Here Comes the Sun

by Autumnnight99

Summary

Naruto befriends Kurama early and everything changes.

Notes

So, I'm writing this as I go along. Expect random updates. Also, I'm not sure of pairings just yet.

Anyway, Enjoy!
Chapter 1

Naruto had a memory, one that stuck with him through everything. It wasn't much, just sound, sensation, and glimpses of red and white, but it was enough.

He remembers soft humming. Peaceful notes washing over him and bringing with them so much love he felt like he would burst. The voice, rough and drowsy, singing a few words here and there.

He sees long, red hair that tickles his cheeks, feels the shift of fabric against his sensitive skin.

The memory doesn't last long, just a few minutes at most, but it's precious all the same.

Naruto finds himself reliving that memory now. Sitting in his small apartment upon his bed, trying to distract himself from the loneliness gripping his heart.

He hums along with the voice in his memory, having heard it enough times to have it memorized. The song is quiet and peaceful, reminding him of waves lapping at a shoreline, and always manages to bring him some semblance of peace.

He doesn't know where the memory is from, or when it happened, but it's the only time he's ever felt so much warmth in his life.

Laying back, hands tucked away behind his head, Naruto closes his eyes and feels one, lone tear slide down his cheek.

It was his ninth birthday today and, as always, he spent it alone, hiding from the hate filled glares of the citizens of Konoha.

It hurt, to be so alone, with no one to fill the void in his heart.

Sure, he saw Jiji-sama sometimes, but the old man never truly saw his pain.

Not that Naruto blamed him. He knew the Hokage was extremely busy, knew Jiji didn't have much time to spare for him.

Naruto only wished he had someone there for him. Maybe a parental figure, or even those he could see as siblings.

He wished and hoped with everything he had for the day where he was loved and could love in return.

Naruto let the memory play once again, slowly drifting off to sleep.
Chapter 2

Here's chapter 2.

Tell me if you want shorter but faster updates or longer but slower updates.

I had fun writing this chapter so I hope you guys enjoy reading it.

Enjoy!

When Naruto opened his eyes, he was sitting cross-legged in murky water.

Save for the faint drip... drip... drip... coming from somewhere behind him, silence reigned.

Looking around, Naruto found himself to be in a dimly lit, large, open space. Directly in front of him, were golden bars rising from the water and stretching upwards far beyond his vision.

An inky black darkness filled the space behind the bars, no light penetrating its depths.

Naruto rose to his feet, curious as always, and approached the shining metal.

The first thing he noticed, upon moving closer to the darkness, was a barely audible whimper followed by long, drawn out sighs.

Naruto heard the soft swish of something moving lazily through the air and the quiet splashing of water.

Stopping in his tracks a few feet from the bars, Naruto called out, "Hello?"

The sounds stopped.

Light slowly trickled in, washing away the darkness.

Before Naruto lay a giant fox with blood orange fur and crimson eyes. His paws were placed in front of him, and nine tails frozen in the air.

For all of a second Naruto was overcome with fear because this, this was the Kyuubi no Yoko, the nine-tailed fox. The beast that could flatten mountains and destroy countries.

But then, he looked into one of the being's eyes and saw.

He saw pain, and loneliness, anger and hate. But also, so, so much regret pooled there in that eye that Naruto felt his chest tighten with pain. If he was right, this being lived a life full of suffering just as Naruto did.

And there's no way, no how, that he could show hate to a being that lived that life.

So, he blinked, once, twice, and tilted his head to the left. "I'm Naruto, Uzumaki Naruto. You are?"
The being just looked at him, surprise evident on his face before he answered in a deep, grumbling voice, "You should know who I am, Kit."

Naruto brought his arms up and folded them behind his head and gave the Kyuubi a genuine, but small smile. "Well, yeah. You're the Kyuubi no Yoko. But that can't be your name, right?"

And now it was the Kyuubi's turn to blink which preceded a short, disbelieving laugh. "Kurama. My name is Kurama."

Nodding his head, Naruto sat cross-legged in the water and looked up at Kurama. "Say, Kurama, how'd you end up in here? Actually, where is here?"

Tilting his head, Kurama considered that question a moment before responding. "This is your mindscape, Kit. I was sealed here the day you were born."

"Oh," Naruto said. "And that happened because?"

