they were absolutely right. I’d struck up my training partnership (mentorship? friendship?) with Naruto at Miyuki’s prodding precisely because ‘second best in class by default’ is not at all the same thing as training with the intent to engage in life or death struggles with stronger opponents. But Neji and Hinata were my siblings and them being right didn’t mean I couldn’t needle them right back. _I could just point the Nope Stick at them for a moment. You know, just enough to sting a bit._

“Kids,” Dad cut in sharply, “now is not the time.”

“What your dad says,” Mom followed up, “I haven’t finished. I still haven’t gotten to why you two might say no, Yuki,” _elder_“and Hinata.”

That earned a ceasefire in our adolescent hostilities as we refocused our attention on Mom.

She grimaced. “Hinata’s grandfather, Hizashi and Hiashi’s father, was one of Danzo’s supporters
on this. And I don’t know if Hiashi agreed with him or not. He … probably did.”

Oh.

Mom continued in the uneasy silence that followed, “And obviously we wouldn’t want you to be at odds with your family, so …”

“No.” Hinata said.

“No?”

“No.” Hinata repeated, speaking softly but intently, “I’ll help.” She turned to Aunt Yuki. “Mom, if you’re … if you’re okay with this, I want to help.”

“Hinata…”

Hinata wrung her hands and swallowed hard - but also sat up straighter. She took a deep breath and spoke up, just a shade louder than she had been. “Please?”

“I-” Aunt Yuki hesitated, “-can I have a minute to think about this?”

“Mom-”

“Please, Hinata?”

Hinata swallowed. “Okay,”

Neji and I exchanged a glance. Hinata didn’t always … see, exactly, what her father’s treatment did to her mother. She was too close to it, maybe, thought of it as too normal to see how deep it cut. But Neji and I did. We knew why Mom had emphasized so much that they could veto anything which would put them at odds with Hiashi. If Aunt Yuki said no and Hinata pushed, we’d step in. In the end though we didn’t have to. After a long minute of contemplation Aunt Yuki raised her head and reached out to take one of Hinata’s worrying hands in her own. She took a deep breath, filling her lungs as much as they could be. “Okay,” she said, “I’ll help. It’s the least I could do. Just … Keiko, Hizashi? If things get bad- if I start to struggle- will you … be there? For me?”

Dad smiled softly. “Of course. You don’t even have to ask. Hey-” he got up from the couch and extended a hand to Aunt Yuki. He waited until she folded her hand in his and lifted her out of the reading chair and into his arms. He wrapped her in a big hug, the kind that filled you up inside with all it had to offer. “-we’re here for you. Always.”

Mom leaned forward on the couch, stretching out to take one of Aunt Yuki’s hands in her own. Rubbing her thumb over the back of her sister-in-law’s hand she murmured, “Always.”

Looking up at the three of them from where I was sitting on the ground, I marveled at the weight settling in my heart and wondered how Danzo couldn’t see the value of this. We’d all carry one another through hell. This is why Neji fights to be so strong, what Hinata makes it to the end of each day for. How can Danzo not see it? How can the Hyuuga -how can Hiashi- not see it? What makes people think we need to be beaten and broken to fight for them? Just give us a home. Gods, that’s all we need. We don’t need to be broken. Just give us a home and we will fight for it.

That’s what we’ll give Naruto, I thought, surprising myself with the vehemence of it, a home actually worth fighting for, not just the hope of earning one.
Hinata waited for her mother to center herself before interjecting, “Um, by the way, what was the second thing you wanted to ask?”

“Ah, right.” Mom slipped her hand back out of Aunt Yuki’s and let her and Dad retake their seats before responding. “This is the selfish thing. It would be more of a personal project than a family thing, really.” Mom frowned. “I want to make sure that Danzo pays for this.”

She paused for a second and I took the moment to push my eyes to their limit and check for invisible watchers, recording equipment, transmitting seals, small summoned creatures, and every other method of discernible eavesdropping I could think of. Not that I really expected to find any or to be able to do anything about it if I did, it was just kind of a reflex action. You know, hear a loved one threaten Danzo, immediately fear for their safety and panic a little, the standard reasonable response.

Mom continued on though like she hadn’t just fucking threatened Danzo, “Danzo crossed a line here. There’s no way that sabotaging Naruto’s education would get him the weaponized Jinchuuriki he wanted, it’s far too late for that. The only thing I can imagine him getting out of this is validation. Being able to say ‘I was right, there wasn’t a point to educating the jinchuuriki, we should have done it my way, I told you so’. And that’s—” Mom scowled, like she’d bitten into rotten fruit.

“That’s wrong. That’s a violation of everything Konoha was founded on. Ruining one of our own ninja’s lives so you can lie and make a point? In a way that undermines the Hokage’s authority and damages Konoha’s defensibility? For no one’s benefit but his own?!” Mom’s voice was climbing in pitch, equal parts disbelief and rage rising out of her throat. “He waged fucking psychological warfare on one of our village’s children so he could make the Hokage— the Hokage!— look bad? Danzo has gone beyond the pale. You do not get to hurt children because it makes you feel better. He deserves nothing less than to see his entire fucking life collapse around his head and to be held accountable in the ruins that remain. I want to lay waste to him.” Mom was breathing heavily by the time she finished, ready to wield a kunai against him herself if the way her fingers were twitching was any indication.

Dad laid a hand softly on her shoulder. “I get it,” he murmured.

Around them the rest of our family sounded off their agreement. Except for me. I hesitated. Hinata was the first one to notice my reticence. “Yuki?”

I struggled not to scratch my arms, to not give the skin-crawling sensation over my skin any physical weight. “I—”

“Yuki?” my sister repeated more softly. “Are you okay?”

No. No I was not. This was Danzo we were talking about. Helping out Naruto was one thing, challenging Danzo was suicide. Possibly quite literally. I would not put it beyond Root to fake a few suicides if that’s what was needed to shut us up.

Mom leaned towards me, “Yuki what’s—”

“No,” I interrupted. “Let him get away with it. Walk away, bite your tongue, and don’t ever mention that you have evidence of Danzo’s wrongdoing.”

Our parents exchanged glances with one another, Neji frowned, and Hinata gave me a long concerned look.
A thought was taking shape in my mind, years of ‘that doesn’t quite make sense’ finally finding an answer. Earlier I’d been annoyed that Danzo somehow got away with this shit even with the freaking Hyuuga clan right living in the same village. Sure we didn’t see everything all the time, and Root probably cloaked as much as they could in coded language and the camouflage of ‘just ANBU doing secret ANBU stuff, nothing to see here’. But someone in the Hyuuga clan should have, at some point, seen something suspicious. Nothing could be hidden forever in a world made of glass. So how did he do it?

The answer was obvious as soon as the question was spelled out. Someone had seen something. Probably many someones who reported their concerns up the chain of command and heard back “No big deal, the Hokage cleared it, all’s good.” Because the Hyuuga were compromised. Important figures in the main family, elders on the council, maybe Hiashi himself. It was impossible to say who, but it must be enough. Enough Hyuuga in positions of power that worries and concerns never made it to the wrong ears.

Powerful Hyuuga who, if Mom went through with this, would inevitably see her. That godsdamn meddling clanless ninja who had already ruined one the Hyuuga’s clan heirs, threatening to make sure everyone who mattered would be looking into Danzo’s crimes - and by extension, their complicity.

As my mother opened her mouth to speak I interrupted again. “Don’t do it. Please, Mom. You gave us veto power and I’m using it. Don’t try to touch Danzo. Not now, not ever.”

Mom didn’t like it. She argued for a bit, tried to wheedle why not out of me before Dad pulled her back and told her that was enough. Eventually the conversation turned back to how to help Naruto and we uneasily left the topic of holding Danzo to account behind.

I could tell Mom wasn’t really happy about it. Or at the very least she was unsettled. She couldn’t understand why I’d shut it down. The rest of the family gave me some odd looks too. Except for Neji. One look at Neji and I knew. He got it, because he too had grown up a slave.

Sometimes you can fight back. Small victories can be stolen unseen. You can make a better life than they give you, if you’re careful about. But never attack their power. Never challenge their right to play god with the lives of those below. They will kill you for that. It was an ugly truth, but one I’d learned well over two lifetimes. Sometimes it’s just not worth it to hold powerful people accountable for what they’ve done.

Oh I knew just how much of a threat Danzo was to Konoha. I knew this was a golden opportunity to nudge the Hokage’s attention towards Root. And I knew just how many wrongs Danzo would commit and how many ills he’d bring down on Konoha. Second to Obito, Danzo might be the most important person in the world for me to see dead. If I loved Konoha, if I cared for it all, I wouldn’t stand in my mother’s way.

But I didn’t love Konoha. I loved my family.

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Chapter End Notes
This chapter might be kind of rough because of the circumstances under which it was written and because Wecan'tgiggleit'sacrimescene has been dealing with their own stuff, so if there's any typos or odd spots in this chapter, please feel free to point them out so I can fix them.

Also, question: Now that we're getting closer and closer to graduation (slower than I thought we would, but getting there), I'd love to hear what y'all are looking forward to or anticipating as this story goes forward. Leave a comment and tell me all about it! :D

P.S. As always, pessimistic statements by characters in this story do not always fully represent reality, my own opinions, or what will happen in the greater arc of the story.
Tenten idly whirled a blunt senbon around her fingers and grinned. “So Neji, how good is this new sparring partner supposed to be?”

Her partner, sitting cross-legged beneath a straw target dummy bound to a tree and laced through with thin ribbons, frowned minutely. Tenten grimace. Neji could be very expressive with very little when he wanted to be and that frown was not encouraging.

With a sigh, she flipped the senbon into the air, grabbed it by the tip, and flung it at the dummy in what she hoped was all one fluid hard-to-follow motion. It *thunked* through the thigh of the dummy a dozen centimeters from Neji’s head, embedding itself cleanly in the tree behind it. “We aren’t being handed another slacker to whip into shape, are we? Tell me this isn’t like that Kurama clan kid Misao wanted us to work with?”

Neji shook his head a fraction. “No, not like that. He’s ...” He paused, clearly weighing what he wanted to say next. Tenten quirked an eyebrow. Neji was really in a contemplative mood today. “Hmm. Oh, by the way you missed the nerve.”

“What?” Tenten exclaimed. “No way! That had to have hit it!”

“Nope. Senbon’s touching the ribbon but didn’t pierce it.”

Tenten scoffed. “That counts. On a real person the senbon would have embedded in the tibia and be putting pressure on the nerve.”

Neji quirked one of those perfect eyebrows that so many of her classmates gushed over and favored her with a lopsided smirk. “Maybe. Maybe not. But since when has ‘that counts’ ever been good enough for us?”

Tenten smiled. He was right about that. A moment later another senbon *thunked* home in the opposite thigh.

“Better,” her partner commented, “you cut the edge of the ribbon.”

Minutes passed between them, punctuated only by the *thunk* of senbon and Neji’s feedback on her accuracy. Tenten didn’t press Neji to elaborate on his opinion of Naruto, he’d get to it when he got to it. She just sunk herself into the exercise of repetition, of ingraining a motion so deeply into her body that it would come without thinking when she needed it. There was something beautiful in that, she thought, in deciding that something would be part of your being and then making that be so. Like taking a forge hammer to one’s own soul, shaping it into something useful with slow and steady blows.

Tenten smiled ruefully. Neji’s father was rubbing off on her. If she wasn’t careful she might actually start reciting poetry out loud. She would never live that down. … well, *Yuki* would never let her live that down. What would Neji think if she took up poetry?
“So,” Neji interrupted that thought, “about Naruto.”

“Right.” Tenten cleared her throat. “About Naruto.”

“... what do you think I would have been like, if the Hyuuga elders didn’t permit branch family to fight at all? If we were to be scouts and spies and nothing more?”

“Uh, this is about Naruto?”

Neji nodded.

“Well I mean, they already don’t teach you the higher techniques but you’re still—” Tenten gestured vaguely at Neji. She didn’t know the specifics of the chakra manipulation he practiced while he sat under her target dummies, but she knew it had something to do with the main family’s Kaiten technique. “You don’t let that stop you.”

“True. A ninja who cannot learn without being taught will never achieve greatness. And you and I were not fated to be satisfied with mediocrity. What the status of our births have not granted us, we will make for ourselves.”

Tenten nodded firmly. Exactly. Noble birth was no substitute for knowing how to play the game. Clan techniques and bloodlines meant nothing if you didn’t put the work in. Genius didn’t do anything for you unless you knuckled down and actually *used* it.

“But still,” Neji said, “we have been taught. Maybe not everything we need to know, but we had teachers who taught us. We learned how to learn. We were trained how to spot defects in our own stances, how to grind away one another’s flaws in spars, how to dig through scrolls to find the advice we need, how to experiment with a dozen styles until one fits, but none of these things were we born knowing how to do. Before we could learn we had to be taught.”

There was something helpless on Neji’s face, something Tenten’s wasn’t used to seeing there. He was platinive as he continued. “But what if we had never been taught how to learn? What if we knew we were fated to be better than what we were given but didn’t know how to get there? Having the will to try and try and try but not knowing how to use that drive? Can you imagine seeing your goals in the distance and being willing to put in the hours but having *no idea* how to get there?”

Tenten could smell bile in the back of her throat as she tried to imagine what it would be like to stand on a training field with kunai in her hand, throwing day in and day out but never getting closer to the bullseye. Seeing everyone else get better as day after day she stayed the same and not knowing why. Trying to convince herself that there was a reason to try again the next day, that the problem could be fixed, that the problem wasn’t *her*. Imagining what it would be like to live like that ... she couldn’t.

…

Gods she could.

“Naruto’s childlike. He’s immature, he’s defensive, he gets frustrated easily, and I don’t know how Yuki tolerates it. But he’s angry because he wants to be better than what he was given. Because he’s like us.”

There was a pause where Tenten tried to find her words before eventually just settling on, “Oh.”

Neji nodded.
“Does Naruto have proper equipment?”

“Not so far as I am aware, no.”

“I’ll see if I can borrow some training kunai from Hideo’s forge.”

Yeah! Let’s do this!” Naruto yelled at the top of his lungs. He wound up and hurled his kunai with a cry, “Hyah!” … and missed the target completely. Just like he had with the last four kunai. He turned around to face Tenten and chuckled sheepishly, hand rubbing the back of his head.

It was a terrible throw. They were all terrible throws. Gods above Tenen literally could not remember having even thrown that terribly, because when she’d been that bad she’d also been too young for memories. But Tenen didn’t roll her eyes and sigh. Oh she wanted to. Gods did she want to. The blond-haired kid she and Neji were supposed to be training with didn’t even try. There was no attempt to double-check his stance, to check his grip, to go through the motions a few times before letting fly, no pause of deliberation between throws, nothing. He just got really loud and yelly and made more noise each time he threw a kunai, like that was supposed to change anything.

She hated it. She hated him. Just watching him ‘practice’ made her jaw clench and her fingers twitch.

But she could imagine the pain he was masking behind that casual self-deprecating laugh. So she passed him another kunai and told him, “Don’t give up. Not yet.”

Oh, Hinata, here to see the elders?” The older retired ninja who served as the elder council’s informal secretary smiled indulgently at Hinata. “I wasn’t expecting to see you this week, what are you here for?” She answered her own question even as she asked it, flipping through a calendar book on her desk. “Ohoho, sitting in on their village politics meeting are you? What’s prompted this sudden interest in highborn gossip?”

Hinata smiled despite herself as she entered the elder council’s waiting room, closing the door behind her. It never ceased to amaze her how many words Fumie could get out in the time most people took to say hello. “Good afternoon Fumie. And yes, I’ll be dropping in on their meeting, but just for a short while. How have you been doing?”

“Oh, just fine. The elders have been in a good mood recently. That big wedding announcement up in the capital has the clan just flush with all kinds of high-paying low-risk surveillance missions. The money from that alone should cover our whole obligation to Konoha this quarter and a hefty chunk of our budget after that. Oh, and please tell your mother thank you again for that ointment. My stumps always swell up something fierce in winter, but they’ve barely started to chafe against my legs even after the first snowfall!”
“That’s wonderful. There’s no dead skin or anything?”

“Not at all!”

A warm glow spread through Hinata’s chest. When she’d suggested adding a moisturizing base for the ointment to her mother she’d been worried that it might react badly with some of its active compounds -no matter how much her mother had assured her that couldn’t happen- so it was good to hear that it actually helped.

Hinata spent the next few minutes in the council’s waiting room, trading family news and snippets of village gossip with Fumie. The elders had seen her show up, they would call for her when they were ready.

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Entering the elder’s council chamber was always disorienting for Hinata. She didn’t understand how the elders could stand it. Every piece of decoration shimmered with chakra, to the point where she could hardly see! Bright plates of chakra-infused steel from the Land of Snow hung on the walls made it impossible to see anything in front of them. Flower vases filled with conjured water dense with excess chakra formed shifting obscuring blurs. Even the floor was filled with so much chakra that she could hardly see where she was placing her feet! But Hinata did what she always did -pretend nothing at all was wrong- and walked smoothly up to the council’s table. “Honored Elders,” she murmured politely, bowing just an inch.

If the elders noticed her heart beating faster as she entered the room (though Hinata had a hard time imagining they could with the room such a fuzzy mess of chakra) they said nothing. They knew Hinata to be a somewhat nervous child but so long as she projected the calm and poise the rest of Konoha expected from the Hyuuga heir, they would say nothing.

They so often say nothing, Hinata thought bitterly. Outwardly she politely asked, “May I take this seat Elder Emiri?”

Elder Emiri nodded and Hinata took her seat.

“So,” Elder Taeko said sharply but not unkindly, “what is this about Hinata? I was under the impression that your father is waiting until your graduation to involve you further in political matters, so that you can focus on your education. Is that not so?”

“Yes Elder, that is correct and I intend to respect his wishes on that front. However a situation has come up with my schoolmates which may have political repercussions regardless, and I thought it would be best to seek the advice of my elders.” Keiko’s advice ran through Hinata’s head as she nodded respectfully to Elder Taeko. Play the part of one who flatters and honors your superior and it will not matter if they believe you. Your subservience is what they want from you, not your opinion of them.

“Oh?” Elder Taeko replied. “Go on then.”

“As you may be aware, the jinchuuriki recently failed the graduation exam and is now in the same class as Hizashi’s sons, who serve as my branch protectors.” The elders gave her scattered nods. “Well, the jinchuuriki is … unrefined, to put it mildly. No one who interacted with him would be surprised at his failure. Despite his social shortcomings however, upon entering my protectors’
class he attempted to strike up a friendship with one of them. I was surprised, and slightly concerned at the influence the demon’s vessel might have on my protector. Nevertheless, I tentatively gave my protector permission to reciprocate the friendship. I would have to be blind to not see the use in a potential tie to our village’s jinchuuriki, after all.”

Elder Taeko raised an eyebrow. “This wouldn’t be the sealing twig Hiruzen directed me to teach, would it?”

Hinata inclined her head. “It would. Speaking of which, I wanted to thank you for your tutelage. He recently crafted these senbon launchers for me,” Hinata held out her arms, drawing attention to a pair of thin bracers inked with a glowing spidery scrawl, “and they’ve performed marvelously.”

“I’m glad to hear the lessons have been of use to you Hinata. However,” the elder’s voice turned wry, “teaching that twig is near insufferable as it is, working around all those scraps of different sealing styles his Inuzuka teacher insists on stuffing inside his head. If teaching him becomes any more difficult because of this, I’ll be holding you responsible young lady.” A playful finger wag accompanied that last statement.

Hinata smothered a giggle, because that was the response Elder Taeko wanted. “I promise, he’ll behave.”

She cleared her throat. “Though actually, my request does touch on that somewhat.”

“Oh?”