Sighing, Kurama placed his head on his paws and stared at the young boy in front of him. "It's a long story." Seeing Naruto gesture with a hand to continue, Kurama sighed again and spoke. "As you know, the Bijuu are feared. Always have been, most likely always will be.

In the beginning, my siblings and I had never done anything to cause harm to the world. But humans have always been scared of the unknown and when they discovered us, they attacked and brought destruction upon themselves from our wrath.

Eventually, one man decided to force me to fight against another. He used his dojutsu, the Sharingan, to control me. During the fight I had no control of myself. At one point, a woman who I later learned was named Uzumaki Mito sealed me within herself and the man who controlled me was killed.

I spent years sealed inside her, with her always telling me that I must be sealed away, that I was too dangerous to be left free.

She was hailed as a hero for her actions while I sat, alone but for her visits.

Years passed and before Mito died, I was sealed into a young girl, another Uzumaki, Uzumaki Kushina.

Kushina was bright and full of life. Always quick to forgive and protected those precious to her with all the fury and force of a hurricane.

But even she thought me to be a danger, thought I was better off here.

And then, Kushina married a young man, Namikaze Minato, the fourth Hokage, and she became pregnant.

The night she gave birth, the seal weakened, and a masked man used the child as leverage to separate Minato from his wife.

While Minato took the child, his son, to a safe place, the masked man extracted me from Kushina.

And where normally a Jinchuuriki would have died from having their bijuu forcibly extracted, Kushina was an Uzumaki, with the life force to prove it, and she managed to survive, though just barely."

Kurama went on to describe how Minato just barely saved Kushina from being killed by him while he was under control of the masked man.
How, while the Hokage took his wife to settle with their son, the masked man had him attack Konoha.

He spoke about fighting the control to no avail, how he was forced to kill and kill and kill.

How Minato and Kushina gave their lives to stop Kurama and to seal him into their son.

How he had watched the life of that boy growing up.

How disgusted and angered Kurama was when the child was treated like dirt for something he couldn't control.

How he wished, more than anything, that such a young boy never had to go through so much suffering because of him. A boy who Kurama had grown to care for and respect for his strong will and loving heart when all he ever knew was pain.

How he wanted to be there for the boy, to help him, protect him. But instead he was stuck in this cage.

And Naruto, he sat and listened through it all. Watched the emotions play over Kurama's face and dance through his eyes with a heavy heart.

Because he knew.

Naruto knew the pain of the lonely. Felt it every day, like sharp knives carving bone deep lines into his skin.

He knew how it felt to be hated, completely and utterly. The glares directed at him on the streets, full of scorn and piercing to the very depths of his soul.

He knew the feeling of being stuck in a cramped, rundown cell of sorts. After all, that's what his apartment was, right?

Naruto knew the feeling of wanting to lash out at those around him, of wanting to destroy and rage and burn.

So, no, Naruto doesn't blame him for hating the world. Doesn't care about his past actions, especially when he wasn't in control of some of them.

Naruto understood. He understood the being of chakra better than most.

Being hated and feared for something out of your control was hard. Being locked away like some animal, treated as inferior because those around you are terrified of you, isn't living. It's barely even surviving.

And while he may be young, may seem naive and childish to most, that's just a mask.

He covered up his intelligence with loud words and brash movements because he knew nobody cared enough to listen when he spoke.

So, he sought attention any way he could, sought to be acknowledged.

Naruto lived a life of pain and misery, with a hole in his chest that grew bigger with each passing day. He was afraid that maybe that hole would consume him someday.

But if it does, would anybody care?
Naruto would like to think so, would like to believe in the good in people.

But he knew it was unlikely.

But the being in front of him was someone he could relate to. Was someone who knew how it felt to live like he did.

And the question, the big question.

Did Naruto hate Kurama? For being part of the reason for his parents' deaths? For being the cause of all the pain he's lived through in his short life?

No. Never.

How do you hate someone who's basically a mirror of yourself?

The answer? You don't.

So, Naruto squared his shoulders and looked Kurama in the eye. He knew, just knew, that Kurama was waiting for rejection, to be hated. Naruto knew he was expecting to be cursed and screamed at.

But instead, Naruto gave Kurama one of his crooked, genuine grins and spoke. "You know, Kurama, I don't care about what other people think of you. I don't care about the things you've been forced to do. I can see you regret every death you've caused, every life you've taken. You and I, we both know pain and suffering for something that wasn't our fault in the first place. So, I think, the two of us, we should be friends."

And Kurama, he just stared and stared and stared like Naruto was the oddest thing he had ever seen.

Naruto knew Kurama had never expected to be forgiven, never thought anyone would care. So, he just waited for the bijuu's response, making ripples in the water with his hand to pass the time.

Eventually, Kurama threw his head back and laughed. And if it sounded mostly hysterical, well, Naruto could relate.

"So," Naruto started. "It's hard to believe my father was the fourth Hokage."

Kurama, who had just finished laughing moments ago, tilted his head to get a better look at the small boy in front of him. He was still reeling from the fact that the boy whose life he had made a living hell had forgiven him, had even asked to be friends.

And of course, Kurama had accepted. Why wouldn't he? This young boy, with his heart on his sleeve and pain in his eyes, who's seen the world and people for what they truly are, still hoped and dreamed. He forgave and forgave and forgave because he can, and he will, and he won't hate. He won't.

This child knew suffering and scorn better than most and he kept his head held high where most would drown beneath the raging waves.

So Kurama will stay with this child wherever he goes. Will help guide Naruto into the incredible Shinobi he knew he would become.

Because if nothing else, Naruto had a spirit that wouldn't quit and potential by the spades and Kurama wouldn't let that go to waste.
And he'll start like this. "Minato was an amazing man. While I was never entirely fond of either him or your mother, I respected their strength."

Naruto looked up from where he was lying on his back, having discovered long ago that the water wouldn't get him wet. "I knew the fourth- I mean my dad was awesome. But what was mom like?"

With those earnest eyes staring up at him, Kurama couldn't stop the words from spilling out of him. "She was a brilliant woman. Fiery temper and wicked skill with a blade. She carved through whole armies with a strength and skill few had ever possessed.

Kushina had deep, crimson hair reaching to her ankles and sharp, violet eyes. Her skin was pale bearing few scars from her years as a kunoichi.

A prodigy with seals, like many in her clan, she outclassed even Minato."

He went on and on, telling Naruto as much as he could about his mother. And Naruto ate up every word.

Naruto groaned, stretched his arms above his head and winced as his back popped.

He and Kurama had spent hours talking and Naruto had just woken up as the first rays of sunlight shone through his window.

Naruto hopped out of bed and started on his morning routine.

After a shower, Naruto opened his closet and blinked at the groan Kurama gave.

"Honestly, Kit. Must you wear those orange monstrosities?"

Naruto wasn't surprised by the bijuu's voice as Kurama had mentioned before he woke up that he would be able to speak with Naruto when he was awake.

Scrunching up his nose in distaste, Naruto replied, "I know what you mean. But they're the cheapest clothes I can buy. The villagers overcharge me for everything else."

Kurama hummed then spoke, "Hm. You should henge yourself."

Naruto blinked then face palmed with a groan. "Honestly, how did I not think of that?!"

Kurama chuckled a bit. "It's alright, Kit. No worries. Since it's an off day for the academy, let's go shopping."

"Right."

After applying a henge to make himself look like a brown-eyed, brown-haired academy student in mostly black clothing, Naruto checked his fridge and wrote down a shopping list for food and supplies.

Grabbing his trusty wallet, he left his apartment by way of the window and made his way to the Shinobi district first.

After looking around for a while, Naruto entered a store with weapons and ninja clothing in the display window.

Making a beeline for the clothing racks, he looked for a while, picking out three pairs of black, loose-
fitting, Shinobi style pants along the way.

Grabbing some black, long-sleeved, tight fitting shirts a few sizes too big, some burnt orange wraps to keep the extra material from getting in the way, and a pair of black Shinobi sandals, Naruto left the clothing section.

Perusing the many different kinds of weapons for sale, Naruto, with Kurama’s input here and there, picked up a few spoils of ninja wire, some very sharp kunai and shuriken, weapons pouches, and even splurged on a pair of tanto on the urging of his bijuu.

He also picked up a good amount of parchment, ink, and brushes so he could start to learn sealing and some already made privacy seals.

That done, he paid for his items and left the shop.

For his next stop, Naruto entered a grocery store and bought a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, meats, and other cooking supplies.

After paying, he made his way home.

As soon as he was home, Naruto dropped the henge and put away his purchases where they belonged.

After changing into some of his new clothes, Naruto, with some directions from Kurama that he remembered from his Kushina, made a simple meal.

Humming to himself while he cooked, Naruto paid careful attention to the food, so it wouldn’t burn.