“Well, my protector began training with the jinchuuriki and the jinchuuriki learned. Contrary to all previous reports of our jinchuuriki’s feral nature, he has been picking up skills and knowledge remarkably fast. In fact I’ve seen him train on several occasions, and my impression has always been that of a remarkable if socially incompetent young ninja. I was almost impressed.”

Elders blinked with surprise, leaning in and taking notice.

“Put simply, he seems to learn better with others than on his own. Perhaps his prior social isolation at the Academy simply made it a difficult environment for him to learn in. Regardless he’s doing very well right now. Except,” Hinata puts on her father’s grimace, “well, except for his social skills of course. My protectors are superbly useful, but they are branch family.”

Murmurs of acknowledgement made their way around the table. Of course, of course. One could simply only expect so much good breeding from twigs. There was a reason one didn’t see them in high society after all.

A smile rested precariously on Hinata’s lips as she continued. “And of course I don’t want to risk the jinchuuriki’s, mmm-” Hinata paused as if searching for a less scathing word than what first came to mind “-rambunctious nature rubbing off on my protector, nor do I wish for any ill behavior on the jinchuuriki’s part to reflect poorly on the Hyuuga clan through my protector. At first I thought to simply do the obvious and rectify the situation myself, educating the jinchuuriki in matters of etiquette and society myself. It would be a simple enough extension of the relationship between he and my protector as is.”

Hinata affected the faintest bit of distress, the kind nobles used when they wanted to make sure you knew they truly were distraught over a dilemma, honest. “But that’s when I realized I had likely gone too far. The Hyuuga heir offering to oversee the jinchuuriki’s social education -oh let us be real, his political education- would most certainly be beyond my father’s prohibition on political involvement. But at the same time, I cannot merely let my protector’s rectitude be compromised.
Nor can I order my protector to retract his tutelage without *that* being a political statement. I’ve found myself in something of a bind and I could dearly use some advice."

And then, bait set, Hinata let the elders take it. Elder Mineko spoke up first, pouncing on the silence before another elder could steal her suggestion. “Oh dear, there is nothing to be worried about. Such an arrangement could hardly be considered political. Why back in my Academy days the previous Nara clan head and I studied together and nothing was thought of it all. I’m sure no one would think differently simply because this child is the jinchuuriki.”

Elder Taeko followed up quickly, “Besides Hinata, your intentions are completely apolitical. There will always be those who read omens from the shifting of the clouds and of course they may ascribe motive to your actions. But their opinions do not matter. Those whose insight matters will see it for the innocent gesture it is. Besides, you are well known for how freely compassionate you are even with your lessers, this would simply be an extension of that.”

With a perhaps too eager grin -but then he had never been the subtlest elder- Elder Naganori added, “Of course, ties to the jinchuuriki of any sort are a heavy responsibility, and it would be important that you give careful consideration to your interactions with him.”

For once Hinata didn’t have to fake a smile with the elders, only nudging honest joy into innocent relief. It was just as Keiko always told her. *People are unpredictable as a rule, but there are a few responses you can rely on people to have. The most important of which is that people will almost always make excuses for something they want.*

Was helping uncouth, orphaned, disreputable Naruto learn proper social skills and how to recognize high-society maneuvering something her father would probably disapprove of? Probably, yes. Was Hinata exercising actual political intrigue outside of her father’s shadow something he would shut down? *Absolutely*, yes. And the elders knew it. But a Hyuuga clan head with close childhood ties and a deep debt of gratitude with the jinchuuriki? That was something the elders would *want*. They weren’t about to pass that up when it fell in their laps.

So Hinata wasn’t going to even bother trying to argue this with Hiashi. No, let the elders argue her case for her. They could take on the task of explaining to her father why this didn’t violate his prohibition on political involvement. Or failing that, explaining to him that it was just not worth his time to push the elders on this and to let it go, which was a thing the elders could do that Hinata very much could not.

Of course, it wasn’t as if the elders didn’t know they were being used. … Well, *most* of them probably knew they were being used. (Elder Tetta was not the sharpest kunai around). But that was fine. So long as the interests of the Hyuuga clan were advanced the elders would be happy to play along. Besides, she was the clan heir. Cutting her teeth on some harmless subterfuge with the elders was practically expected of her.

As the elders confirmed their intent to have Hinata tutor Naruto (which became increasingly *their* idea as they talked, of course) Hinata permitted herself one small genuine smile. Keiko’s lessons in social manipulation really were such a help. She’d have to buy Keiko something nice later. Maybe she could commission some of those seal lamps Tenten’s forgemaster made, the ones which Tenten said could change color.

Yes, that would be perfect.
“So, um, uhhhhhh, what am I doing here again?” Naruto stammered out. The boy blushed as she leaned over to pour their tea, eyes darting back and forth as he tried -and failed- to focus anywhere but at the close of her robes.

“Having tea with me,” Hinata said crisply. Once the tea was poured she leaned back in her seat, eyes slightly narrowed. Rude as she knew it to be for those with mortal eyes to stare at another’s breasts, she was just as concerned by how bad Naruto was at hiding it. The more unscrupulous of her adolescent classmates -gods, Sasuke’s fanclub especially- at least tried to be ninja about that sort of thing.

“But, uh,” Naruto continued to stammer, “why? Like I know Yuki said to meet you here for tea,” he glanced nervously around her father’s richly furnished house, “but why?”

“So that we can have tea, and talk about the weather.”

“Uhhhhhh…..”

Hinata didn’t respond, savoring a long sip of her tea instead. It wasn’t the best tea, Yuki had assured her that such would be wasted on Naruto, but it was a good decent herbal blend.

“Uhhh, the weather is … cold? The snow last week was pretty?”

“It really was pretty, wasn’t it? Sakura -a friend of mine- kept saying how romantic it was.” Hinata let out a small huff of fond laughter. “Sakura’s a real fan of romance novels, movies, you name it, if it involves a happily ever after between lovers she’s a fan. Personally I’m not the biggest fan of the cold, but this year I found myself enjoying it, if just because I could see her so excited.”

“Ummm…” Naruto looked completely lost.

“How do you feel about the cold?”

“It’s, uh, fine?”

Hinata prodded a little further. “Is there anything which happens specifically in the winter that you’re particularly fond of?”

“Uh. Huh. Yeah I-. Yeah! Ichiraku’s -it’s this ramen place near my house, old man Teuchi runs it, he’s really awesome!- they put out these heater things which blow on your feet during the winter! You know when it’s really cold and you can like, feel how cold the cobblestones are through your shoes?”

Given Naruto’s holey socks and thin soles that she could see through the table Hinata suspected that no, she did not know what that was like in the way he did. Her chest ached and her feet ached with phantom cold as she imagined what that must be like.

“Well it sucks, right? But when you go into Ichiraku’s and you get a bowl of ramen and you put your feet up near a heater as you slurp down a bowl of piping hot ramen? That’s the best!” Naruto wiggled his feet under the table, reliving fond memories of a warm ramen shop.

Hinata took another sip of tea. “Oh that sounds lovely. Do you go there often in the winter?”
“Not just during the winter! I go there all the time! It’s the best place in Konoha! You should go sometime!”

Hinata waved a hand. “Ah, I’m good, thank you. Restaurant ramen tends to have too much salt for my taste. But I love it when I get the opportunity to make some ramen from scratch with my uncle. It’s so much fun.”

“You know how to make ramen?!”

Hinata relaxed into her seat with her tea as the conversation wound on, back and forth. This was going to work out just fine. Oh there was plenty to be mended in the young jinchuuriki’s behavior. He was just barely managing to hold coherent small talk with an accommodating conversation partner, to say nothing of being able to manage the political intrigues of Fire Country’s elite. (If he so rudely stared at the breasts of the inheriting Fire princess … well, execution probably wouldn’t be on the table for the vessel of the Nine-Tails, though being forced to argue against such an execution could easily destroy Konoha’s political position for years). But step one towards establishing good conversation habits was getting Naruto to simply enjoy having one. And at that, Hinata thought to herself proudly, she was very much succeeding.

Besides, it was actually kind of refreshing to talk to someone with so little concept of subterfuge. With a little work she might even enjoy these little tea parties.

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Chapter End Notes

I originally switched from two week updates to three week updates because I felt I needed more time to write the amount I was writing. But upon looking back at my word counts, I’ve realized that I literally did not change my words per day at all, my chapters just got longer on average. I am not entirely sure how to feel about this.

Also I feel like a bunch of chapters lately have been kind of establishing filler, but we’ll be getting to some interesting stuff soon, I promise.

And as always, comments are very much welcome, whether about the chapter or about the story as a whole. <3
Chapter Notes

This is a day late, but honestly the fact that I got it done at all is a minor miracle considering how terribly sick I got and the fact that I had a family reunion, so I'm just happy with what I managed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 41: A Vine Needs A Branch To Climb (Naruto)

Naruto is born and he is loved.

There are many, many children in the orphanages and Naruto is but one face among many. No one needs to know what he is. He is allowed to simply be an infant who needs to be cared for. And while there are many such children who need to be cared for, many people lend their hands. It may take a village to raise a child but Konoha is up to the task.

Naruto is raised by a dozen hands. He is swaddled, and changed, and played with when there is time. Many of the women who nurse him cry as they do, eyes red with their own grief and loss, but they have no reason to resent him for what they have lost. If anything he is held closer and tighter.

And so he is loved. It is perhaps not the most focused form of love in the world. There are many caretakers and many, many orphans after all. But nonetheless, when he is held he is cradled, and when his name is spoken it is with love.

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Naruto is one year old and he has perhaps a bit too much energy.

Long after any other child would have fallen asleep he is scooting about, doing his best to toddle around with his hands on the walls of the orphanage and laughing. Always laughing. His favorite (and only) word is “ghost!” He loves to point at the air and yell “ghost!”.

Naruto is always trying to catch the ghosts. He can’t see them and the adults say they’re not real, but he knows they’re there. They smell like metal and leather and chakra and sometimes blood. And they’re so much fun! They always move away when Naruto follows them, always just out of reach as he falls over himself trying to grab them. Some of them don’t play along, they go up to the ceiling and they stay there where he can’t get to them. But those are fun too. Naruto throws blocks at them and giggles as they try to stay out of range.

The best ghost is the hugging ghost though. It smells like dogs and lightning and love and sometimes it lets Naruto catch it. Only when no one is looking, but that’s how Naruto really really for sure knows the ghosts are real. When no one is looking the dog and lightning ghost will let
Naruto hug its leg and play with its toes (ghosts wear sandals!). Sometimes it will rub his head and whisper things in his ears. And sometimes, late at night when everyone is asleep, that ghost will pick him up and hug him. It sings lullabies and rubs his back and it smells like so much sadness but also so much love.

Naruto caught this ghost and it’s his.

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Naruto is two. He does not know what a war is, or what full deployment means, but he does know that the ghosts aren’t always around anymore. When they show up they almost always smell like blood and pain, and sometimes sickness. The hugging ghost almost never shows up.

Naruto spends more time playing with the other children instead. And his caretakers still love him. But he misses the ghost that smells like dogs and lightning and love.

-----

Naruto is three and his best friend is dead.

He and Naruto sleep on neighboring beds. They talk a lot late at night, after they’re supposed to be asleep. Naruto likes him a lot. But he is sickly and coughs a lot and one day he just doesn’t wake up.

Naruto cries. The caretakers cry. Naruto hates it. He hates that his friend is going away forever, he hates being so sad, he hates that the caretakers are sad, he hates it. He has nightmares about it, about pushing his friend’s shoulder and him not moving.

Some of the other children start to get sick, start to cough. The nightmares get worse.

-----

Naruto is four and he has a nightmare. A really, really bad nightmare that has him tossing and turning. He gets scared in his sleep and he pushes out with … something. He doesn’t know what it is but it makes him feel safe so he pushes and pushes and pushes and pushes.

Each night Naruto sleeps in a dormitory with nine other children. They are his friends. This night when he wakes up, sweat-stained and panting, they are all dead. None of them will wake up, no matter how much he shakes them. Naruto screams.

The caretakers come running in. When they see what has happened, one of the caretakers wails. Another slumps against the wall, crying. One scoops Naruto up in his arms and runs out of the room as fast as he can, as if the room will kill Naruto too.
People come. There are doctors and strangers dressed all in black who smell of death. And then there are ghosts. Except now Naruto can see the ghosts, everyone can see the ghosts. They wear white masks painted with scary animal faces and right now the smell of their chakra is tense and thick and violent.

The ghosts talk with the doctors. There are quiet conversations and hushed whispers. One of the doctors raises her voice and shouts once before being hushed. For a while there are more whispers. But the doctor who shouted does not stay quiet forever. She gets louder and louder and eventually she starts yelling, screaming at the ghosts. She says they killed the children. That they should have known better.

The caretaker who is holding Naruto asks what is going on. What happened. What killed the children.

The ghosts are quiet. Even behind their masks, none of them will meet his eyes. The doctor steps up. She is angry. Furious. She shouts, pointing first at the ghosts and then at Naruto. Naruto doesn’t understand most of what she’s saying. There are words he doesn’t know. ‘Chakra suffocation’, ‘long-term gate contamination’, ‘jinchuuriki’.

What Naruto does understand is how the caretaker pushes him away and refuses to pick him back up. He understands how the rest of the caretakers look at him, their awful expressions, the fear he can smell. When he starts crying none of them will touch him and he understands that too.

Naruto’s friends are dead. And no one loves him anymore.

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Naruto is five and he is a monster.

He sleeps alone in a shed behind the orphanage. The caretakers have turned it into a bedroom for him. They say he isn’t allowed to sleep in the same house as the other children anymore. He isn’t allowed to eat with them either. The caretakers bring him meals in his shed and he eats alone. Some of them scowl at him. Some of them say they’re sorry. Some of them even hug him and tell him it’s not his fault. But none of them smell like love anymore.

When he plays in the yard, none of the other children will play games with him. They call him a demon. Naruto doesn’t know what that means, but he knows that it’s bad. He knows that he is bad.

-----

Naruto is six and he starts taking lessons at the Academy. He loves the Academy more than anything in the whole world. He gets to sit next to other children again, children who talk to him and play with him and listen to him. He throws himself into his lessons, doing everything the teachers ask of him. Being at the Academy, his caretakers told him, is a privilege for good kids who do what they’re told. So he makes sure to be the best student ever.

Naruto fidgets and bounces his legs when he has to sit still in class but he does his best. He really
wants to do his best. Some of the other students are bad kids and the teachers get frustrated with them and Naruto wants more than anything in the world to show that he’s not one of them. He’s going to be the best student they’ve ever had.

The first time he holds up a finger-painting of a touch-me-not flower to his instructor and gets a proud smile in return is the best day of his entire life.

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Naruto is seven and his primary teacher is replaced.

The new teacher is Instructor Banri Shimura. One of the clan kids says Instructor Banri has a really important uncle (great-uncle? Naruto can never remember) and that’s got something to do with why he’s their teacher now. Naruto doesn’t really care. He’s determined to show Banri what a good kid he is.

Banri doesn’t care. Naruto shows Banri his oh-so-careful (but still a bit messy) calligraphy with a beaming smile. It earns him a glance. Naruto jumps up and down and asks Banri to watch how fast he can run. Banri doesn’t. Naruto scrapes himself on a bush and bandages it up all on his own, just like he was taught. He shows his arm to Banri, eyes watering but beaming, showing off how good he is. Banri snorts and tells Naruto it doesn’t matter.

Every day Naruto’s heart is sinking further into his stomach like a stone.

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Naruto is nine. He is still trying.

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Naruto is ten. He doesn’t bother raising his hand in class anymore. He never gets called on. So instead he interrupts. Banri asks if anyone knows where the liver is. Naruto shouts out “The right ribs! It’s under the right ribs!”

The other students just think he’s rude. Naruto spends lunch inside for disrupting the class.

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Naruto is eleven and he is still trying but it’s so, so hard. Fractions don’t make any sense. He gets his homework back with terrible grades and all Instructor Banri will tell him is that weapons don’t
need math. The class moves on to units and something called ‘dimensional analysis’ but he still can’t make sense of fractions.

One day Banri’s assistant asks the class a question about kunai speed and Naruto jumps up, shouts the answer. But this time he doesn’t get eyerolls or sighs from the other students. This time they laugh at him. He’s stupid. He’s an idiot.

Banri loudly calls for Naruto to stop wasting everyone’s time. Naruto sits down.

(He doesn’t even know what he did wrong).

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Naruto is twelve.

The Academy, they are told, is going to start take them seriously now. Naruto even moves out of the orphanage, into his own little apartment (it’s lonely, but so was the shed). He’s a big kid now, a real ninja, and Banri tells them that they’re going to be treated like real ninja. There will be consequences if they underperform. Other students complain of being drilled to exhaustion after school for deficiencies in their taijutsu, of long weekend study sessions with Chuunin archivists, of their parents fretting over their grades and their position in the class rankings.

Naruto gets sick and stays home one day, his chakra burning under his skin. He doesn’t even realize he missed a history test until a week later. No one ever asks him to retake it. No one mentions it. There are no weekend study sessions scheduled for him.

Naruto stays up late, late, late into the night reading comics and no one tells him not to. He fumbles a kunai the next day during an examination, cuts himself. He panics. That’s an instant fail, it’s been an instant fail since they were nine. Banri shrugs. It’s not like it matters, he says.

Nothing Naruto does matters.

Naruto turns in an essay that’s just a big picture of Banri with his pants pulled down and fart noises coming from his butt, with a big middle finger drawn next to him flipping Banri off. That matters. Banri yells at Naruto a lot over that. Naruto makes a big wet plblblb noise with his tongue while Banri is yelling at him. The way Banri’s face goes purple and his voice cracks is the best thing ever.

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Naruto is thirteen and he has learned that while his classmates may say fart jokes are childish and stupid, they still laugh pretty hard when Banri is suddenly interrupted with one in the middle of class.

Banri dodges a dozen whoopie cushions, but the time Naruto actually sews a whoopie cushion inside Banri’s chair cushion and gets him with it is the best. Totally worth the screaming lecture afterward. One of the Nara twins in the class actually pats him on the back later and congratulates
him, tells Naruto that he’ll make a good ninja yet.

Naruto doesn’t quite know what the feeling in his chest is. It feels like it should be familiar but it’s not. It makes him feel like he could fly.

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Naruto is fourteen.

He’s not a very good ninja. He knows this. Everyone tells him he’s a bad ninja and he’s ranked bottom of the class, Naruto knows that he’s a bad ninja. But he hasn’t flunked out. Some of the other students who just couldn’t catch up got cut from the class. But not Naruto. He may be dead-last, but he’s dead-last in the class, and that means he’s still good enough to be a ninja.

And he’ll prove it too. Persistence is a ninja trait just like any other. After all it doesn’t matter if your first eleven sabotage attempts fail if the twelfth succeeds, right?

So Naruto proves that he’s a ninja by pranking Banri, over and over and over again. And sure, Banri escapes most of the pranks. But only most of them. And every time Banri misses a trap the whole class gets to see Naruto beat their teacher. Everyone gets to see Banri being dumb and Naruto being awesome.

Eventually Naruto starts pranking some of the other people in the class too, because why not. Kaho’s the top-ranked student in the class and she’s an asshole. Told Naruto that he should just drop out once. So when she leaps straight up during lunch, howling and chugging water as fast as she can to get the burning pepper powder Naruto slipped into her food out of her mouth, Naruto doesn’t feel bad laughing about it one bit.

And yeah, Naruto earns himself some enemies pranking the best students in the class. But so what? They’re all assholes anyway. Sure, they kick the crap out of him once or twice. But Naruto’s tough! He can take it! And besides, the cool kids think he’s funny. And everyone gets to see how awesome of a ninja he is.

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Naruto is fifteen. And it’s not his fault.

One day, when Naruto comes into class, everyone is just quiet. It’s a misty drizzling morning, the kind that makes everyone else (who’s not awesome and full of energy) tired and quiet. It makes sense that everyone would be quiet. And no one tells him otherwise.

When Naruto sets off his prank for the day, a red-dyed water balloon that comes flying out when Kaho opens her weapons locker, he doesn’t expect her to scream. He doesn’t expect her to stumble back hyperventilating, staring at the red on her arms and chest, and then to start crying.

Naruto can only stare on helplessly as she crumples to the ground, tears pouring down her face, chest heaving with hiccupping stuttering sobs. One of her friends rushes to her side and glares at
The friend murmurs soft steady words to her, asking her what she needs, but even as his voice stays calm and soothing his eyes bore into Naruto like he wants to murder him.

Every other student is giving him the same look. Even the Nara twin who once complimented Naruto’s traps won’t talk to him, spits at his feet when he tries to ask what he did wrong.

Only later, when Banri finds out and yells at him -because that’s what always happens-, does Naruto learn what he did wrong.

It was the anniversary of some clan getting wiped out. And Kaho’s best friend, the daughter of her dad’s teammate, who she’d grown up with since birth, had been one of them. Kaho had been the person who identified the body. And Naruto had splashed red all over her on the anniversary.

It’s the first time Naruto actually feels ashamed when Banri yells at him.

When Kaho’s friends find him after that and beat the shit out of him, break his cheek, a leg, both arms, and most of his ribs, that’s when he learns that Kaho had loved her friend. Had had a crush that had just started to grow into an inkling of what romantic love might be when the person she loved died.

And that’s when Naruto starts to get resentful, waiting for his wounds to heal the next day in the hospital. He didn’t know. How could he have known? No one ever tells him anything! Kaho’s never even given him the time of day! How was he supposed to know that day was the day her best-friend/crush was killed? It’s not his fault!

No one ever looks at Naruto the same after that. No one at the Academy laughs at his pranks. No one makes any attempt to hide how much they hate him. A few of the clan kids call him a demon just like the kids at the orphanage did, say they should have known better, and the name sticks.

Demon.

Naruto keeps smiling. Keeps laughing out loud in class, at Banri. He’s not going to let them win.

But if some of his pranks are a little spiteful. A little angry. Well. It’s not his fault.

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Naruto is seventeen. He’s been ignored for years. People only pay attention to him when he’s underfoot, so he’s made a habit of getting there. Being the prankster, the loudmouth. But no more! He’s done with people only paying attention to him because they’re annoyed with him! He’s going to take the graduation exam, pass it with flying colors, and become the best ninja anyone has ever known! He’s going to rise all the way to Hokage! And this is how it starts! He’s going wow them all, so they’ll all notice him!

He fails.

Just like always.

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But Naruto gets back up. This is a new class, a new teacher, and new year. And Naruto will never give up. Banri is stupid and dumb and failed Naruto because he didn’t like him, but these teachers and these students will see how awesome he is.

So Naruto tries again.

And this time … Naruto makes a friend.

He reminds Naruto of an apartment cat, the kind that looks bored and listless and ready to spend their whole life curled up in a ray of sunshine, right up until they bound through the air like a liquid spring. That’s what Naruto thinks of this lazy kid who dozes through class and then beat the pants off his sparring partner like it’s no big deal. The first time Naruto tries to talk to him though, chatting with him in the Hokage's tower, he's sure he's blown it. The white-eyed kid with the melted face brushes him off, just like everyone else.

But Yuki really is just like a cat. Friendly, just on his own terms. He approaches Naruto later, trains with him, even talks with him! He gets skittish and grumpy when Naruto comes racing up towards him after school or tosses notes to him in class, but when Naruto lets him - and oh gods it's so hard because Naruto has a friend! he has a friend! - Yuki comes to him. Yowling at his door to go for a run at five in the morning like an asshole, true, but that's cats for you.

And then Naruto makes another friend! Two friends!

They're the last people Naruto would ever think about befriending, the exact kind of jerks he'd normally be well-deservedly pranking. Neji, Yuki's twin, absolutely needs to get taken down a peg more than anyone else Naruto has ever met in his life. Neji is like a fancy person's cat, perfectly groomed and prettier than silk, with a look that says he's better than you and knows he's better than you. He doesn’t just win spars, he demolishes every other student and looks bored while doing it, even yawned the first time he got paired with Naruto! And Tenten! Tenten is the biggest teacher's pet to ever live, always sucking up to Misao and Kazue after class, always doing extra credit, always with her name at the top of the training field signup sheet, always turning in forms asking for more equipment, more supplies, more books. And gods it is not possible to do a single thing wrong around her during weapons classes without her telling you exactly what you're doing wrong!

But ... they’re his friends. Naruto likes them. Neji listens to Naruto about how shitty Banri was and how Naruto's going to be the best ninja there ever was and how no one is ever going to get him to give up his dream and he doesn't laugh. Instead he grins, a feral look that's totally out of place on his fancy cat face, and tells Naruto "Good, bring that attitude to the training fields tomorrow". And if Naruto is sore all over and covered in pinprick bruises afterward, it is all worth it for the moment when Naruto gets back up to say "again" and Neji actually looks impressed.

Tenten takes a little longer to befriend. Every time Naruto asks her a question she's scowling and angry, looking like she’s about to bite through her own tongue but would rather bite through his. She’s furious. But she answer his questions anyways, helps him practice his taijutsu and finish his homework. And Naruto can’t even remember the last time someone did that for him, so Naruto keeps on talking to her no matter how much she hates him.

Until one day he shame-facedly admits to chipping the last of the training kunai she gave him, and she asks him why he doesn’t just fill out a requisition form for more. That’s the day he learns that requisition forms exists. That’s the day he - during a lecture from Tenten - learns stipend update forms exists, that an orphan’s stipend is supposed to grow with their stomach and the demands of
the Academy. That’s the day Tenten learns she’s being given four times as much money per month as he does. And that’s the day Naruto sees Tenten snap.

Turns out the scowling bun-haired girl has never been angry at him. She’s been angry at the world, at the reasons he fucks up. (No one ever told Naruto that there were reasons for him being a fuckup before, he always thought it was just him). Tenten growls, rages, about how messed up it all is, how it’s a miracle he’s even been able to feed himself, about incompetent fucking bureaucrats, about the godsdamn overloaded orphan system, about funding cuts and teacher’s assistants who can’t speak up about a struggling kid and an educational institution which doesn’t know how to deal with clanless orphans who have no one at home to fill in the gaps and people who assume that just because she works and works and works and makes it work that every other orphan can do the same and-

She slams her fist on some bureaucrat's desk in the Hokage’s tower with Naruto in tow, chewing up her anger like sharp bits of iron and spitting out grievances like nails. She smiles like a Kiri nin when she sees his backpay check, wears that look the whole way as she drags him to the furniture store “we’re going to get you an actual damn mattress to sleep on”. She grabs him by the shoulders later and tells him, voice low and furious, that no one is going to look out for orphans like them, that they don’t get to make the mistakes that others do. People like them don’t get to be coddled clan geniuses. They have to do the work, and fix their own mistakes, and fight for what’s theirs, and knuckle down and train and train and train until they bleed because no one else is going to do it for them.

Naruto learns what it’s like to have a friend who understands.

Hinata teaches Naruto what it’s like to earn respect. That when he sits down at a table with cultured, polished ninja he doesn’t automatically have to be the odd one out. The loud mouth, the messy kid, the snot-nosed brat. He doesn’t have to lean into that, doesn’t have to make it impossible to ignore him to be seen. He, Naruto, the orphan brat, the demon child, can actually be worthy of their respect. He learns that if they don’t give it to him willingly, he can hold his chin high and demand it.

Hinata’s not his friend. He’s had tea with the Hyuuga princess dozens of times and he still doesn’t think he’s actually seen her. She shows up with the sharp ripe odor of bruised flesh hanging about her, smelling like ninja he’s seen groaning in agony at the hospital, and she still sits with her spine straight and loose, relaxed as can be. She smells of pain and stress and hurt and she asks calmly about his opinion on the weather. She smells of happy tears and love and her family’s scent pressed into her skin and doesn’t show a hint of it on her face as she politely scolds him for using the wrong tea spoon.

But she doesn’t need to be his friend and he doesn’t need to know who she really is deep down. All he needs to know about her is that she’s a good person. He can smell that on her, the worry-happy-nurture-joy of a person who rushes to help a child who’s tripped. And all she needs to do for him is smile when he makes an insightful comment, tell him that he’s doing good and actually mean it. Because she’s a good person and she believes in him and that is everything he’s ever needed.

Then there’s Miyuki. Miyuki is cool. She’s the tallest student in their class and she’s got the most amazing hair! It’s a whole bristly black waterfall that covers her back all the way to her waist, and it smells like chakra and moves out of her way when she sits down. (It stabbed his hand like needles the one time he tried to touch it too). And she wears these big thick furry jackets which make her look like one of those scary mob enforcers from the movies.

But more importantly Miyuki is just like him. She’s got claws that come out when she spars just
like him, and she sniffs at the air just like him, and she’s got these funny upside-down red triangles on her cheek which make her chakra smell like his. He never even realized how weird and not-normal other people’s chakra smelled until he started spending time around her, until she and Yuki took him back to her clan compound and he got to smell so many other people like her. But they just smell right in a way other people don’t. They smell like him.

And then Hizashi is teaching him how to cook, one meal at a time. And Keiko takes over tutoring him in math, and introduces him to Akito who has just as much energy as Naruto and helps him learn how to read better. And when he sleeps over at their house (their house which is never ever empty) the older Yuki tucks him in on the couch and brushes his hair back from his face to kiss his forehead good night.

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Naruto is eighteen.

He wonders if this is what having a family is like.

Chapter End Notes

Woo. Naruto perspective. Finally. And by woo I mean aaauuuuuuggggghhhhh, writing Naruto is so hard, he just does not cooperate as a character.
New Beginnings

Chapter Notes

Just a reminder that I've moved the standard graduation age up to 17 'cus it makes more sense to me and 'cus I'd rather write a story with characters closer to adulthood. (In practice this won't change much, the manga/anime and most fanfics treat the characters as pretty adult anyway. I'll just feel less awkward about writing characters with adult-ish maturity if they're actually adult-ish in age.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 42: New Beginnings

I sank gratefully into a split, legs splayed out to either side of me on the bristly grass and my head flopping forward to rest face first on the ground, breathing in the brittle scent of grass dying with the coming winter. This was the best thing after a long workout. Stretching out in the cool crisp air, replacing the impact and exertion of sparring with the simple ache of well-worn stretch. Just the best.

“Hey!” Naruto piped up from in front of me. “Hey Yuki!” He was stretching out too, standing with his legs separated at a ninety degree angle and doing his best to keep his hands flat on the ground. “Yuki!” And very much threatening to overbalance himself if he kept focusing on trying to catch my attention more than keeping himself upright.

Miyuki chimed in with a smile. “You know Yuki, I think Naruto’s trying to talk to you.”

I sighed. “And I think you need to focus on your own splits. Come on, I thought we all agreed stretching time was quiet time?”

“But Yuki,” Naruto whined, “you stretch for an hour!”

Yes, I thought to myself, one full hour of blessed silence.

But I knew how Naruto got when left with only his own thoughts and people who weren’t talking to him, so out loud I just sighed and asked, “What is it Naruto?”

“Well, so, I was thinking, stretching’s kind of boring, right? So why don’t we practice jutsu while stretching? I know you said I needed to practice my meditation before we start doing jutsu, but I’ve been meditating really hard and-”

Oh gods. I liked Naruto, I really did. He was a cheery person, very affable. There was a lot to be endeared by about him and he’d been growing on me. But for the love of all that was good, I was just not made to talk as much as Naruto did.

Fortunately Miyuki noticed my discomfort - bless that girl for caring so much about those people-reading lessons- and interrupted Naruto, “Hey Naruto, Yuki really does like some quiet time while he stretches. How about we go over there-” she gestured to the opposite side of the training field, “- and we can talk about your jutsu over there while we stretch out.”
Miyuki scooped up Ren -the tiny little fuzzball was napping after our long training session- and did just that, heading for the other end of the training field.

Thank you, I signed as Naruto followed her. The two of them started chatting in earnest only once they’d settled in on the opposite end of the field, giving me some space.

I flickered through a few hand seals to reduce the flow of chakra to my eyes as much as possible, so I could only blurrily see through my own head and wouldn’t be distracted lipreading their conversation. It was kind of funny, with graduation fast approaching the clan had begun teaching us formal techniques for focusing our vision even more than normal, but I was finding more mileage in using the techniques as a vision-damper than as an enhancer. Not being able to see behind me gave me the heebie-jeebies so I basically walked around with my Byakugan at full power all the time anyway, there exactly wasn’t much to enhance.

Though I swore, if that main family instructor made one more comment about Neji and I’s fifty meter range I’d- … well, grin and bear it. Like the last dozen times. Fifty meters isn’t so bad. Sure I can’t see the Hokage Monument, but I can see individual nerve firings. That’s something.

Speaking of electrical impulses though, why the heck do all my lightning spirals keep back-propagating chakra whenever a capacitor spiral in the system discharges? It would make sense if the capacitor spiral’s output just couldn’t handle the load and it spilled backwards, but it happens to every single lightning spiral in the system. Why?!

Actually, hmm. I wonder if I could use this effect to synchronize system-wide signals. Wait, no. Focus! Like Akito always says, first you understand something and then you exploit it. I leaned over to my side, grabbing my right foot and leaning sideways into the split. Hmm. Maybe it’s actually a magnetic field thing and not a sealing thing. I should check if lightning spirals which aren’t directly hooked up to the same sealing circuit are affected … or just hold a compass next to it and see what happens. That’d be a lot easier.

Distractions gone and my quiet time established, I lost myself in musings of electromagnetic fields curling around swirling loops of chakra.

I got in a good thirty minutes of quiet musing and calming stretches before Naruto and Miyuki came back my way. Which was … eh, fine. Thirty minutes of quiet time had already done wonders for my mood.

Miyuki spoke first, a frustrated frown creasing her brow, “Hey Yuki. I’m sorry to interrupt but I was trying to help Naruto with the transformation jutsu and we got to talking about how it feels for him and it almost sounded like … can you just take a look at him while he does it? Real quick? Because it sounds like he’s doing something more like-” she gestured vaguely at Ren and herself, “-what we do than … can you just look at him?”

I blinked. Naruto was standing behind Miyuki, fidgeting and scratching away nervous energy like he always did he felt inadequate. I could see faint smudges of leftover chakra laced through his hands where he’d been molding chakra inefficiently.

“Of course Mimi,” I answered. Miyuki wouldn’t have asked without good reason, and besides, it would be cruel to let Naruto just stew and feel bad about himself when I might be able to help. “Show me a transformation Naruto.”

The shorter boy stepped out from behind Miyuki and closed his eyes in concentration, pulling chakra from his core into his hands. (Where it was effortlessly replaced by the jinchuuriki seal on his stomach). He glanced over at Miyuki and then began running through the full set of hand seals
for the transformation jutsu, carefully shaping and focusing his intent through his chakra at each step.

I poured chakra into my eyes, sharpening my focus. Something with the jutsu was … wrong. It was using too much chakra for one thing. It wasn’t just that Naruto was putting more chakra than he needed to into his jutsu, that was pretty normal for him, he overcompensated for absolutely every chakra enhancement of his muscles when we sparred. No the jutsu was using more chakra than it should have. Way more. His chakra should have been forming a thin shell around him to frame the illusion on as he worked, but instead it was … pouring back into him? Absolutely massive quantities of chakra were pouring back into his body.

And something else was badly off about the jutsu. Whatever he was trying to do with it didn’t match up to the shapes his hand seals were forcing it into. There were knots and kinks and frayed edges all throughout the chakra moving through his hands. If I hadn’t known he’d just been practicing this with Miyuki I would have shouted for him to stop, worried he might hurt himself.

And then the jutsu finished and I straight up fell over out of my stretch, gaping like a fish. “What the fuck?” I cried out.

A lumpy misshapen Miyuki stood where Naruto had been, frowning. “Is it really that bad?”


Miyuki asked me, “Am I right? Is it like-” she waved at Ren and herself again, “-that stuff?” Where Naruto couldn’t see she signed clan techniques, query.

I blinked rapidly. “Miyuki,” I said, “could you poke Naruto’s head for me?”

“Eh, why-” “Sure.” they said at the same time.

And then Miyuki poked Naruto’s head. Despite the fact that he was at least twenty centimeters shorter than her. The knotted filaments of light I saw her finger as pushed up against the knotted filaments of light which made up Naruto’s misshapen Miyuki-like head and it didn’t pass through.

I put my head in my hands and groaned. “Naruto, what the fuck?”

“Huh?” Naruto tried to make some expression but on the misshapen Miyuki face it just- it looked really weird.

“Wait that’s too strange, drop the transformation first and then we’ll talk.”

There was a poof of chakra smoke and Naruto was standing there in all his short glory.

“Okay.” I took a deep breath. “Naruto. Are you aware that the transformation jutsu is supposed to be an illusion?”

“Uh, yeah?” Naruto was looking pretty confused, and maybe a little worried. “Why?”

“An illusion as in not real.”

“Yeah? It’s fake I get it.”

“As in you can’t touch it.”

“Yeah I kno- Wait. … Like a genjutsu?”

“Yes.”
Naruto looked at the space above his head. Miyuki looked at the space above his head. Swiped a hand through where his transformed head had been. They both watched as it passed right through the empty space.

Naruto looked back at me. He scratched the back of his head sheepishly. “Ahhhhh, oops?”

I groaned again.

Twenty minutes later we had determined several things.

First, our resident jinchuuriki had outright skipped the class where he was supposed to learn how the transformation jutsu worked. And of course his instructor, Banri Shimura, never arranged for Naruto to make that lesson up. So Naruto had just copied the hand seals for the jutsu from his classmates later and guessed how the rest of it was supposed to work. And the end result of Naruto’s experimentation was most definitely not the transformation jutsu the rest of us had learned. It might be an entirely new jutsu or it might just be a botched version of a higher level transformation jutsu we didn’t know about, but it definitely wasn’t the Academy jutsu.

How it worked was completely different. The standard jutsu was basically just an illusory picture draped over a thin shell of chakra, with a touch of “missing the trees for the forest” genjutsu suggestion to make people overlook the imperfections if you wanted to be fancy with it. It was a pretty low-key jutsu all told. It popped if you poked it, looked kinda funny when you moved, and it certainly didn’t stand up to the scrutiny of a half-decent ninja, let alone the Byakugan. But it was good for learning fine chakra control, decently useful for novices, and could really shine in the hands of experts, so into the Academy curriculum it went.

But Naruto’s jutsu. Heck, it was something else. He became whatever he transformed into. His whole chakra network altered to match! It might even be able to fool my Byakugan if he figured out how to do it properly. And while actual damage seemed to unravel the jutsu (tested by cutting the hair of misshapen-Miyuki-Naruto), it didn’t seem to be transferred to his true self in the process. Though we weren’t exactly about to stick a kunai in his belly and see what happened when the transformation unraveled with the kunai still in the same place, I doubted it would protect him from that.

So far as Miyuki and I could tell Naruto was actually molding chakra into some sort of mimicry of matter and (poorly) shaping that into the form he wanted. Which explained the massive chakra cost. So far as I could tell this universe had a much gentler energy to mass ratio than my old one, but making matter still wasn’t cheap. To my eyes the technique seemed kind of similar to what Miyuki and the Inuzuka did when they grew claws and fangs and when their wolves transformed into bestial versions of themselves, shaping chakra into the forms they wanted. Though after Naruto explained what he was doing as best he could, Miyuki told us “it’s not the same” and left it at that.

Also Naruto could become things smaller than himself which- No. Just. No. It didn’t even look like he was shunting the excess mass into a storage space! I mean, there was definitely something extradimensional going on, the process of him shapeshifting into a (very disturbing looking) puppy warped his chakra in ways that made me want to cry blood. But it wasn’t any kind of sensible or structured matter-displacement which I could comprehend. And of course Naruto didn’t even understand why there was anything weird about a whole-ass person turning into a five kilo puppy.