Kurama interrupted his thoughts with a wistful sigh.

Blinking, Naruto asked, "Is everything alright, Kurama?"

Another sigh. "Yes, Of course. It's just, I remember Kushina used to hum that same song while she was cooking. I'm surprised you know it, actually."

Naruto answered, "I learned it from a memory of when I was very young. From what you told me it was probably from the day I was born."

"I see."
So, this is the longest chapter I have ever written. Tell me if you think I should make the next one longer. Though, just be warned, this chapter only came out so fast because I had nothing to do the last two days and I was on a roll when it came to writing this. Anyway, enjoy!

After he finished eating breakfast, Naruto inquired of his bijuu, "What now?"

Kurama replied, "You should start with chakra control exercises. Do you know anywhere hidden away that you could train?"

Naruto thought for a moment then answered, "There's a clearing just outside the Nara Clan lands. I stumbled across it years ago. I go there when I need to clear my mind or just relax. It doesn't seem like anyone goes there, ninja or not." Dredging up a memory of the place to show Kurama what it was like, Naruto asked, "Would it work for our purposes?"

"Yes, Kit. It's perfect."

Nodding, Naruto went to collect what he would need. "Will we need the privacy seals?"

"Yes, definitely."

Arriving at his clearing, Naruto looked up through the gaps in the trees and judged it to still be early morning from the position of the sun.

With Kurama's help, he placed the privacy seals around the clearing and activated them.

Standing under the shade of a large oak tree, Naruto waited for Kurama's first instructions.

"Alright, Kit. I know I said we would work on chakra control, but I want you to warmup first. So, give me 100 push-ups, 100 sit-ups, and 20 laps around the clearing."

Nodding, Naruto got to work.

Sweat dripped down his body as he finished his warmup.

Even in the relative shade provided by the forest surrounding him, the humid air of Fire Country would not be left behind.

As Naruto collapsed in front of the tree he started at, he took in deep breaths to try and lower his heart rate.

When his breathing stabilized, Naruto took a look around the clearing from his position lying on the ground.

The sunlight filtered through the trees and shone upon the river twisting its way through the eastern
side of the clearing. Birds sat in the branches over head, filling the air with their song.

The grass was soft beneath his hands, green and thriving.

Naruto was brought out of his thoughts by Kurama's voice echoing in his head.

"Good job, Kit. Now we can start with chakra control."

Naruto beamed at the praise. "What's first?"

Kurama chuckled. "Tree climbing. You channel chakra to the bottom of your feet and walk up the tree. Too much chakra and you'll destroy the bark beneath your feet and be pushed away from the tree. Too little, and you won't stick. Use a kunai to mark your progress. Got it?"

"Yup!"

"Alright, give it a try."

Nodding, Naruto stood up and walked over to the Oak and retrieved a kunai from one of his thigh holsters. He knew he had much more chakra than the average ninja. Kurama had told him it was a side effect of being an Uzumaki and a Jinchuuriki.

Thinking for a moment, Naruto channeled a small amount of chakra to his feet and placed his right foot onto the bark. Feeling it stick, he raised his left foot and placed it higher than his right upon the tree.

Taking slow, deliberate steps, Naruto made it a quarter of the way up the oak before he slipped. Marking his spot with the Kunai, Naruto flipped off the tree and landed back on the ground.

"I'm impressed. You did well for your first try, Kit. Especially with the amount of chakra you have. Ok, let's try again."

Taking a deep breath, Naruto started walking up the tree, taking the time to focus on the amount of chakra he channeled between each step. This time he made it three quarters of the way up before he fell.

Kurama whistled in appreciation. "Wow, Kit. You're a natural at this."

Naruto smiled. "Thanks, Kurama. I think I'm getting the hang of it."

Trying one more time, Naruto slowly made his way up to the top of the tree. When he reached the top, he sat on one of the branches to rest.

"Congrats, Kit. Even Kushina took longer than that to get tree climbing down."

Naruto blushed. "I'm not a prodigy or anything like that. You just make things so easy to understand compared to the academy teachers. They always make things so complicated."

Kurama hummed. "That's because you learn differently than most. Kushina was the same way. Like you, she had to figure out most things on her own. At least, you don't have to worry about that anymore. I'll always be here for you if you need help."

"Thanks, Kurama. You're the best."