But my frustrations with the weirdness of chakra mechanics aside, we had a lot of fun testing out Naruto’s jutsu. Naruto was absolutely ecstatic to learn that he wasn’t bad at the transformation jutsu and instead was just doing a “super special sneaky jutsu!” with the wrong hand seals. Miyuki got a kick out of poking all of Naruto’s different forms. And for the first time I got to engage with
Naruto on something close to one of my own interests. It was nice being able to get excited about something and see that same excitement reflected in him.

All in all it was a good day.

Not the kind of day I would have expected to end up cracking the foundations of Konoha. But then I wasn’t actually a seer, no matter what Itachi might think. I couldn’t have guessed where this would all end.

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The three of us ate at Naruto’s place later. It roughly midway between the Inuzuka and the Hyuuga compounds, so when the three of us trained together it was pretty normal for us to stop there and eat a little something before going our respective ways.

Well. Had been normal ever since we helped Naruto clean his damn kitchen and got him some actual cooking supplies. A few months ago cooking in Naruto’s apartment would have been a genuine health hazard, if one could even find something to cook with. Though Naruto had forgotten to restock his fridge again that week, which made fixing his kitchen kind of moot.

I made a point to glare at Naruto a little over my instant ramen cup. Instant ramen was not my idea of post-workout food.

Naruto cheerfully ignored my hostility though, too excited over the revelation about his transformation jutsu to care. He gesticulated wildly with his chopsticks, narrowly avoiding poking a wary Ren atop Miyuki’s head, exclaiming, “This is so cool though! If I figure this out I could just be like ‘Bam! I’m a rock!’ and it’d be the ultimate disguise! And hey Mimi thank you so much for helping with this, you’re really smart and I never would have figured this out without you.”

I raised my eyebrow (scratching the outside of my left knee for balance) and coughed. What was I, chopped liver?

“Oh, hehe, and you too Yuki! Your eyes are so cool, you just took one look and you knew what was up!”

Eh, close enough.

Miyuki raised a finger to interrupt, bringing Naruto’s rambling rant to a halt. Speaking at the same time as someone else was really uncomfortable for her, so she waited until he’d finished stumbling over the last of his words to talk. “We don’t know,” she put careful emphasis on the word, “how your jutsu works. We just guessed. You still need to talk to the instructors tomorrow to get their advice.”

“Eh, I know, I know. Hey, what about the cloning jutsu? Do you think we could figure out what I’m doing wrong with that? I mean I’ve already got the substitution jutsu down—” that was debatable “-if I get the cloning jutsu down too then I’ve got the graduation exam in the bag!”

Miyuki said something about taking things one step at a time but I wasn’t really listening. My mind was elsewhere.

Because Naruto might be right.
Now the truth was that Naruto was in absolutely no way shape or form ready to graduate in a year. Just catching him up on all of the security codes and bringing his covert signing up to par would take too long. He literally had a lifetime of education to relearn and simply not enough time to do it. But he would be (or rather, had been) allowed to eventually pass the graduation exam on the third time around with the shadow clone jutsu as his only real skill. Danzo Shimura would win and the powers that be would eventually decide to settle not for a ninja but for a weapon which functioned in combat and which could be managed by a superior officer.

As is Naruto was a barely functional mess of a ninja with almost no combat survivability and no out-of-combat utility. Graduating him this year would risk an irreplaceable wartime asset. But Naruto with the mass shadow clone jutsu was essentially a battalion unto himself. And a disposable, reusable one at that. With that technique … yeah, Naruto might graduate, even with his academic flaws.

But … well, Naruto really should be held back at least one more year. With two years of our help he might actually graduate as a real ninja. We could teach him the social skills he’d need to function on his own two feet, the ancillary skills to function in the field, the academics to thrive at home. We could do it. If I just kept quiet about the shadow clone jutsu, if I just let him fail this year, we could be there to pick him back up again. We could be there to ensure that he’d end up learning under Kakashi (because who else could be assigned to look after the jinchuuriki) as a capable ninja in his own right, with the foundation needed to learn from his genius jounin instructor.

We could give him the chance he’d never properly had in another life.

…. the smell of green tea filled my nose and behind my eyes red clouds danced on a black sky that I would never unsee.

But some things were more important to me.

If Naruto graduated under Kakashi, he would end up on the same team as Sasuke. Because who else could possibly be assigned to look after the last Uchiha? Sasuke would be Naruto’s teammate, that was a certainty.

And in another life that had destroyed him. Sasuke wanted more than anything to kill his brother, but in the end he simply wasn’t Itachi’s match and never would be. Itachi took to the chakra arts in the same way my Neji took to martial arts and Sasuke just … didn’t. That wasn’t a gap Sasuke could overcome. But so long as Sasuke spent every day drowning himself in training he could avoid thinking about that, could tell himself that he would beat Itachi one day if he just worked harder and harder and harder. That is, until he met Naruto. Until he was forced to confront this other ninja with an innate advantage that made him stronger than Sasuke in a way Sasuke could never overcome.

Sasuke had learned -would learn- that he could do his best and still lose. It would destroy him. He’d be driven right into Orochimaru’s arms and then-

It had been a miracle Sasuke hadn’t lost his life to Orochimaru. Allowing that series of events to play out, disrupted by the uncertain butterfly effects of my existence? That wasn’t an option for me. Sasuke might die.

So Naruto had to graduate this year. Even if it wasn’t the best for him. Even if I wanted him to graduate on his merits as a person and not as a weapon. Even if he deserved better. Even if-

Naruto needed to graduate this year.
“Hey Naruto,” I spoke up.

“Yahuh?”

“It feels more natural for you to do a real transformation than to make an illusory one, right?”

“Sure, I guess.”

“And you have an easier time working with large amounts of chakra than with smaller chakra exercises, right?”

“Yessss?” At this point Naruto was quirking an eyebrow at me, very clearly wondering what I was getting at.

“Well~” I drew out the word, “the next time you talk to the Hokage there’s this jutsu you should ask him about-”

Chapter End Notes

As always, feel free to leave any comments or constructive criticism. I feed on your feedback.

Oh, also. I'm going to be making a rather big change to how Naruto will be making use of the Shadow Clone Jutsu. Not in how it actually functions, just how he makes use of it. If you want to take a guess at how he's going to use it, please do. The way in which I'm going to have him use it always seemed really intuitive to me and I'd be fascinated to see if it's that obvious to other people too or if that's just me.
I poked my head into Akito’s living room and signed *status acceptable?* at Neji, waiting to get an affirmative back before rejoining Akito in his workroom. He was playing with Yuuna and it looked like they were having fun, but I didn’t want to just leave him hanging while I talked shop with Akito. That’d be rude.

Behind me Akito hummed as he looked over my latest spiral work. “So this is … what? A voltage transformer? Did you finally solve the long-range transmission problem?”

I turned around nodded eagerly. “Yeah, and a voltage transformer is a pretty good analogy. This set of compression spirals here concentrates lightning chakra, gives it more momentum and makes it lose less power when flowing over long distances. But, you know, put that much lightning chakra in one place and it just, uh, turns into electricity.”

Akito glanced down at a set of branching scars on his right arm he’d gotten a couple years ago during one of his own experiments with the Uzushio style of sealing. They were only just starting to fade. “Uhuh, yeah, I remember. Vividly.”

“Right. Hey, could have been worse though, you know?” I gestured at my face and gave Akito a wry lopsided grin, getting a far gentler one in return. “Ahem. Well so these squiggles over here bleed a little bit of earth chakra into the main channel to make the lightning chakra more stable, so that doesn’t happen. The real trick was balancing the chakras just right, but if you link the earth rings and the compression spirals to the same power source then you just need to get the blood balance right for a single chakra splitter.”

“Eugh.” Akito groaned. “You say that like it’s easy. Some of us can’t just look at our inks and know if we got it right you know. It’s testing, and more testing, and next thing you know it’s two in the morning and your neighbor is banging on your door and telling you to knock it off with the damn explosions.”

“Aww,” I gave Akito a half hug. “You’ll get the hang of it eventually, I’m sure.”

“Haha, hey did I ever tell you that it turns out that Yuuna’s heat cycle affects my chakra potency? So every few months all of my blood ink ratios that I use just go haywire? Just completely unworkable?”

“Only a dozen times. But hey, it’s just the one splitter. And I even figured out out how to make the purifier at the other end -to pull the earth chakra back out- work using a splitter with the blood balance!”

Akito smiled fondly and leaned down to hook his arm over my shoulders. (No matter how much I grew, Akito was still taller). “Well thank you for trying to make this easier for me.”

“I mean, not just you. If we’re ever going to make any kind of large-scale infrastructure that’s powered off of ambient chakra there’s going to need to be a lot of people involved. So I’ve got to
make this as easy to work with as possible. I can’t just assume everyone working with this stuff will be a Hyuuga.”

Aktio squeezed my shoulders and sighed fondly. “You know most ninja would take a novel technique biased towards their bloodline that no one else understands and try to keep it that way, right?”

I snorted. “Yeah well, those people are idiots. Individual skill only takes you so far. The really big stuff takes a society of skilled people to run. I mean, have you seen the reports on what it took for Kumo and Iwa to knock out Uzushio’s main shields? It took jinchuurikis! Plural! Show me a classical seal master who can make something like that on their own, I dare you.”

“No,” I continued, “ninja may see it as an advantage that every sealing master has to design their own sealing language from scratch based on their own personal understanding of the forces at work, but they’re wrong. Sure it makes classical seal designs harder to copy, but it also prevents teamwork! I’m telling you, Uzushio’s sealers weren’t special, they were just benefiting from that fact that all spiral sealing works the same. They could work in teams and each generation could build off the next, because standardization is how you get stuff done.”

“And, eugh, don’t even get me started on the combat focus you get when your sealing R&D is performed by individual isolated soldiers! Seriously, can you imagine what Konoha’s supply network would look like if the Flying Thunder God seal had been designed so third parties could use it to send goods instead of for kicking ass in melee combat? Konoha would be able to outspend the damn Daimyos! We could’ve knocked Suna and Kiri out of the war without a single battle just by paying them to fuck off! I know the Third Hokage was a genius but he was also an idiot! It’s-!”

Akito coughed. “Yuki, that sounds, uh … how to put this … That’s kind of vaguely seditious?” His voice squeaked at the end.

I huffed. “Mom already gave me a talking-to about this. It’s fine to criticize Konoha’s actions so long as I’m presenting a clear method of doing things better and doing so with the intent to improve Konoha.”

“Well. If you say so-”

“I do.” But I wasn’t going to keep pressing if criticizing a Hokage - okay maybe my rant did get away from me a little- made Akito uncomfortable. “Oh, and by the way, I think this method of making lightning chakra more stable could be a good starting point for storing elemental chakra in general. Just, you know, food for thought.”

Akito gave me a weak smile that said ‘thank you for changing the subject’. “Huh. Okay yeah I can see that. Do you have any designs?”

“Ah, no actually. I was hoping you could tackle that. I’ve been spending a lot more time actually training normal ninja stuff recently. Miyuki and I have been practicing with Naruto, you know that kid from my class I told you about?”

“Hmm, yeah I think I can fit another project into my schedule. And hey, when am I going to get to meet this Naruto kid? I keep hearing about him from my niece, but Mimi keeps on refusing to bring him over. Says he isn’t housebroken yet?”

“Uh-” Neji let out a choking cough in the other room and I laughed awkwardly “-well, uh, how about I let you meet him and decide that for yourself?”
“Yeah, sure, when do you think I could meet him?”

“Right now? Neji, come on in here will you?” I leaned back out into Akito’s living room and waved Neji in.

To his credit he only gawked a little bit at the sealing odds and ends decorating Akito’s workroom when he entered. When his steps slowed Yuuna - Akito’s chubby wolf companion - butted up against his legs to get him moving again. “Whoa,” he said, “cool.”

“Hey Neji,” Akito said, giving him a little half wave, “always nice to have you over. You should come ‘round for dinner with us more often. And bring Hinata too. I don’t get to see you two nearly often enough since you stopped needing me to babysit you.” He chuckled. “You can tell me more about this Naruto Mimi’s been hiding from me.”

Neji snickered. “Haha, yeah, sure.”

I hid a smile behind my fist and shook my head. “Oh good gods. Your acting is still terrible. Please just drop the jutsu already so I don’t have to see you butchering my brother’s mannerisms any more.”

“Wait wh-” Akito started, before jumping in surprise. “Ach!”

With a messy poof of wasted chakra, Neji vanished and Naruto appeared in his place. “Tada! Pretty good right? I looked just like him didn’t I?”

Yuuna let out a yip of shock and reared back, stumbling back a few steps on two paws before overbalancing and going over backwards. The fluffy wolf yelped as she fell on her back, squirming around and desperately trying to right herself. When she finally did she faced Naruto and made a noise I could only describe as a gargling whine of confusion.


“I- but he- … He smelled exactly like Neji!”

Yuuna whined her agreement with Akito’s confusion.

I chuckled. “Yeah so you know how smell is typically the failure point in higher caliber disguise techniques? Turns out that’s less of a problem when your disguise technique is a genuine full-body transformation and you’ve got a bijuu-granted sense of smell on par with an Inuzuka’s.”

Naruto beamed and threw up a thumbs up. “Translated into normal people talk: I’m just that awesome!”

“Sorry for the shock,” I told Akito. “The Hokage wanted Naruto to master this technique before moving onto another shadow matter based technique and I figured if he could fool your noses that would count. Speaking of which, Naruto-” I started in a warning tone.

“I know, I know. Don’t prank competent ninja like this because they can and will stab me before I
get a chance to explain myself. You only told me a thousand times.”

Akito spluttered and finally got out a coherent sentence. “Hey! Are you implying we’re not competent ninja?” Yuuna huffed and shook her fur out to stand on end and make her look larger, an effect slightly ruined by the way squirming around on the ground had mussed up her fur.

Naruto opened his mouth wide before pausing and glancing my way, swallowing whatever he was about to say.

_Aw, he’s learning tact. Hinata will be so proud._

I cleared my throat. “Akito. Yuuna. You know I respect both of you very much—”

Akito and Yuuna each raised an eyebrow in unison, daring me to go on. I scratched the back of my neck to relieve the tension (and to balance out their eyebrows).

“Akito, you’re a very accomplished sealing specialist. And Yuuna, you are _very_ fluffy. Both are admirable qualities I genuinely respect. But uhhhh … look you two just haven’t been out in the field in a while. You’ve got the clan skills to smell out infiltrators so you two were a good target to test Naruto’s jutsu on, but you’re also not as jumpy as field ninja so I didn’t think you’d react badly to a surprise. That’s all.”

Naruto opened his damn mouth, “Translation: you’re smart enough that it’s okay if you go soft behind a desk.” Responding to the appalled look I sent him, he shrugged. “What? Desk ninja are still ninja, your mom told me that.”

Yuuna snorted and Akito chuckled. “You know what?” he said, “I like the way the blond kid put it better than how you put it Yuki.” He gave Naruto a good long look. “You’re, ah, you’re a real straight talker aren’t you?”

Naruto puffed out his chest and beamed. “You better believe it!”

“Yeah you’ll fit right in. C’mon, lemme be a good host, I’ll give you a tour of the compound. Oh, and remind me to show you the puppies. They’ll love you. Heck you smell close enough to canine that they’ll probably think you’re one of us.”

I didn’t miss the way Naruto’s lungs caught when Akito said that last sentence. And I didn’t miss the way the corners of Akito’s lips quirked up when he said it either. I followed behind as the two of them headed off to the puppy kennels, a broad smile spreading across my face.

The Inuzuka had the most wonderful habit of taking in strays.

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“Yuuuuuki! Mimiiiiiiii!” Naruto cried out to us, running full tilt across the frosty morning grass. Miyuki winced and I screwed my eyes tighter shut. It was too early for consciousness, let alone Naruto.

But Naruto caught up to us outside the Academy doors anyway, making himself known with all the sound and fury of an excitable teenager. “Heyyyyyyy! Wait wait wait wait don’t go in yet, I have something to show you.”
Mimi turned around to face Naruto. She yawned in time with Ren, who was stuffed into the front of her jacket. She was normally more of a morning person, but bonding with her new puppy who slept away half the day had seen her struggling to rise in the mornings. She still at least tried to be conscious and capable of responding to stimuli though. She greeted Naruto and covered up another yawn with the back of her right hand. “G’morning Naruto. Hello.”

I, who had never even pretended to be a morning person, didn’t bother opening my eyes. I refused to be awake before the earth started warming unless schadenfreude was involved.

Naruto skidded to a stop in front of us and bounced eagerly in place. “Hey! Come with me real quick, to one of the target practice fields. I wanna show you something!”

Miyuki glanced at me. I did not glance back. “Naruto, can this wait until later-?” she ventured.

“Nononono! Well. Yes. But it’s amazing, I promise you! It’s the most awesome thing you’ll ever see and it’ll be totally worth it. And there’s time before school starts, c’monnnn.”

Miyuki shrugged and I didn’t say no, which is how we ended up leaning against a pair of kunai throwing posts at ‘fuck you o’clock’ in the chilly morning rather settled in a warm building with nice desks to lay one’s head down on.

Ren cracked another high-pitched squeaking yawn, which set me off in turn. “Alright Naruto,” I mumbled, “what is it?”

“Welllllll. The old man finally decided I’ve got shapeshifting down. So he finally let me learn me that jutsu you told me about! The shadow clone one!”

I cracked my good eye open (and scratched my opposite cheek) and widened my sphere of vision just a little. Oh? Okay, this might actually be worth being awake for.

Next to me Miyuki perked up, scratching Ren’s head to properly wake him up too. A lot of Inuzuka techniques relied on their wolves transforming into humans to perform joint clone attacks. She had plenty of reason to be interested in solid clone techniques.

Naruto rambled on. “Yeah so the old man gave me this scroll yesterday, told me I could read it in his office during the evenings so long as I was quiet. But I finished it! The whole thing, in one night, pow, just like that. It actually wasn’t that hard of a jutsu, I don’t know why the old man said-”

My head drifted forward, chin tilting towards the ground. It really was chilly out here. The rest of the elemental countries must get really cold during winter if it was this cold in Fire Country. Mmmnnn. What kind of name was Fire Country anyway? Why would- would …

I jerked my head back up, blinking my good eye open and opening my dropping eye as far as I could. I’m awake!

Our excitable jinchuuriki was still chattering away. Something about transformation jutsu and … flashing the Hokage? … I didn’t want to know. And it was too early for this anyway.

I coughed loudly to get Naruto’s attention and then plastered a too-early-for-this smile on my face. “Hey, um, I’m sorry to interrupt your story Naruto, but it is kind of early and it’s a bit cold out so-”

“Oh! Right! Sorry! Sooooo … I can do the shadow clone jutsu now! Wanna see it? It’s, um,” he scratched the back of his head sheepishly, “I’m really proud of it. So I wanted to, um-” he scratched the back of his head some more, “-do you wanna see it?”
Beside me Miyuki nodded. “Yeah. Show us what you can do.”

Naruto smiled broadly. He widened his legs and settled his stance, taking a deep breath. He shook his hands out and held them out in front of him, ready to start the jutsu. I leaned in, blinking a bit to try and keep myself awake. This should be interesting to see.

Then Naruto made the first hand seal and my eyes flew wide open. My vision instinctively focused to a razor’s edge and I sank into a defensive stance without even thinking about it. Oh. Gods. With the first seal Naruto opened the floodgates on his chakra, dredging up a mountain of power from inside his belly. My breath caught in my throat. When Naruto’s chakra was still bound to his chakra coils, it was bright. But pulled away from his core like this, leaking freely from Naruto’s weak control straight into the air? I could almost feel the heat of it on my skin, as if the blinding light in my vision was actually true light from a blazing sun.

Naruto shaped three more hand seals and the chakra inside his chest shifted, forming some sort of knotted chakra space which he poured his energy into like a waterfall. Truly, like a waterfall. The rushing roar of that much chakra being moved was deafening in a way, sinking into my bones and numbing my ability to feel chakra. Behind us in the Academy I saw students and teachers jerk and start, some rushing to the windows to see what was happening.

I couldn’t quite follow what Naruto did with the last several seals. The sheer quantity of chakra he was using obscured my sight. But something in that knotted chakra space shifted and … echoed? It was forming a mirror of his chakra inside his chest and then-

“MASS. SHADOW CLONE. JUTSU!!!” Naruto bellowed the name of the technique and slammed his fingers into a cross, pulsing his chakra outwards-

For a moment my vision went white with chakra smoke.

When it cleared, every surface in my Byakugan’s range was covered in Narutos. They formed a dense mob over the grass. They crowded the tree branches at the edge of the target range. They stood on top of the throwing posts Miyuki and I were leaning against. They even stood on top of the Academy rooftop. All around us they grinned, whooped, cheered, and threw their hands in the air, revelling in the mastery of their new jutsu.

A hoarse puff of breath made its way out of Miyuki’s mouth like a cough. “He- he-” She turned towards me and found a Naruto in the way. “Oh. Uh, hey Naruto.”

“Hey Mimi!” he said.

“HEY MIMI!” chorused the crowd.

She tilted her head to see me over that Naruto’s shoulder and gaped like a fish. In the front of her jacket Ren looked similarly gobsmacked, the little puppy gazing about with absolutely no frame of reference for what was going on. “Yuki. How?”

I let my vision drift over the crowd of clones I couldn’t see the edge of, the tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of kilos of mass Naruto had conjured from thin air. I was certainly wide awake after that display. Heck, so was the whole Academy, going by the ninja crowded at its windows looking at the legion of ninja Naruto had just conjured from thin air.

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding in. Hoo. Wow. Okay then. I’d known that this was thing Naruto could do. But seeing it up close like this made it apparent that I had only known what Naruto could do in theory. On a black and white page in two dimensions with little pictures
of tiny Narutos, it was easy to chuckle and say ‘Wow, Naruto is a one-ninja army isn’t he?’.
Seeing it face-to-face though, surrounded by Naruto’s clones literally as far as my eyes could see ...

Gods above.

“Okay but seriously Yuki,” Miyuki repeated. “Explain.” She made twitchy motions with her hands at all of the Narutos, at the sea of clones who probably outnumbered her entire clan ten to one.
“How?”

I opened my mouth once. Closed it. Thought about what exactly I could say. Opened my mouth again. “…” I looked back at my friend and had only silence to give her.

Miyuki’s heart rate had spiked when Naruto first cloned himself. But now as I watched it started a slow and steady climb upwards, faster and faster. I could see her glancing back and forth between the Academy (and the Narutos on top of it) and the Narutos on the practice field (and in the trees and on the throwing posts and oh hey a few were on each other’s shoulders now). Her gaze was becoming steadily more and more grave with each glance back and forth, and she was murmuring under her breath in the way she did when she was thinking really hard. “Yuki. This is …”

Taking in the scene, it wasn’t hard to follow her train of thought. Naruto had just displayed the ability to single-handedly wreck the Academy. Sure, he wasn’t the best fighter. And raw chakra constructs were fragile things, his clones probably couldn’t take more than a single wound before they’d pop. Each teacher and each guard patrolling the perimeter would surely be able to mow his clones down …

But fighting multiple opponents is a nightmare even for the best trained fighters. How many clones could they each take until they’d be dogpiled? And sure most of the older students were much better fighters than Naruto … but even a mere ten percent casualties is typically enough to cause a rout during battle. The older clan kids would eat his clones for breakfast, sure, but would we be able to beat a significant numbers advantage while protecting the younger kids without losing even ten percent of us? Against a force of disposable clones who wouldn’t blink at their own casualties? I certainly wouldn’t bet on it.

Could Naruto destroy the Academy? Probably not. And from Miyuki’s face she thought the same. Her eyes were a flinty ‘working out a hard tactical situation’ serious, not ‘laced with panic’ serious. But … that really didn’t matter. Naruto could casually summon up an army capable of hammering one of Konoha’s more secure locations before any sort of effective response could be mustered, without ever taking the field himself.

That was the kind of power which turned wars. Which let someone get away with murder because they were too valuable to punish.

Miyuki was just realizing how dangerous the young jinchuuriki we had befriended was. And if I was being honest with myself, so was I.

I breathed out. “This is just what jinchuuriki do,” I answered Miyuki softly. I took in another careful breath. “Hey Naruto?” I said, and clasped the nearest clone on the shoulder. “Have I ever told you how lucky we are to have you as our jinchuuriki?”

“For real? Like,” the clone swallowed hard, “really?”

“Yeah,” I murmured, looking over his army and thinking of Gaara and blood red sands. I squeezed our aggressively and sometimes annoyingly chipper jinchuuriki’s shoulder. “Really. We’re lucky to have you.”
Chapter End Notes

As always, comments are wonderful. I could not have gotten this far without the motivation that comes from reading what people think of this story, and I appreciate each and every commenter. <3
Content Note: This chapter deals with alexithymia as a symptom of autism, which is essentially having emotions but having a limited ability to recognize them. The human brain is kind of a hot mess and it turns out that the parts of it which do the whole emotion thing and the part which handles the whole recognizing emotions thing (both for others and oneself), uh, aren’t the same. Which can cause some interesting problems, like alexithymia, when the midcingulate cortex (the emotional pattern matching part) has some atypical pattern recognition. With alexithymia the emotions happen, and you feel them, and you have their related physiological responses, but you might not necessarily be able to recognize them. It can be kind of (but not quite) like smelling something but not being able to place it, or not registering a strong smell because you just didn’t notice it.

Anyway, alexithymia is very complicated and can be an intrinsic phenomenon stemming from psychiatric neurodivergences like autism or it can be a treatable psychological issue stemming from situational factors like persistent childhood neglect or trauma. It can present very differently in such cases and individuals can experience it in very different ways, even those with the same reason for having alexithymia. What’s portrayed in this chapter isn’t and frankly couldn’t be an all-encompassing picture of alexithymia and should not be taken as such.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 44: Love Listens (Miyuki)

Content Warning: Romantic pressuring / inappropriate behavior.

“Oh hey, you’re coming to study again tomorrow too, right?” Naruto called after her.

Miyuki froze on the stairs down from his apartment. Her feet itched and her stomach churned. Saying no was the kind of thing that needed a reason. Did she have a reason? “... yes.” She swallowed sourly. “See you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, see yah tomorrow Mimi!”

The Inuzuka’s stomach kept churning as she rushed down the stairs. She raised her nose and scented the air as soon as she hit the street, orienting herself to the smell of grass, tree sap, and the stale flash-burn smell of old fire jutsus. She needed to be alone, away from the noise and people of the city, and right then that meant running towards the training grounds which ringed Konoha.

Miyuki kept off the rooftops as she ran through Konoha. The ninja settlement had more than
enough twisting back alleys to allow her to avoid crowds where she might run into someone, and right now jumping across rooftops would have left her feeling exposed.

She didn’t think she could handle feeling exposed right now.

Time slipped easily between labored breaths as she ran. It felt like no time at all before Miyuki burst out from between cramped apartments and onto the familiar grass of a forested training field. Miyuki aimed for the biggest tree in the field, a towering senju tree which soared up as high as any building in Konoha. She ran for it as fast as she could, on a collision course.

Miyuki didn’t slow as she hit the tree. She planted one foot on its trunk and pushed backwards, letting the tree absorb her forward momentum and transform it into upward motion. She grabbed the first branch in her reach and pulled, planted a foot, leapt, grabbed, pulled, leapt, grabbed—.

Miyuki rooted herself to a thick branch and stopped dead in an instant, exactly how the Academy had taught her to break an enemy’s line of sight in the trees.

Seconds after she entered the training ground Miyuki was hidden halfway up the massive senju tree, curled up perfectly still in a crook of its branches.

Ren poked his nose out of her jacket. He whined quietly at her, the uncertainty / involuntary excitement / concern of his emotions making themselves known clearly in her brain in a way her own never did.

Miyuki scratched Ren’s neck, running two clawed fingertips through his scruff. She didn’t shush him though, didn’t tell him it was alright. It wasn’t good to give a pup in training the all-clear unless everything was actually alright.

And … were things alright?

Miyuki swallowed. She was sweaty. Clammy. Faintly out of breath. Jittery? … no, not jittery her hands were still, but she felt like she should be jittery. That could all just be from the running though. Maybe she was just being weird over nothing.

No, Miyuki took a deep breath to center herself and thought, people who are feeling happy don’t run away. … but ‘not happy’ doesn’t exactly narrow this down. She blew out a frustrated breath.

That, at least, was an emotion Miyuki could pin down. Not being able to tell what she was feeling made her frustrated. This happened to her often enough that she knew having to flee a situation because she couldn’t tell what she was feeling made her frustrated.

Ren whined.

Which made Ren worry. Which also made her frustrated. She didn’t like it when Ren was unhappy. Miyuki thought to herself for a moment and cocked her head. Though maybe that was a flavor of protectiveness rather than frustration. Could protectiveness feel growly / lost / restless like that?

Miyuki kept herself busy with spinning restless thoughts until she was pretty sure the run wasn’t messing with her body’s reactions anymore. Once she was cooled down she pressed a finger to her throat to measure her pulse.

Still fast.

Miyuki shifted herself around in the tree to make some space, letting herself out of the tight hidden ball she’d packed herself into. She pulled Ren out of her jacket and placed him in her lap, petting
him softly when he whined at the empty space below them.

Ren was brave but he still got nervous about heights. She let him calm down for a few breaths before continuing.

“Alright Ren. It’s emotions time.” She tapped Ren twice on the bottom of his jaw with the backs of her fingers, their signal to focus on their bond. She closed her eyes and focused on the tattoo seals on her cheek, the inverted triangles which bonded her to Ren. Ren’s eyes lidded and his breathing slowed. Less than a minute later the faint rhythmic pulse of chakra she always felt in her cheeks took on a deep resonant quality, like an echoey well.

“Good boy” Miyuki murmured, giving Ren a quick scratch. He was getting faster at that. Once Ren’s end of the bond was open Miyuki fumbled to complete the link, tuning her chakra like someone above an echoey well might try to sing just the right note to get the well to sing back. She just had to find-

There, she/he/they thought. Miyuki took a slow deep breath and felt Ren’s quicker breaths at the same time. The young pup’s rapid breathing, needed to fuel his smaller frame, felt just as natural to her as her own. With their bond fully opened like this they didn’t just know about each emotions, they could feel each other feeling each other’s emotions.

Ren wagged his tail as his fear of heights slipped away, reassured by how aware his partner was of his body. He could feel her feeling his presence in her lap, could feel exactly how she’d roll and grab him if he fell, could feel her awareness of her own skills and her calm certainty that she could do it. He could feel her memories of training in trees, practicing, of being frustrated by a body that wouldn’t tell her where her hands and feet were, skinned knees and twisted hands, he could remember her learning how to focus on the big picture, how to trust that her body would handle the details with enough practice if she just didn’t think about it, he-

Miyuki could feel Ren falling into her. The young pup didn’t have the meditative experience the Academy trained into its students yet, and he often dove too deep too fast. So she centered herself for him, breathing deep and calm and steady. She was here. Her butt was wedged in the crook of a tree. Twigs were scraping against her back. Ren’s body rose and fell in her lap. She was here in this tree, with him.

Ren felt her calm and it became his calm, his centeredness. He could feel her in the here and now and that rooted him in the here and now.

Good, Miyuki thought. That’s good. She loved Ren for how much he trusted her to care for him and was warmed by the thought that if she cared for him well as a pup he would in turn care for her when they were older. And through Ren she knew she felt that way. Ren could feel her love and so she could feel it too. The expansiveness in her chest, the loosening of her shoulders, that feeling like a warm lullaby murmur from her father but in the opposite direction, framed in Ren’s mind all of it meant something that just didn’t click in her own.

Alright. Miyuki took another deep breath to center herself. “Help me out with this Ren.” *Naruto just asked me out for the second time. How do I feel about that?*
They’d been studying together and eating a prolonged lunch. There’d been snacks on the table and scattered half-eaten plates of food they’d occasionally gone into the kitchen to reheat. Miyuki had been smiling faintly as she worked, but she hadn’t been able to say why.

I was happy. Reassured. I’d been worried that things would be different with Naruto after he’d asked me out. I didn’t want things to change - don’t want things to change - and I’d been afraid he’d be angry or distant over something that wasn’t my fault.

There had been laughter. Frustration over study problems that didn’t make sense. Getting up and going to the kitchen just for the relief of stretching their legs. Miyuki hadn’t even withdrawn or snapped when Naruto interrupted her a couple times when disagreeing over a difficult homework problem.

It wasn’t just happiness. It was relief. I shrugged the interruptions off so well because having feared a bad reaction after I’d turned him down made it easier to appreciate how nice normal is.

When Naruto had come out of the kitchen with his hand behind his head and that sheepish laugh in his mouth, Miyuki had tensed up. His sentences hadn’t made sense at first, the sounds taking long seconds rattling around in her brain to become words. It’d been strange in the moment. Typically she only had auditory problems when she was absolutely socially overwhelmed and she’d been having fun just the moment before.

But I still wasn’t calm. Happy, yes, but not relaxed. I never would have guessed that Naruto would ask me out in the first place. I’ve never expressed any interest in him and we’re decent friends but he barely knows anything about my life. I don’t even think he knows for sure that I’m into men. I’m definitely sure he doesn’t know that I’m trans!

So it was a surprise, something I didn’t understand. And the first time when he hadn’t taken no for an answer, when he’d followed up with “Are you sure though?” and “Why not just give it a shot?”, that was scary. He’d changed things, put me on the spot, and then hadn’t let me fix it. Even though he eventually dropped it, deep down I was still afraid he wouldn’t let me tell him no. I hadn’t seen any of it coming so I couldn’t guess what would happen next, and that made me nervous.

No wonder my brain locked up when he came back from the kitchen. I was on high alert. I must have picked something up from his body language that I didn’t like.

The nonsense coming out of Naruto’s mouth hung in the air for long seconds, only making itself understood long after it had passed through Miyuki’s ears. But once the words settled in her head they were still nonsense.

“Oh, Mimi~” I didn’t like it when he called me Mimi , “the Akimichi are putting on a fire-dancing play in a couple of days, after dusk. Would you like to go with me? As a date? It’s apparently really cool and the food is gonna be really good too. What do you say? Mimi? Hey Mimi, you there?” He’d grinned at the end of his last sentence, like it was all some big joke.

She’d frozen in place when she finally parsed what he said. Why? She remembered thinking. Why, why, why?! Why couldn’t he just leave well enough alone?! Her breath had quickened and her hands had clenched and flexed above her kunai pouches.

This was the part she really needed Ren’s help with. Had she been frustrated? Angry? Or-Afraid.

When Miyuki hadn’t responded Naruto had just kept talking, going on about how cool the fire-
dancers were supposed to be and how he was sure she’d love it. (She hated plays, it was like the actors used a whole different set of rules for their intonation and body language than normal). He knew she didn’t like ramen -I told him that’s not why I didn’t want that first date, I told him!- but they could get something else from one of the Akimichi stands before the play if she wanted to-

I was afraid.

Naruto being kind of insensitive sometimes frustrates me because I don’t know how to tell him off without hurting him. Naruto interrupting me makes me angry because I’ve told him not to so many times. But him doing this-

It scared me.

---

Past that was a blur. Nervous excuses, her heart beating faster as Naruto pushed past them, and eventually making excuses to leave. A trapped helpless feeling weighing heavy in the pit of her stomach as she pulled her school stuff together with Naruto there watching her.

In the tree, safe and alone and hidden, Miyuki sunk her fingers in Ren’s scruff. She hunched over him protectively, burying herself in the security he felt from having an immeasurably bigger and stronger guardian protecting him.

What was I supposed to say? No? I already said no!

And what am I supposed to do tomorrow? Is he going to ask me out again? What’ll he do when I say no then? What’ll he do if I keep saying no?

Miyuki curled up in on herself, muscles tense and tight. Ren whined.

I just want him to stop. Why won’t he stop?!

Ren whined louder.

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Miyuki caught Yuki in the Academy library the next day before going over to Naruto’s apartment to study. “Hey, Yuki. Can I ask you a favor?”

Her absent-minded friend nodded above a scroll he was reading. “Uuhh, sure.”

Miyuki huffed and poked him in the shoulder. “Yuki.”

“Hm? Oh, sorry, what did you ask me?”

“Yuki can I ask you a favor? And-” Miyuki brushed her fingers on her pants and then her elbows, unconsciously mirroring Yuki’s twitchy mannerisms, “-can you … not ask why?”
Within a moment the bleary-eyed scrollworm was gone. In his place was a ninja with cold marble eyes. “What do you need?”

In her jacket Ren twitched, picking up on the sudden change in atmosphere. Miyuki absently pet Ren. He didn’t need to be afraid of Yuki. “I told Naruto I was going to study with him after school today. Can you come with me?”

Yuki tilted his head just a shade. “Elder Taeko wants me to read these scrolls by tomorrow,” he said. It wasn’t a refusal. Just a statement of fact. If I do this for you I may not have time to finish my work and I could get in trouble. And behind that statement was an implied question. Is this important?

“I know.” Yes.

Yuki nodded. Okay. “Is there anything else you want me to do?”

Miyuki hesitated. She still wasn’t sure how she wanted to handle this. One the one hand she hated Naruto for cornering her like that. He’d made her afraid and uncertain and she hated that, so she hated him. But on the other hand she didn’t know why. She couldn’t imagine any reason why he’d keep asking her out after she said no. But that was just it. She couldn’t imagine why he did it. So she didn’t know how she should respond. And until she did-

“Can you just talk to Naruto today? Keep him occupied?” That should be enough for now.

Yuki tilted his head again, wheels turning behind those cold marble eyes. He’d wonder, Miyuki knew. But he wouldn’t ask and that’s what mattered. Instead he nodded and said, “Sure. And hey, mind if I use you as a sounding board with these scrolls on our way over though? I think I understand this one but it’d be nice to double-check and make sure.”

Miyuki nodded. “Uhuh.”

Her friend smiled. “Cool. Let’s go then.”

Miyuki kept petting Ren as she led Yuki out of the library, enjoying the soft ticklish feeling of his tail swishing back and forth inside her jacket.

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Chapter End Notes

Yeah, so at this point in the story this is still the same Naruto who repeatedly asked Sakura out, over and over and over again. And that’s an aspect of his character we need to deal with. *takes a deep breath*. Yup.

This chapter is pretty short on account of me having finals, and medical stuff (nothing to worry about, just a hassle), and having to prepare for a long trip, but I hope it’s satisfying anyway! Anyways, I’d be really interested in hearing what y’all think of this chapter. I thrive on comments. :D
Chapter Notes

Akita Inuzuka shows up in this chapter. If you don’t remember her, she’s a minor canon character who briefly showed up in this story in an earlier chapter. There’s a description of her appearance in Ch. 23 and the Naruto wiki has a page and picture of her.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 45: Reaching Out (Miyuki)

Miyuki was home alone. Her father and his wolf, Bunta and Sho, were on patrol duty that night. Normally her half-uncle Akito stopped by when her dad was out on patrol, at least to check in before she went to bed. But he was out celebrating the promotion of one of his old genin teammates. A week ago Miyuki had told him to go and have fun. She could handle herself for a night. She was almost a genin, almost an adult. She didn’t need someone to tuck her in at night. That had been true a week ago.

The girl with long brown hair curled up on a too-wide couch with her wolf pup in her lap. She stared at the wall. She made a quiet noise in the back of her throat. It might have been a whine.