"It's no problem, Kit. It's no problem at all."
After a few minutes of rest, Kurama spoke, "Alright. I want you to walk up and down the tree as many times as you can. Try to go faster each time. You want to get this down until it's instinctive. Tree climbing may be a chakra exercise, but it's also helpful in battles. You never know when you may need to run up a tree to get away from an enemy."

Nodding, Naruto did as instructed, going faster each time.

By the end, he was exhausted and had managed to make it up the tree at a run.

Resting his back against the base of the oak, Naruto took a rest for a while.

When his breathing was back under control, He asked Kurama what was next.

"I want you to meditate for a while. It will help smooth out your chakra flow. Cross your legs, close your eyes, place the back of your hands on your knees, and just breathe. Listen to the world around you, the chirping of the birds, the rustling of the leaves. Feel as the air flows by your skin. Just relax your muscles and breathe deeply."

Naruto settled his back against the bark of the oak, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath.

Time passed by and there he sat, at peace with himself and the world. Nothing to do but breathe in, and out. In, and out.

Eventually, as the afternoon sun reached its highest point in the sky, Kurama called Naruto out of his trance.

"Good job, Kit. Now, reach for your chakra and tell me how it feels."

Naruto reached deep and felt for his chakra. "It's much calmer than usual. Normally it feels like a roaring river rushing through my chakra network. Now, it flows calmly, like it's ready to respond the second I call on it."

Kurama nodded. "Yes, that's what I'm feeling too."

Naruto blinked in surprise. "You can feel my chakra?"

"Of course. The seal that keeps me here allows me to sense your chakra flow. It works well for us, actually. This way I can monitor your chakra levels."

Tilting his head to the left, Naruto thought about that for a moment. "Alright. So, what's next?"

Kurama laughed. "So eager, Kit. Let's work on water walking next."

Nodding, Naruto stood and walked over to stand at the edge of the river. "So, how does this work?"

"Channel chakra to the bottoms of your feet. This time, you'll need to pay attention to both the flow of the water and the flow of your chakra. Match the two rhythms and let your chakra flow with the water. Start with one foot then move onto both."

Doing as instructed, Naruto placed a foot onto the surface of the water and tried to match his chakra to the flowing and ebbing of the river.

It took a while, but once he was confident he wouldn't sink, he placed both feet onto the water.

Letting his mind match his chakra flow with the flow of the river, Naruto stood still for several minutes.
Eventually, he took a step and, when he didn't sink, took a few more. Soon enough, he was running on the surface of the water, leaping over boulders and laughing in joy.

Kurama smiled watching his Kit with an overwhelming fondness he didn't know possible.

He had known that Naruto was a quick study, knew that he had the talent and drive to be great.

But even Kurama had underestimated Naruto's ability.

Having a front row seat to watch as his Kit succeeded time and again filled him with pride.

Naruto would go far and Kurama would be with him every step of the way.

"What's next, Kurama?"

Naruto lay back on the grass beneath the oak, relaxing and watching the clouds float by.

His hair was sticking up in spots and his clothes were damp from river water.

It was late afternoon and Naruto felt more alive than ever even though his body was exhausted. His mind was alive, and he felt a thrill run through him at the idea of more training.

Naruto had never really been told he was good at anything before. His teachers in the academy tried to put him down whenever possible.

So, to hear someone, especially a millennia old being of chakra, praise him for doing well, made him want to try a thousand times harder.

But Kurama said to take it slow at first, get his body used to the training before they upped the difficulty. And Kurama knows best, so that's what he'll do.

"Alright, Kit. I want you to position yourself as you would if you were meditating." When Naruto was in position, Kurama continued. "We're going to work on finding the affinity of your chakra. Focus and see if you can find your core."

Naruto closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Thinking for a moment, he looked for the flowing of chakra through the vessels in his hand and followed it inward.

When he reached his abdomen, where he found the core of his chakra, Naruto waited for further instruction.

"Good. Now, tell me, what does your chakra feel like? What does it remind you of?"

Immersing his consciousness in the flow of his chakra, Naruto sat and let himself feel. "It reminds me of a hurricane. The outer edges are sharp and constantly moving, I feel like it could tear me to pieces if I let it. And the center is calm, like a meandering river or lazy waves upon a beach. Unassuming at first glance, but deadly once the storm hits."

Kurama nodded. "As I thought, you have wind as a primary affinity and water as a secondary affinity, though it's almost as strong as your wind. Makes sense seeing as your father had wind for a primary affinity and your mother, water. And both your primary and secondary are strong, too."