She didn’t want to be alone right now. But she’d told Yuki she didn’t want to have dinner with his family (Naruto would be there). So she was alone. And earlier that afternoon she’d told Neji and Tenten she’d practice on her own (Naruto had been with them). So she’d been alone then too. She might have asked her best friend Tomomi to come over except their kikaichu colony was sick so their immune system was sick. They were on enforced bedrest for a while, no visitors. Another friend she couldn’t see.

Ren whined in her lap and Miyuki cradled him close. His warmth should have made her feel less alone. Instead they were just lonely together.

It wasn’t fair.

Why was she the uncomfortable one? Why wasn’t Naruto the uncomfortable one after asking her out and being told no half a dozen times? Why did she have to be the one who was scared and confused?

Miyuki curled her fingers into Ren’s ruff. He whined at her more.

It wasn’t fair! Why couldn’t Naruto just stop? Why couldn’t he just go away and. Leave. Her. Alone?!

Ren yipped and snapped at Miyuki’s fingers. She jerked and dropped him out of her lap, suddenly feeling through their bond where she’d been gripping him too tightly. Her pup hopped to the floor and yipped at her again. Reproach mixed with concern on his side of their bond.
Before Miyuki could even start to apologize though, Ren bounded over to the door of their family’s apartment. He turned around and pawed at it with one foreleg, barking out the command for come, mission objective. Miyuki could feel exasperation and a hint of adolescent ‘why do I know better than you’ from her young wolf.

Confused, still trying to figure out how to apologize for mishandling him, Miyuki got off the couch (why did her heart beat like that when she uncurled from her fetal position?) and walked over to Ren. He looked up at the door handle and yipped. Mission objective. Door.

With a sigh Miyuki opened the door. Did Ren want to go for a walk? Well, it probably would be good for her to get out of the house. Especially if just getting off the couch made her anxious (assuming that’s what her heart beating faster meant)-

Miyuki’s thoughts scattered when Ren shot out of the door, racing down the apartment hallway at a speed no ordinary dog could match.

“Fuck!” burst out of Miyuki’s mouth as her companion shot out of sight. Her ‘catch the rambunctious chakra-using pup’ instincts slammed straight to the forefront of her brain in an instant and she dropped into a runner’s starting crouch, clawed hands digging into the bamboo floor for traction.

The Inuzuka ninja tore down the hallway after her runaway companion, hoping that no one else was walking through the apartment as she turned a corner after him. “Rennnnn,” she whined as followed him, “we were past this phase!”

Neither of them ended up running into anyone else, but Miyuki almost tripped over Ren when he jerked to a chakra-aided stop in front of someone else’s door. She leapt over his head to avoid slamming into him, whirling around as soon as she touched down. “Ren!” she hissed.

But it was too late, Ren was scratching on the door and barking. The door behind which Miyuki could smell a dozen different people and wolves, a thickly spiced soup, and fresh bread. And hear the clatter of utensils on tableware and the happy chatter of well-fed family.

“Ren!” Miyuki swept down and yanked her errant pup into her arms. “No! Why would you do that? Why-”

Ren barked code at her. Mission objective. Psychological reinforcements.

Before Miyuki could open her mouth and ask what the heck he was on about the door opened, crushing Miyuki’s hope that they could quietly leave. An older woman with almost more wrinkles than scars stood in the doorway, her hair up in a bun and a stained apron proclaiming “Kiss the chef!” tied to her waist. A mountain of a wolf peered out from behind her with rheumy eyes and yellowed fangs that didn’t quite fit in its mouth.

“Oh? Hello there dearie. Who are you two?”

Sorry, my ninen just- he- a flushed Miyuki signed, Ren got away from me and was scratching on your door. I’m sorry.

The woman raised an eyebrow and sniffed the air deeply. Then her expression softened -or perhaps sharpened?- into a smile. She barked out a laugh. “Your partner’s got good instincts kid. Come on in, you smell lonely and hungry and no one is either in my house. My name is Miori, let me introduce you to the family.” With that said she turned around and walked back inside, leaving the door open as if it was a foregone conclusion Miyuki would follow and close the door behind her.
And, well, she did. A bewildered (that was definitely what that disoriented feet-tingling feeling was) Miyuki trailed after her fellow clanswoman. Miori, right? Her name is Miori. As she shuffled past the massive wolf in the entryway with Ren in her arms, the wolf leaned down to nose her partner.

The wolf’s jowls pulled back in a broad toothy grin. She spoke to Ren with a voice like an avalanche, telling him, “Good job little one.” She raised her head up to Miyuki’s eye level. “Come,” she rumbled.

Miyuki allowed herself to be herded to a long table crammed with Inuzuka of all ages and so covered with plates of food she could hardly see the wood beneath. Miori disappeared into the kitchen to “get this beanpole some food, she clearly needs everything she can get”. Miyuki found herself handed off to an older one-legged man she was pretty sure was Miori’s husband. (She’d seen him in the gardens before, right? Wasn’t his name Daigo?). He produced another chair from nowhere and squeezed her into a space between a pair of siblings she recognized who had graduated the Academy a couple years ago.

The siblings introduced themselves to her and Miyuki -a little overwhelmed- responded in sign. The siblings switched over to sign in kind, as did their parents across the table when they greeted Miyuki too. A wolf under the table pressed his head into her lap and sniffed her and Ren. Food was shoveled in front of her and Ren, the mother across from her started signing a story about her son next to Miyuki (“Mom, you tell that story to everyone”), and then, just like that, Miyuki was part of dinner.

The dinner was just winding down when an unexpected person’s scent made its way into Miyuki’s nose. “Akita?!” she cried out, whirling around in her seat to look behind her.

Sure enough, standing there in the entryway accompanied by Miori’s mountain of a wolf was Akita Inuzuka, Akito’s twin and her half-aunt. Miyuki didn’t see her as often as her brother, Akita was climbing the ranks of Advanced Tech’s research department and that didn’t leave much spare time for hanging out with younger relatives. But there she was, breathing as if she’d just been running.

“Woof!” Akita’s partner Chamaru, a tiny little wolf with a prosthetic leg, wove through the tangle of chairs and feet and leapt straight into her lap next to Ren. He licked Ren and then Miyuki, wagging his tail and fussing over them.

“Ach! Pbblt!” Miyuki protested. “Chamaru, stop!” she laughed. As usual he gave her another couple of licks before relenting. While he settled down Miyuki looked back up at Akita, who was making her way over to her. “What are you doing here?”

Akita shrugged, her fang earrings swaying and catching Miyuki’s eye as she did. “You tell me kid, all I know is that big, fluffy, and very insistent over there,” she gestured to the huge wolf that had been standing behind her, “found me and brought me here. She was looking for someone with your scent on them and said you needed family.”

Miyuki blinked. She’d been so wrapped up in the dinner she hadn’t even noticed the large wolf leave.

“So little niece of mine,” Akita asked, “what seems to be the problem?”
Miyuki ended the night curled back up on the same couch she had been earlier that evening. But now she and Ren weren’t alone. Akita and Chamaru were sprawled out on the other end of the couch. Her stomach was filled with warm food and she’d come back with the goodbyes and well-wishes of her fellow clan members following her home.

Miyuki fidgeted. “It’s … hard to explain,” she began. She didn’t continue though. Where would she start?

“Well Mimi,” Akita said, “imagine you already explained it to me and I understand what’s wrong. And now I’m bringing Akito up to speed before he talks to you about it. What couple sentences would I say to him so he knows what you’re going to be talking about?”

The younger Inuzuka blinked. “I-” How would she say that? “A boy in my class has been asking me out repeatedly and not taking no for an answer. I’ve been isolating myself to avoid him and I’m not happy.” Oh. That was less complicated once she said it out loud. “That … wasn’t as hard to say as I thought it’d be. Um, thank you Auntie.”

Her half-aunt snorted. “No problem. If there’s anything I can help with, combating anxiety would be it.”

Miyuki wasn’t quite sure the problem had been anxiety but she smiled anyway. Even when Akita was just sitting there on the couch talking with her, Miyuki could still smell a hint of the sour-sharp smell of nerves and worry wafting off of her. But despite that Akita just lounged on the couch with a confident ‘I can fix this, no sweat’ smile on her face. It made Miyuki feel better, knowing that Akita was also worried about doing or saying the right thing to handle this, but that she’d tackle the problem anyway.

“So,” Akita prodded, “you want this kid to stop asking you out, right?” At Miyuki’s nod she continued, “Is there anything else you want?”

Miyuki nodded. “Yeah. I want to know why. And-” she took in a deep breath. Her jaw clenched. She balled her hands into fists. “I want him to know why. It was scary- terrifying to have the jinchuuriki corner me in his house and not take no for an answer. I want him to know exactly why what he did was so awful. It’s not fair that I have to struggle with how it all feels for me and why and wanting it to go away and he just gets to not even know.” Miyuki’s voice turned into a growl. “It’s not fair.”

Akita blinked at the mention of ‘jinchuuriki’ but she took it in stride. “Okay. You’re talking about Naruto right, that kid Yuki introduced to my brother the other day?”

Miyuki nodded. “Yeah. He’s mostly Yuki’s friend. I was trying to figure out if I wanted him to be my friend too when this happened.” She snorted harshly. “Guess I figured that out in the end though.”

“Mhm. Have you told Yuki about this, or your other friends?”

“No.”

“Hm. And Yuki’s family’s taken charge of Naruto’s education, if I remember right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, let’s start there then. You tell your friends about what’s going on and I’ll bring the adults
“Um,” Miyuki fidgeted. “Yes? But what do we do then?”

Akita blinked as if she were surprised by the question. “Then? Well I wouldn’t know yet. That’s the point of bringing friends and family on board with a problem like this. Once you’ve got them on board they can help you figure out what’s an option and what to do.”

Akita’s voice softened. She leaned forward to gently place a hand on Miyuki’s knee. “Mimi … I can smell this room you know. You were stewing in here for a long time struggling with this, I can tell.” Ren yipped agreement, nodding vigorously from Miyuki’s lap. Akita nodded acknowledgement down at Ren and then looked back up at his partner. “And Mimi, that’s understandable. Stuff like this can be scary to resolve and deal with on your own, so don’t. You don’t need to have every little detail of how this is going to be handled plotted out before you reach out to your loved ones, that’s just another flavor of handling everything yourself. I know you trust your friends so trust them to help you. Bring them on board and then let them help you figure out what step two is.”

Miyuki opened her mouth to protest but … couldn’t find anything to say.

Her aunt laughed. “I know, right? But it really is that simple, I promise you.”

Miyuki took a deep breath. “Okay.”

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Chapter End Notes

This is the shortest chapter yet and a week late, on account of finals and then a family vacation with limited internet leaving me with very little time to write it. I’m also not very happy with it for the same reason, but I’m happier with it out than languishing in my drafts.
Naruto put on his best and brightest smile. He was going to see his friends today (his _friends_!).

His smile didn’t even dim a watt when he signed in at the gate to the Hyuuga compound. So what if the guard glared at him? She was just a jerk.

As he walked through the Hyuuga compound Naruto sniffed the air. There were so many flowers to smell! Faint ones and stuffy ones and bitter ones and ones which smelled like … Naruto would have to ask Miyuki what the word for that smell was. Somewhere off the paths in hidden gardens Naruto could smell plants that made his nose tingle and his hair stand on end and he was pretty sure what he was smelling was poison. Maybe the older Yuki would show them to him sometime! She smelled like those flowers really often.

Naruto sniffed the air some more as he walked down the path to his friends’ house. Speaking of older Yuki, was that her he smelled? And … Miyuki’s uncle? Naruto breathed deep. No, not Akito. They smelled like Akito, but also like … Miyuki’s medicine? Naruto blinked. They were definitely an Inuzuka, which was weird. Miyuki said that the important Hyuuga didn’t like the Inuzuka so they tended to stay away.

Normally Naruto would just run on in but Hinata had been teaching him _manners_. Just because it was okay to barge in on Hizashi and Keiko (at least, they never told him not to) didn’t mean it was
okay to barge in on these other people. So he knocked before sliding open the door and walking in, calling out as he did, “Hello! I’m here!”

His ears pricked up as swears drifted out of the living room.

“Why is he here?”

“Ah shit, he’s early.”

“Hizashi, dammit I thought you were keeping an eye out!”

“I thought you were!”

Naruto started to smile wider. Something he wasn’t supposed to hear! But then a moment later a tiny Inuzuka wolf with a prosthetic leg came tearing around the corner and launched itself at Naruto and he was suddenly very distracted.

“Ach! Blech! Too much licking!” Naruto laughed. “Down! Dooown!” Whatever was said in the living room over the next few seconds went totally unnoticed by the boy who was more than a little occupied by the small ninken (very successfully) distracting him.

Finally a woman’s voice interrupted, “Alright Chamaru, that’s enough, we’re done here.” The tiny wolf leapt off Naruto and padded to the side of his Inuzuka, who was standing in the house’s entryway. She had long dangling fang earrings and a thin black band of cloth around her throat and fancy rimless glasses and long black silky hair and-

She looked like what Naruto imagined an older Miyuki might look like if she dressed up to go out on a date. Naruto blinked, swallowed, and then blurted out the first thing that came to mind, “Wow! You’re really pretty!” Then he blinked again and slapped his hand up to his mouth, chuckling sheepishly. “Hehe, uhhhh, your wolf is pretty friendly too! He’s nice.”

The lady looked him over coldly and then walked past him without responding. As she passed him on her way out the door he caught a slap of hostility wafting off her that curdled his nose. It smelled weird on an Inuzuka, especially one who also smelled so much like Miyuki’s family. Normally the Inuzuka were some of the few ninja he could count on to not hate his guts.

But Naruto didn’t let it get to him! He was going to see his friends today and it was going to be a good day. His smile stayed fixed on his face.

Even if he couldn’t smell his friends in the house yet. He really was early. Oops.

He ran into the living room anyway though, to where Hizashi, Keiko, and the older Yuki were. “Heyyy! Sorry I’m early! Hey who was that lady? She was all rude and scowly.” Naruto frowned before remembering he was supposed to be smiling and re-applied his grin.

The adults looked between one another, some unspoken discussion exchanged between them. Hizashi spoke first, standing up as he did, “Well love,” he said to his wife, “you wanted to talk to him first. Yuki,” elder he signed, “do you want to join me in the kitchen?”

A few moments later Naruto was left alone with Keiko in the living room and now he was really struggling to keep smiling. This was feeling a lot like getting called in to talk to a teacher and not at all like coming to play with his friends. “Uh, hey Keiko,” he said. Remembering Hinata’s lessons he asked, “How has your day been going?”

Keiko stared at him for a moment. “Not great, it’s been a day for bad news. But we need to talk about something else. Have a seat will you?” She gestured to the chair across from her.
Naruto’s stomach churned and chest tightened. This didn’t just feel like getting called in to talk to the teacher, this felt like getting called in to talk to the old man himself, the Hokage. But he jumped into their reading chair eagerly anyway, grin wide and eager. Yuki’s family liked him. They did! That’s why he was here.

Keiko let out a long breath. “So, we need to talk, Naruto. This isn’t going to be a good talk, but it’s one we need to have. That—”
Naruto interrupted with a laugh and a grin, “Haha, what did I do this time?”

Yuki’s mother stopped cold with Naruto’s interruption. She stared at him as he spoke. When he finished and she started speaking again it was with a steady even cadence that made it clear she would speak her piece and then Naruto would respond. “That woman who just left. Her name is Akita Inuzuka. And she was rude and scowly, as you put it, because you had hurt someone she cares about. She is usually not that cold of a person, but she had reason to act that way towards. Which is what we need to talk about.”

A frown fought with Naruto’s grin. “D’you mean the Kyuubi thing? I know it killed a lot of people when it attacked Konoha and people are mad at me about it, but I know that and I can’t do anything about them being jerks.” Naruto crossed his arms.

“No. That’s not what I’m talking about. Naruto, you asked Miyuki out recently, right?”

“Huh?!” Naruto flushed red. “I, uh, yeah. How did you know?”

Oh crap, he thought to himself, did someone else have a crush on me? Is that who I hurt? Am I in a love triangle?!

“Because she told her aunt who told me,” Keiko replied bluntly. “Naruto,” she continued, “how did Miyuki feel about that?”

The boy blinked. “Huh?”

“You asked Miyuki out, right?”

“Uh, yeah?” At Keiko’s harsh expression he gulped. Right. She was mad at him. “Yeah. I asked her out.”

“When you asked Miyuki out each time, how did she feel about it? What was her emotional state at the time?”

Naruto blinked again. “Uh, I dunno?” Naruto frowned. Why was Keiko badgering him about this? How was he supposed to know? She’d said no, it’d been embarrassing, and he’d tried to push through the embarrassment and act cool until he built up the courage to ask her out the next time. That was it!

“You don’t know what Miyuki felt when you asked her out?”

“No!”

“You’re telling me you don’t have any idea how Miyuki felt about being asked out by you?”

“No!” Naruto exclaimed. Why did she keep pushing?! It’s not like it wasn’t already embarrassing enough that Miyuki had said no! A moment later though he remembered what Hinata said about uncontrolled outbursts not being helpful. “I mean, no. I don’t know.”

“Okay. Can you make a guess?”
He scowled and shook his head. *No! He’d already said he didn’t know!*

Keiko’s eyes narrowed. But then she relaxed, leaning back (when had she leaned in so close?) and sighing. She closed her eyes for a moment and when she opened them again they were still hard, but less angry. “Naruto,” she said, “this is important. I need you to take your best guess at what Miyuki was feeling.”

Naruto fidgeted in his seat. “Look I don’t know, okay? Is there something you want me to say?”

Keiko shook her head. She sighed again and said, “No. I was- I just needed to know what you knew about how Miyuki felt when you asked her out.”

“Why?!” All of this and he still didn’t know what he had supposedly done or who he’d hurt!

“Naruto...” Keiko took a deep breath, “do you know the story of why Yuki keeps those books on ninja safety with him? The ones he keeps in that sealing scroll on his hip?”

“Yeah? He said he almost blew up a classroom one time, right?” Naruto was pretty sure he hadn’t blown up a classroom, so what was this about?

“Yes. But most importantly, Yuki did that without thinking. He drew a spiral seal he didn’t understand. He wasn’t thinking about what would happen if something went wrong. He wasn’t thinking about what would happen even if everything went right either, even though no one was hurt things still went pretty poorly for him. He didn’t think. And that was all it took. Not thinking for a single moment while dealing with something important almost killed himself, his brother, thirty other children, and both of his teachers.”

Naruto blinked. “Whoa.” When Hinata had told Naruto the story it hadn’t been quite like that.

“Yes. Whoa.” Keiko’s gaze hardened. “Naruto, one single moment of inattention almost destroyed my family. Destroyed dozens of families. Just one gods damned moment of just not thinking about the consequences.”

Naruto leaned back. “O- okay.”

“Now I’m going to ask you again. When you asked Miyuki out, do you know how she felt about it?”

*Oh.*

“...”

“Naruto-”

He chuckled. “Hahaha, I mean, it’s not like I handed her an exploding note!” Naruto’s voice rose at the end of his sentence. “I see where you’re going, and wow you give as good of a lecture as the old man, but-”

“No!” Keiko snapped. “You don’t get it, because you’re. still. laughing.”

“But-”

“Naruto you have more power than almost any other ninja in the world! You can become an entire army in an instant; if you wanted to take something by force there is nothing any genin in Konoha can do to stop you! You are the single most valuable war piece Konoha has at its command, you could get away with fucking murder and Konoha would be extremely limited in how it could risk
reprimanding and alienating you. And I am not exagerrating, our neighbors in Suna literally let their fucking jinchuuriki do exactly that and that is not because their leaders are any more ruthless or pragmatic than ours. Naruto, you once vandalized the fucking Hokage’s tower in full view of the public! And all that earned you was a lecture rather than being crippled and assigned to low-clearance desk duty forever, because Konoha needs its jinchuuriki to one day take the field.”

“But I-

“Naruto, Miyuki knows this. And you, you asked her out repeatedly. She told you no and you did. not. listen.” Keiko punctuated her last words by pounding her fist into her open palm. “She didn’t know why you weren’t listening to her. She had no idea what you-

“I would never hurt-” Naruto tried to exclaim.

“She DIDN’T KNOW THAT! Naruto, Miyuki was terrified. She had no idea why you were asking her out, why you wouldn’t take no for an answer, what it meant that you wouldn’t take no for an answer! All she knew was that you weren’t doing what a good teammate would do and stopping when she said no, so she couldn’t assume you’d act like a good teammate! She could only guess about what you might do based on what you could do!”

Naruto stood up, shoving his chair back. “I didn’t know!” He shouted “I-

“And that is the point!” Keiko stood up too, shouting back. “You weren’t thinking about how Miyuki was feeling, so you had no idea this was going on inside her head! And that made it worse! All she knew was that she was telling you no, that she was clearly uncomfortable, and yet you didn’t seem to care! It didn’t exactly paint a good picture!”

“I didn’t mean to-!”

A calmer voice interrupted, “Naruto! Keiko! Both of you stop yelling.” The elder Yuki’s approach had gone unnoticed by both of them until she was almost right on top of them. She put a hand on each of their shoulders, pupilless eyes taking in both of them at once. “Please, calm down. Both of you.”

Hizashi shifted into position behind her. “Yuki is right. Keiko, you’re layering on guilt without a pressure valve. This talk is supposed to be constructive, not destructive. And Naruto,” he turned his head to face the red-faced boy, “you need to sit down. And listen. Hurting a friend isn’t something that goes away just because you’re upset about it.”

It was a tense moment before Keiko sat. But once she was sitting Naruto -eventually- sat too.

Hizashi let out a delicate cough a moment later. “Um, actually, Keiko, I know you just sat down but I was going to ask you to switch with me, if you didn’t mind.”

Keiko looked up at Hizashi and sighed. “Well. If you insist.” If Naruto had been more observant he might have noticed their arms opposite him shifting as they formed the signs good interrogator and bad interrogator. But he wasn’t and he didn’t. So Hizashi took Keiko’s place and that was that.

Naruto mumbled as the middle-aged ninja sat down across from him. “I didn’t know Miyuki was upset about it.”

Hizashi tilted his head quizzically and asked. “Why does that matter?”

There was an easy answer to that, of course it mattered, it was obvious. But what came out of Naruto’s mouth was, “Huh? Uh...”
Hizashi blinked twice with those creepy pupiless eyes and tilted his head the other way. (Naruto could see where his friend Yuki got that same habit from). The older ninja mused, “Well, okay. I believe you. You didn’t know.” He shrugged. “So what does that mean, what comes next after that statement?”

“Huh?”

“You didn’t realize you were scaring Miyuki. Why tell me that? Is it because you don’t intend to apologize to her?”

“What?! No! I mean-” Naruto wasn’t going to say he wasn’t but he didn’t know what he was going to say. He hesitated long enough that Hizashi stepped in.

“Are you going to tell her that you didn’t mean it and you feel really bad so she can tell you ‘it’s alright, I understand’ and everything can continue on as normal?”

Naruto swallowed. Some part of him felt queasy. “I mean … was it really that bad?”

The white eyed man sitting across from him nodded sadly. “Miyuki was in a state of drawn-out panic for almost a week. She kept on trying to figure out how to get you to stop. But of course ‘no’ hadn’t worked and she couldn’t figure out what else would work if that hadn’t. She started self-isolating a few days ago to avoid running into you outside of the Academy. I won’t go into private details, but Miyuki’s aunt -that ‘rude and scowly’ woman you just met- ended up spending a very long time calming Miyuki last night.”

“But … I only asked her out! Why did that freak her out so much?”

“Naruto, when first I asked Keiko out, what do you think that meant?”

“Huh?”

“When I first asked Keiko out -read her some truly awful poetry and laughed along with her when she laughed at it- what do you think I was trying to tell her by asking her out?”

“That … you liked her?”

The older man shook his head, hair drifting sadly back and forth. “Naruto, there’s a dozen reasons why you might like someone romantically and not tell them. Maybe you know it wouldn’t work out in the long run, maybe you know they don’t feel the same, maybe they’re a subordinate and it wouldn’t be appropriate. Maybe they just had a tragedy and aren’t looking for romance, maybe you just had a tragedy, or maybe there are just things you want in life more than to date that person right now. There are so many reasons to like someone and say nothing. Liking someone doesn’t necessarily lead to telling them that.”

Hizashi continued in a low tone, leaning in towards Naruto. “Asking someone out doesn’t only mean you like them. It’s saying that you want them to feel the same way about you. You ask someone out because you hope that telling them your feelings will get them to think of you in that way. Do you understand the difference?”

Naruto nodded hesitantly. “I think so? Yeah.” He chuckled thinly. “I see what Tenten means about how much of a romantic you are.”
That earned no more than a raised eyebrow from the other man, who continued on a moment after. “So Naruto. With that in mind, what does it mean if someone answers ‘I am not interested in you in that way’ but their suitor keeps pursuing them anyway?”

Naruto swallowed, breathing hard through his nose.

“The answer’s obvious, isn’t it? It means that their suitor doesn’t care whether they’re liked back. That they intend to act on their interest whether it’s returned or not. They-”

By this point Naruto was almost hyperventilating. He shouted out, “But I’m not like that! I-”

“Say it plainly,” the white eyed man spoke. “You’re not a rapist? You’re not the kind of abusive person who would pressure or coerce a friend into a relationship they didn’t want?”

“No!”

Hizashi shrugged. “Okay. I don’t care,” he said flatly.

Naruto reeled back as if he’d been spat on. “Wha-”

“Nor does it matter to Keiko or Akita. Certainly not to Miyuki. All that matters to her is that you pressured her in a way that safe suitors who are signaling ‘I hope you like me back’ don’t do. You behaved like someone who isn’t safe to be around would behave.”

“But- but- I didn’t know!”

The white eyed man blinked. “Okay. And once again, why does that matter? Miyuki couldn’t tell the difference between you having bad intentions and you not bothering to realize how scared she was. She couldn’t afford to assume the best. I mean, what if she’d been wrong? And it’s not like the best was good either. Remember the story of when Yuki almost blew up his classroom?”

Hizashi waited for Naruto’s nod before continuing, “Right. Well it didn’t matter that it wasn’t on purpose. So far as safety is concerned, there’s not much difference between someone who intentionally makes a bomb in a classroom and someone who is so negligent of safety they do so on accident. Both types of people are the kind of people who might blow you up.”

Hizashi’s voice was almost as hard as Keiko’s. “There is a reason that our son is still carrying those ninja safety books around all these years later. There’s a reason he’s still not allowed to work on anything new without supervision. Because no one cares if he meant to do it or not. He showed he couldn’t be trusted not to endanger others. And it’s the same with you. A friend who can’t be trusted to not do what you did, is, one way or the other, not a friend Miyuki can feel safe around.”

Naruto swallowed rapid breaths and sniffled. “So- so what am I supposed to do?”

“Better.” At Naruto’s helpless look Hizashi leaned forward, his voice took on a softer tone but his expression remained just as stern. “You do better in the future. You accept the consequences of what damage you’ve already done, learn to live with it, and do better.” Hizashi shrugged. “Same as the rest of us.”

“But … Miyuki doesn’t hate me now? Right?”

Hizashi took a deep breath. “She could. If she wants to. If she decides she still wants you in her life -and that is an if-, then you talk to her and figure out what you need to do to make things better. To help her believe you’ll do better.”

“And- what about if she wants me to go away?”
“Then you regret it. You’ll go away. And you still try to do better.”

“But …” Naruto hesitated. He didn’t think Hizashi would like it if he said ‘I didn’t know’ again.

Hizashi seemed to see it in his eyes though and he said it for Naruto. “You didn’t know, right? It doesn’t feel fair that without warning, without you ever being given a chance to change your behavior or fix things, you might suddenly lose a friend you love very much? It’s so horribly unfair, right?”

Naruto gulped down a sob and nodded.

“Well,” Hizashi said softly. “There’s two things I can tell you about that. The first is that this is more unfair for Miyuki. She lost the company of a friend she could feel safe with just as suddenly, in an even worse way. If it’s unfair for you, it’s more unfair for her.”

As Naruto’s breath shuddered Hizashi continued, “The second thing is that the pain you’re feeling right now? That’s a good kind of pain. Hold on to it and keep it close. If you let it, it will make you a better person. It will leave a mark on you that will keep you from making the same mistakes again.”

With a swallow Naruto tried to steady his breathing. “O-Oh?”

“Yeah. That’s the point of pain like this. It’s why we feel guilty and ashamed and bad for hurting our friends. And yeah, I’ve hurt friends too before. And yeah, it hurt. I felt like an awful, terrible person. But that pain gave me a reason to do better in the future. I’m grateful for the person it helped me to become.”

Naruto took a deep breath. “I…” he hesitated. Then with a small voice he asked, “really?”

Hizashi nodded. “Absolutely. You have to make sure not to wallow in it, to actually use the pain and not just pity yourself for it. But I’m not too worried about that with you. I know you had a hard time hearing this, but even so you don’t strike me as the kind of kid to wallow in self-pity.”

Naruto opened his mouth. The boy almost said no, Hizashi was wrong. He had dark moods. Times when he would sit on a swing or in his bathtub and just … sit there. Because he ran out of reasons to move. Because he knew he’d never be a ninja no matter how hard he tried. He could have told Hizashi about the times he did wallow in self-pity.

But he didn’t. Instead Naruto put on his best and brightest smile, watery as it might be, and grinned at Hizashi. “Don’t you worry Mr. Hyuuga, I’m gonna make it better! I’ll figure out a way to fix things up with Miyuki, you’ll see!”

The man sitting across from him hesitated for a moment before responding, “That’s … not a bad attitude to take. Just remember that-” he didn’t get to finish his sentence. Hizashi let out an explosive sigh as Naruto raced out of the Hyuuga compound, slumping back into his couch.

Keiko poked her head out of the kitchen. She looked at the front door Naruto had left open, brow furrowed. “He left already?” she said. Flicking her gaze back over to her husband she asked, “Should I bring him back?”

Hizashi frowned. “I … am not sure. Yuki?”

The elder Yuki stepped up next to Keiko so she didn’t have to look back and forth between the two of them. “No, I don’t think so.”

Keiko raised an eyebrow. “Really? Because that parting note doesn’t leave me filled with confidence.”
Yuki snorted. “I should hope not. If you think that kid’s going to handle this situation with anything approaching tact or by taking the time to think through how Miyuki might feel about his actions, I’ve got a mine in Iwa to sell you.”

“Uhhhh, and that means we shouldn’t bring him back?” Keiko asked pointedly.

Yuki shook her head. “No. Keiko, we’re not going to teach that kid thoughtful sympathy or constructive selflessness in an afternoon. Those are skills, not decisions. You two already did what needed to be done, which was making Naruto fully aware of what he’s done. Even if he wouldn’t say it to your faces by the end, he still has that childish belief that because he didn’t mean harm that he couldn’t have done anything truly wrong. It’s just a big misunderstanding and it’ll all be worked out when he tells everyone that he understands and that he’s all better now.”

Keiko crossed her arms. “I’m still not hearing why I shouldn’t bring him back, and he’s getting further away each second…”

Hizashi reassured his wife, “Don’t worry, he’s not even at the gate yet. And I’m keeping an eye on him, I’ll know where he is if you want to go get him. Yuki, go on.” He leaned in, waiting to hear her chain of logic play out.

“Here’s the thing about Naruto. This kid wants to be a good person so badly. He wants to be liked and respected and for people to be proud of him, and he wants to earn that. He wants to be the kind of awesome and amazing person who one day becomes Hokage because he’s made everyone like him so much.”

Keiko raised an eyebrow. “He thinks being liked has anything to do with becoming a Kage?”

Hizashi patted his wife’s elbow. “Oh shush. I mean, you’re right, but let Yuki finish.”

Yuki laughed. “No that’s kind of it. Naruto wants to be good, in every sense of the term. That’s not even a question. But he thinks of being ‘good’ in entirely positive terms. It’s about being funny, and chipper, and energetic and strong and determined! But what it’s not about is doubt. He doesn’t think about doubt in any kind of positive sense. ‘Am I throwing my kunai right?’ ‘Do I actually understand this lecture?’. ‘What if she doesn’t like me asking her out?’.”

Yuki shook her head. “Naruto can’t handle that kind of doubt. He’s learned to function by never questioning himself. That’s how he’s kept going at all in the face of how badly his education has been sabotaged and how isolated he’s been. And that learning has gone deep. It’s the core of who he is! You’re not going to get him to start doubting himself now just by telling him that a mistake he made could have been prevented by doubting himself and doubting how his friend saw him.”

Hizashi blinked. “Huh. That almost makes too much sense.”

Keiko frowned. “Yeah. Though I wish you’d brought this up earlier Yuki, I would have used a totally different tact with him.”

Yuki smiled apologetically. “Sorry, I’m still not much one for interrupting and you and Akita were so…”

“Passionate?” Hizashi offered diplomatically.

“Yes. You two got very passionate in your conversation about Naruto. I was going to bring this up when you two had cooled down a bit, but then Naruto arrived early and, well-”

“Ah.” Keiko scratched her shoulder. “Yeah we weren’t really letting you or Hizashi get a word in edgewise were we?”
Yuki gave Keiko a quick half-hug. “That’s quite alright dear. You two just care a lot about our kids’ little Mimi.”

Hizashi coughed lightly. “So I’m still interested in what you were saying about Naruto not doubting himself…”

“Right. Thinking critically about how your actions impact another is, however necessary and important, fundamentally an exercise in self-doubt. It’s constructive self-doubt, but still. It demands that you think long and hard about the particulars of how other people might not like what you’re doing. It’s not something you can do with unrelenting positivity, so it’s not something Naruto is capable of. You’re not going to get Naruto to learn better by telling him to be self-critical like this. To him it’d feel like inviting one crushing mountain of miserable self-doubt after the other every time he interacts with his friends. All to reduce the chance of him making a mistake which he, to be frank, still thinks deep down can be excused by not having known better.”

Keiko hummed thoughtfully. “So what, you think if he tries to force a reconciliation with Miyuki, fucks it up because he doesn’t think of her feelings and suffers the consequences, then he’ll actually learn from that?”

Hizashi frowned. “Yeah I’m worried that this seems to be more about teaching Naruto a lesson and less about helping Miyuki by managing Naruto.”

That drew a short laugh from Yuki. “Oh I’m not worried about Miyuki. The Inuzuka have mobilized around her now, she’ll be fine.” Her gaze turned distant for a moment and she smiled. “Heh. Yeah she’s got the biggest damn wolf I’ve ever seen draped over her lap and an older woman with an ANBU tattoo is keeping her company.” She blinked. “Huh. Oh my, I think that’s Miori the Red Fang.”

Hizashi let out a choked cough and flew through the hand seals to boost his Byakugan at the same time his wife laughed. “Hah. Okay you’re right,” she said, “Miyuki’s going to be fine. That old monster won’t let Naruto hassle one of hers.”

“Oh gods it’s really her,” Hizashi whimpered.

Keiko nodded. “Okay. Alright, yeah, I can see this working. Getting punched in the face by a protective Inuzuka does seem like it’s Naruto’s learning style.”

Hiashi laughed nervously, “Love, this is the Red Fang, she could disembowel him.”

Yuki shook her head, responding to Keiko. “It’s not that I’m sure this will definitely teach him. It’s entirely possible that Naruto may never learn better. I- I’ve got a lot of experience dealing with … people who never learned how to see their own flaws.” She put on a fake smile. “Nobles, you know?”

Hizashi and Keiko winced sympathetically. They knew exactly who she was really talking about.

“It’s just that…” Yuki paused and marshalled her thoughts, carefully and deliberately picking her words. “There is a difference,” she said, “between being backed into a corner where you aren’t allowed to not acknowledge wrongdoing, and choosing to confront your flaws so you can do better. Because the former doesn’t always mean much. And what we need… what I need to see from Naruto is the latter.”

Hizashi hummed thoughtfully. “And that’s something which has to come from him.”

Yuki nodded firmly. “It is.”
The two of them looked at Keiko, who smiled faintly and shrugged. “You make a good point. My instincts are to keep hammering at this until it’s fixed, but if you need to see Naruto own up to this himself I’m not going to argue with you.”

A slow smile spread across Yuki’s face. “Thank you Keiko,” she said.

“Of course.” Keiko smiled in turn. “Though … you do realize this means one of us,” she gestured to herself and her husband “needs to run and tell Miyuki’s family how the talk with Naruto went for you, hopefully before he shows up at their compound and pisses off the Red Fang?”

The blood drained out of Hizashi’s face. “Oh fuck.”

Yuki made a puzzled noise. “Hizashi are you okay?”

Keiko laughed sharply. “What, your husband never told you the story of the time he and Hizashi tried to mess with her garden?”

“No?”

Keiko laughed harder. “Okay, well, I’ll let Hizashi tell it to you while I run over to the Inuzuka compound. It’s a great story, you’ll love it.” She turned to leave the living room but as she did, Yuki caught her hand.

“Keiko. Thank you.” She put as much emotion as she could into those two words. “Both of you. For… you make it easier for me to trust me.”

Keiko softened. She squeezed Yuki’s hand gently and brushed her thumb over her knuckles. “Of course. You’re family.”

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Chapter End Notes

I’ve learned a lesson as a writer while struggling with this chapter. And that’s: “do not make things I don’t enjoy writing into a central plot point”. For the first time since starting this story I just blew past my self-imposed deadline for finishing a chapter and then kept being unable to finish it. I wanted to (and still want to) write this aspect of Naruto’s canon characterization in a context where it’s not treated as a joke. But I don’t enjoy working with it. And as a result it’s bogged me down and slowed my writing progress to a crawl. It may continue slowing my writing until the whole arc is wrapped up.

I’ll do the best I can, but I may not be able to make solid update promises for a while. I’m going to finish what I’ve started, but I definitely made a mistake in tackling this part of Naruto’s character in the way I did and this section of the story won’t come out as quickly as I want to be updating this story because of that. Thank you all for bearing with me, none of you have left pushy update-request comments and I really appreciate.
And thank you, those of you who leave comments. The love in the comments really helped me push through the slog of writing this chapter.
Chapter Notes

I had to rush this chapter a little bit towards the end and not much beta-ing happened, so if you notice any typos please tell me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 47: Taking Action (Naruto/Keiko)

Naruto summoned another clone. “Alright!” he shouted, “From the top! Why should Miyuki forgive us?”

The clone dropped to his knees in a moment, head and hands pressed to the floor with his elbows pointed out to the sides. “Miyuki!” he cried out, “I am so sorry! I was terrible and awful to you! I was being dumb and selfish when I kept pushing after you turned me down! I promise I’ll never ever ask you out again!”

The original Naruto stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Hmm.” He turned to look at the panel of other clones beside him, transformed so they were wearing fancy overlarge robes like the Hokage’s. “What do we think? Was that good enough?”

“Eh.” “Hmm.” “I liked it.” “Ehhhh, the ground kind of muffled his voice.” “Oh yeah, some of the words were kind of hard to hear.” “Coulda been better, yeah.”

The original Naruto frowned thoughtfully. “Hmm, alright, next time bow, say you’re sorry, and then raise your head for the rest of it.” Naruto brought the first two fingers of each hand together in a cross and dispelled the clone. Memories of pressing his face into the carpet (ew, he really did need to get a clone to clean it eventually) rushed through him and the clone judges.

“Hm,” one of the clone judges said, “he did feel real sorry as he said it. A-plus for effort.”

“Of course!” the real Naruto cried out. “This is Miyuki we’re doing this for! It has to be perfect!” Naruto brought his fingers together again, summoning a new clone with his memories of the previous performance from both angles. “Again!”

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He was ready! He’d practiced and practiced and practiced and now he’d show Miyuki how sorry he was! Naruto rushed into the Inuzuka compound, ready to make things right!

Or he would have if a leather clad arm hadn’t been thrust in front of him at the gate.

“Huh?” Naruto skidded to a stop and turned. “Hey! I’m-” His gaze tracked up. And up. “Oh.”
The lanky Inuzuka who had stopped Naruto towered over him. He was long, more limbs than person, and covered in more piercings and tattoos than Naruto could count.

Naruto gulped. “Uhhh-” the look in the tall man’s eyes was decidedly not friendly. But a moment later Naruto steeled himself. He’d dealt with jerks before! And this was for Miyuki! “Move it buddy!” he shouted. “I don’t have time for you!”

Something rumbled in the ninja’s chest and was echoed by a quiet growl somewhere behind Naruto. Before Naruto could turn around though the ninja spoke, with a low drawl that brooked no disagreement, “I’m the gate guard today. And you do have time for me.”

Naruto frowned. The gate guards never stopped him! Not at the Inuzuka compound! They weren’t jerks like the Hyuuga guards. Looking up at this jerk’s expression, Naruto scowled. The Inuzuka were the one group of ninja he could typically trust to be half-way decent to him.

Guess every clan has their jerks, he thought sullenly. Out loud he said, “I’m going to visit my friend, alright?”

The ninja guarding the gate peered down at Naruto. “Is that friend Miyuki Inuzuka?”

Naruto’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah,” he challenged, “what’s it to you?”

The guard took a small step to the side, putting himself fully between Naruto and the path leading further into the compound. He raised his open hand to just in front of Naruto’s chest, blocking his way. Naruto’s nose wrinkled, the man’s tattoos stank like burnt chakra. “It matters,” the guard told him, “because she’s not available. She’s taking a few days off from the Academy for clan training. You’ll be able to see her when she goes back to school just like everybody else.”

Naruto scowled more as he took a step forward. The ninja’s palm hit his chest as he did, landing with just a bit of a push Naruto hadn’t been expecting that broke his stride. “Look! It’s important, okay? I’ve got something she needs to hear.”

“Then tell it to her when she goes back to school.”

Naruto tried to move around the guard but a quick shift kept the tall ninja firmly in front of him, his hand unyielding against Naruto’s chest. “What’s your problem? I said it’s important!”

The guard’s eyes narrowed. His tone shifted, and something in his low voice tickled at the hairs on the back of Naruto’s neck. “Oh? And what will you do if I keep saying no?”

Nervousness suddenly pooled in Naruto’s belly, but he couldn’t let that stop him. Miyuki was counting on him to make things right! Naruto pushed at the man’s hand and took a step back, squaring up and getting ready to tell the jerk where he could go shove it. He drew in a breath and-

“She doesn’t want to see you,” the ninja said.

“Huh?!”

“Miyuki does not want to see you right now. I’m to keep you out, specifically, because she doesn’t want you to be here. You can see her when she goes back to class. No sooner.” The tall man finally drew his hand back from in front of Naruto’s chest and let it rest at his side. He drew himself up to his full height -oh, he was really tall- and frowned down at Naruto. He watched Naruto, waiting for his reaction.

Naruto swallowed. Miyuki really was upset with him right now. But that’s why he had to
apologize! She still thought he was a mean jerk who kept on asking her out after he said no! But that was just cus he hadn’t known better! He had to tell her he was sorry so that she’d know he was really a friend and not one of those gross people Hizashi talked about, so they could be friends again. If Naruto didn’t get to tell Miyuki he was sorry then she’d be losing a friend too, just like Hizashi said. So he had to talk to her!

Naruto squared his shoulders and pulled in a deep breath. “I’m sorry,” he said to the gate guard. “But Miyuki needs me right now.” He drew his fingers up in a cross and yelled, “Mass-”

The other ninja was faster.

His right hand wrapped around Naruto’s right wrist faster than thought. A pattern under the tattoos on the ninja’s hand lit up and sizzled. The chakra of the shadow clone jutsu burned away with a smell like greasy shadows.

Naruto’s mouth had just started to fall open when the Inuzuka yanked on his arm, pulling him off-balance half a step forward. Naruto couldn’t follow what happened next. He had a brief impression of the ninja’s arms going around his waist, and then flailing backwards as something pressed into his hip and his legs suddenly couldn’t support his weight. He squeezed his eyes shut for just a moment as his back hit the ground and by the time he opened them the ninja was lying on top of him, arms wrapped around him like a seatbelt.

“Wha-”

The ninja turned his head and drove his chin into Naruto’s eye socket, pushing and prodding. Naruto flailed, trying to hit the ninja, to do anything to him, but he couldn’t get the leverage to land a decent hit. And when he finally turned his head away from the ninja’s uncomfortable probing chin, pressing his cheek into the cobblestone to get away, he found he could barely get the leverage to even lift his arms.

“Ach! Plbbt! Get- Gah! Get off me!”

The Inuzuka didn’t respond. He just held him there, pressing Naruto’s face into the gritty stone as he struggled. Naruto thought frantically. They’d practiced this in class, hadn’t they? Eugh, he’d never been good at grappling at the Academy and Neji and Yuki never practiced it with him. Naruto scrambled to get his feet flat on the ground so he could buck the tall Inuzuka off him. But the guard was so heavy and it didn’t feel quite right when Naruto tried to lift him. It didn’t seem to matter that the ninja was lanky and thin, he still weighed a ton and Naruto could barely get the leverage to even lift his arms.

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Naruto’s struggles stopped abruptly as a wolf rippled into existence twenty centimeters in front of his face. One moment there was empty cobblestone and the open gate of the Inuzuka compound in his vision, the next moment that space was filled by a wolf shaped like an arrow. Loops and swirls of glossy black and red ink shimmered under its blotchy grey fur, that to Naruto’s nose smelled like the dark hidden places under heavy rocks and logs.

It yawned wide, showing off its many, many teeth. The smell of its breath -old meat and marrow- hit Naruto in a sudden rush and he swallowed hard. Naruto spent a long moment staring into its mouth before it closed its jaws and licked its chops. Then it spoke in a growl.

“Go. Home.”

Naruto’s vision doubled as he focused on one of those long fangs peeking past its bared lips. He
swallowed. *Holy shi*- he started to panic. But just for a moment! He couldn’t give up now! Miyuki was counting on him! He couldn’t let this jerk and his dog stop him!

Naruto opened his mouth wide and shouted, “I won’t let anything stop me! My name is Naruto and I’m going to be the next Hokage-”

~~~

Keiko watched from the roof across the street as a struggling and uncooperative Naruto was dragged off, yelling the whole while. The tall Inuzuka hauled the thrashing Naruto off towards the administrative center, leaving his wolf behind. Once he was gone Keiko waved to catch his wolf’s attention and signed down to it, *Patrol assistance required? Act as replacement?* 

The wolf shook its head. It lifted its right paw and chopped it to the right twice, in a fairly good approximation of the *Unnecessary* sign.

*Confirmed*, she signed back. Then, in the more colloquial sign Konoha’s ninja had built out of their combat signing, she signed, “I apologize for the trouble. I would have intervened before he got here, but someone I care about wanted to know what he’d do. I’m sorry that caused trouble for you and your partner.”

The wolf shrugged. It didn’t seem to care. It turned around and unceremoniously vanished under its cloaking jutsu, leaving Keiko alone with her thoughts.

Well. Thinking positively, at least the Red Fang didn’t get involved. That’s a good thing. … and. Yeah. That is the only good thing about this.

Keiko drew in a breath and then uttered a short and emphatic, “Fuck.”

~~~

If someone asked Keiko what the most valuable thing in her life was she would probably tell them that above all else she cherished the love of her family. If they pressed further and insisted she pick a tangible object she owned, she would name her family’s citizenship papers. Kept in triplicate in separate locations, she might explain, to her they represented the protection and stability which Konoha’s institutions afforded her family.

This would be a lie.

Keiko did not believe in Konoha’s institutions. She believed in insurance.

Which is why in Keiko’s desk, locked behind the best seal she could requisition and an even better seal she wasn’t supposed to be able to requisition, was the actual most valuable object she owned. A small storage scroll containing a little black book with a heavily encrypted list of names and favors owed.

This was the book she consulted when deciding how she was going to fix her family’s little Naruto
Waka Yamanaka, aside from being gifted with an unfortunate name, was also possessed of an unfortunate tendency to speak her mind to power. Emphatically, and with a surplus of cursing. Which was a somewhat risky habit for her given that she worked with the branch of ANBU responsible for disappearing politically sensitive targets - a category which included Konoha’s own ninja when needed - and her superiors could sign kill orders. Waka was aware of this though, and smart enough to cultivate acquaintances who could get her out of the hot water she so often got herself into.

Which is how she came to find herself taking tea in the same cafe as Keiko (no last name that Waka knew of) carrying on a telepathic conversation from three tables away as she pretended to read a book.

<So, Keiko, what’s the cause for this unexpected pleasure? I wasn’t expecting to see you again for months, at least.>

Keiko nibbled on a muffin, pretending to be watching another of the cafe’s patrons. Her lips didn’t even twitch as Waka read the humor in her thoughts. <Oh? Wish you didn’t have to see me again quite so soon?>

Waka carefully suppressed the mental shake of her head she might have transmitted to a fellow clan member (non-Yamanaka were so fragile with what psychic transmissions they could tolerate) and projected sincerely, <Not at all. I meant it, it really is a pleasure to see you. The more work I do for you the more often I get to yell at that bastard Zenjiro Sarutobi in accounting while you convince Interpersonal Management to forget to file his complaints.>

<You really hate him that much?> Waka was a better mind-manipulator than mind-reader but she thought she felt genuine interest from Keiko.

<The fucking toad keeps assigning his relatives missions to ‘maintain relations with the Daimyo’s court’. Now don’t get me wrong, the Sarutobi know their way around diplomacy and they do a good enough job. But the expense budgets he gives them so they can live it up while at court eat all the way into critical counterintelligence funds. He’s too well-connected with the moneybags in court for any of us to do anything about it, but the least I can do is make sure the bastard has to hear someone tell him that his shit stinks.>

<Damn. I’m sorry. I assume if there was anything I could about it you’d have already asked?>

<You’re right, I would have. Now, what can I do for you? I want to call Zenjiro a slithering septic slughit in front of his mother sometime this week and you’re my ticket to doing so.>

Across the cafe Keiko blinked twice. <You have a very interesting vice to satisfy.>

<Better than soldier pills. Now tell me, what do you want?>

<Well … before I begin, I promise this is for a good cause.>

Waka stilled. That was not something Keiko had ever felt the need to say before.
It goes against a direct directive of the Hokage and would probably piss off Danzo Shimura too if he learned about it. But I don’t think either of them will be unhappy with the results.> Keiko took a moment before finishing her thought. <I need you to plant a suggestion or two in the jinchuuriki’s mind.>

<...>

<Waka? You’re still there, right?>

The Yamanaka set down her tea and very calmly turned her head to look straight at Keiko. She brushed her blond hair away from her eyes and behind an ear and then spoke in Keiko’s mind. <Keiko. Turn around. And look me in the eyes.>

Keiko did. Exactly as one shouldn’t do during a clandestine meeting, exactly as she never would have done herself, Keiko’s head turned and her dark brown eyes met Waka’s pale blue ones.

A shock ran through the air between them and Keiko’s eyes froze, locked to Waka’s as if fixed by a bar of steel running between them. Waka leaned down to rest her chin in her hand and Keiko’s eyes followed her unerringly.

<Keiko,> Waka projected very calmly, <I know you’ve heard me speak rather frankly about our Hokage in the past. I certainly haven’t agreed with all of his policies. And I like you personally. You’ve stood by me even when my temper has gotten me in more trouble than you signed up for, and I respect your work.>

<But,> she continued, <disagreeing with Konoha’s elite is not the same thing as betraying our home. So you have until you run out of breath to explain why this isn’t treason.>

<Until I-?> Waka watched Keiko try to furrow her brow in consternation. And fail. Then in a sudden panic, to expand her chest and draw in air. And fail. <Waka!>

<Talk fast.>

<!!!>

The psychic didn’t move. She simply rested her chin in her hand and maintained the jutsu, eyes locked on Keiko’s. She was ANBU, one of Konoha’s ninja who had proven psychologically capable of murder. In practice. And unless she willed it Keiko would not breathe.

Keiko’s panic kept fluttering through her mind as she tried and failed to calm herself. But she did what Waka said anyway, and talked fast. <Danzo sabotaged Naruto, socially isolated him. We-I-my family was trying to fix it. To help. Naruto fucked it up, he-> Keiko’s vision blurred. She desperately tried for more air that didn’t come. In a panic she tried to think faster. <He burned bridges. Can’t fix them, has to be him who fixes them, I can’t do it for him. I need you to help him. Make it his idea, think it’s his idea. I can’t let it end like this, can’t let Danzo win, can’t->

Waka blinked. Air surged back into Keiko’s lungs. She collapsed with heaving coughs. A worried server ran over, anxiously hovering behind her and asking if she was choking. Keiko waved them off with a lie about choking on her muffin, smiling wanly and affecting a hint of embarrassment to the cafe’s staring patrons.

Waka gave Keiko a minute to collect herself and shake off some of the attention before contacting her again. <Who’s Naruto?>

Across the cafe Keiko shuddered. But she steeled herself and responded. <That’s the jinchuuriki’s
Oh. Waka leaned back. Huh. She’d never actually learned the jinchuuriki’s name before then. Didn’t think she’d ever actually heard anyone refer to it- him by name. Wait and Keiko had said-

<Yes.> Waka could feel a kernel of panic inside Keiko at continuing the psychic conversation. But she could also feel Keiko smothering it, determined to see her goal through. <Danzo wanted a monster he could point at a target more than he wanted a ninja with a mind. When the Hokage told him no he sabotaged Naruto’s social development instead, either because he thought Hiruzen’s mind could still be changed if Naruto failed to become a decent ninja or just to show he’d been right all along.>

Waka scowled internally. <Fuck. That is something the asshole would do. He absolutely is shitty enough to ruin a ninja’s life just so he could fucking pretend he’d been right. Shit-eating motherfucking son of a->

Keiko interrupted her before she could really get going. <I’m not trying to go after Danzo. I’ve got a family to think of.>

That made the mind-reader wince. She’d gotten a flash of the other woman’s kids when she heard that, and a muted horror when Keiko realized how close she’d come to never seeing them again. Waka hated it when her targets thought of their families.

Keiko continued though, burying the fear under an iron will. <I want to fix this, help make Naruto a decent ninja. Give him a shot at actually being a person. And my family’s been working on that, trying to give him a bit of family. But we just found out he’s been pressuring the daughter of a family friend -Miyuki- romantically. He didn’t mean harm, per se, but that doesn’t matter. He scared her in a way that’s going to make it difficult for her to trust him and then he royally fucked up any chance of her trusting an apology. This might not be reconcilable and our kids aren’t going to side with him if that’s the case. Nor should they frankly, but->

<Now he’ll be alone again and Danzo wins.> Waka finished.

<Yes.>

<Okay. So what did you want me to do about this? Make the kid decide to give a proper apology?>

<No. No it’s not that. He wants to apologize. Tried to, like I said. But his social skills are too stunted for him to not be self-centered. He doesn’t have enough practice seeing the world through other people’s eyes.>

Waka furrowed her brow. <Give me an example?>

<That apology he tried to give? He went to her clan compound, got told by the guard she didn’t want to see him. He kept insisting he see her anyway and then tried to attack the guard with a rank A forbidden jutsu when he was refused. Got escorted to a holding cell until the Hokage could chew him out personally.>

<... holy fuck. Was anyone hurt?>

<No. But you had to ask the question. Says a lot about how his apology attempt turned out.>

<... and you’re sure Konoha doesn’t just have another narcissistic sociopath of a jinchuuriki to deal with? Because as is that sounds … bad.>
No. Believe it or not, I’m pretty sure Naruto actually was trying to do the right thing. But my guess is that all he sees is how bad he feels that he hurt his friend. He feels bad and awful and so of course fixing that involves him apologizing. If he tells her how awful and bad he feels and how much he doesn’t want to do this again, she’ll understand that he’ll do better.

Waka restrained herself from sending a mental image of herself thumping her head onto the table repeatedly. She reminded herself that not everyone got a Yamanaka’s education in social dynamics. But … no, no one could actually be that stupid, Yamanaka education or not. But all that’s going to matter to this girl is that he tried to violently trespass over another boundary of hers while she needed space from him! She might not even hear enough context to be able to conclude anything more benign!

<Yup.>

<What she needs is to feel reassured that he’ll abide by her fucking boundaries, not an apology! An apology is only useful if it serves that purpose!>

<Mhm.>

<No seriously, what the fuck? People feel bad all the time about shit they’ve done and they still do it again! What the fucking fuck does it matter to her if he feels bad? Why the fuck did he think that would come off as anything other than a guilt trip?>

<Waka->

<Keiko that’s not just poor godsdamn planning, he’d have to have not thought about how she’d feel seeing him or getting that apology at literally any point, what the->

<Waka!> Keiko cut off her telepathic rambling. <I know.>

<Oh.> It was at that point Waka noticed the faint echo she was getting from her psychic projection, indicating that this exact rant had already run through Keiko’s head recently and probably been voiced at length. <Sorry.>

<Yeah. This is what I need help with. Naruto isn’t safe. He’s well intentioned, and adorably earnest, and a hard worker, but he is not safe. In one week he’s harassed a poor girl to tears and thrown rank A jutsu at a Konoha ninja who was just doing his job. I wouldn’t have guessed he’d do either of those things last week, which means I can’t say he won’t take action just as bad next week, and that means he’s not safe. I- we can’t in good conscience tell our kids to keep helping him and socializing with him, even assuming they’d willingly do so if allowing him into our home meant Miyuki felt less safe with us.>

<And where do my ‘suggestions’ come into this?>
<Don’t listen to people who say otherwise and don’t get me started. It’s a whole thing.> Waka hummed to herself thoughtfully. <So you want me to, what, give him an idea of what other people are feeling or thinking when he interacts with them?>

<Yeah. Is that-> Keiko swallowed and massaged her throat unconsciously, <-something you’d be
willing to do to the jinchuuriki?

<Yes, I could probably do that. It’s certainly in his best interest. But … I think I have a better idea.>

<Oh?>

<He’s old enough to know the transformation jutsu, right? Is he decent at it?>

A very dry, <Good enough,> was Keiko’s reply.

<Great. Because there’s this exercise we have Yamanaka kids do, you see->

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Chapter End Notes

Remember in canon when Naruto picked a fight with Sasuke on the hospital roof for no good reason and they threw around A-rank insta-kill jutsu and almost murdered Sakura in the crossfire? That’s what Keiko means when she says Naruto’s not safe to be around. He hasn’t done that specifically in this fic, but what he did with the guard tells Keiko that emotionally throwing jutsu at other Konoha ninja is a thing he would do. And she's well aware how badly that could end up, by accident or otherwise. That stuff gets brushed off in shonen manga because it’s just How Shonen Boys Do Emotion, but this fic is a different genre and characters are taking the kind of personality which acts like that a little more seriously.

Also is it clear that mind powers terrify me yet? Because they really do. Fortunately (or unfortunately) for her Keiko is a little more used to this stuff than Yuki was with Itachi.

Lastly, different authorities disagree on the definitions of empathy and sympathy, flipping the definitions. You’ll even find disagreeing dictionaries. I’m going with the American Psychological Association’s definition because it’s what my mother raised me with (being an American psychologist herself) and because it’s more true to the words’ linguistic roots which makes keeping them straight easier for me. (Is this ambiguity a personal pet peeve of mine? Oh you bet it is.)

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