"Hm. Is it uncommon to have two affinities?"

"At your age? Yes, it's very uncommon. Most ninja don't start working on using elemental chakra till
Naruto tilted his head to the left. "What does that mean, exactly?"

"It means, Kit, that if we start you on elemental manipulation now, by the time you make genin, you'll be leagues ahead of the competition. I'm hoping you get manipulating your chakra down to an instinctive action by then. That way, you won't need hand signs or to call out the name of a jutsu. So, you'll be able to use the element of surprise against your opponents."

"That sounds awesome, Kurama!"

Kurama chuckled. "Alright. We'll work on elemental manipulation later today. Head home, it's time for lunch."

"Right!"

On his way back to his training grounds, Naruto took a shortcut through the park.

The sun was shining through the leaves, casting shadows upon the ground. Bird song floated upon the wind. Excited shouts of joy could be heard in the distance from where the playground was located. Farther in through the trees, Naruto walked, alone but for his constant companion.

A short bark of high pitched, cruel laughter disturbed the peaceful atmosphere of the forest, followed by a quiet cry of 'Stop!'.

Naruto, not one to turn away from someone in trouble, hurried forward.

After a few seconds of running, he came upon a clearing. In the center were three girls, who Naruto barely recognized from the academy, surrounding a figure curled up on the ground with bright, pink hair.

The girl in the middle of the three, who looked to be the leader of the small group, taunted the figure on the ground. "Why would anyone want to be friends with you? You're just a shy loser with a too big forehead! Hmph!"

When Naruto saw one of the girls aim a kick at the figure, he jumped in the way and took the hit to his shin.

Looking over the girls in front of him disapprovingly, he spoke. "What do you think you're doing? Making fun of a person for something they can't help is horrible behavior! How would you like it if someone did the same to you?"

The girl in the middle exchanged looks with her accomplices and spoke. "Whatever. You're a loser just like she is. No one cares what you think. Come on girls, let's go."

After the three left the clearing, Naruto turned to the girl who was still curled in on herself on the ground.

Recognizing her as Haruno Sakura from his class, he spoke. "Hey, Sakura. It's alright they're gone."

Sakura looked up and her bright green eyes, full of tears, locked with Naruto's blue. "Naruto?"

Naruto nodded. "Yeah, it's me. Are you alright? Did they hurt you anywhere?"
Sakura slowly shook her head. "Just some scrapes from when they pushed me to the ground."

"Can I see? I have a medical kit with me." Getting a nod in response, Naruto pulled his med kit out of his bag and looked over the small scrapes on Sakura's hands. Using an antiseptic on the scratches, Naruto then covered them with a few bandages. "Alright. That should do it."

Standing, he helped Sakura to her feet.

Sakura spoke, "Thank you, Naruto, for helping me. Most people just ignore the bullying when it happens."

Naruto gave Sakura a small smile. "It's no problem. I know what it's like to be hurt for something you can't control." Thinking for a moment, Naruto continued, "Say, Sakura, want to be friends?"

Sakura blinked then asked shyly, "Are you sure you want to be friends with me?"

Naruto nodded. "Of course! So, what do you say?"

Sakura beamed at Naruto. "Yes, let's be friends."

"Great! Hey, would you want to meet up tomorrow at, say, the library? I was going to go see if there's anything I want to specialize in. Maybe we could look together? We could even train together, if you want?"

Sakura nodded. "That sounds like fun. I've been wanting to train more but no one really takes me seriously. But are you sure? I don't want to slow you down."

It was Naruto's turn to beam. "Don't worry about that, we'll have you caught up in no time. All it will take is hard work and dedication. You ok with that?"

"Of course!" Sakura replied.

Naruto smiled. "Good. Well, I have to go. I'll see you at the library entrance at, say, eight am?"

"See you then, Naruto!"

Waving goodbye, Naruto continued on his way to his training ground.

Naruto sat with his back against the oak tree in his clearing and wallowed in the feeling of finding a new friend.

Kurama interrupted his thoughts before he could start musing. "I'm glad you made a friend, Kit. But now is time for training."

Naruto blinked. "Right. Sorry Kurama. What now?"

"It's quite alright. Now, for elemental manipulation, we'll start with wind. Grab a leaf, place it between the palms of both hands, and try to cut it in half with wind chakra. Remember this, keep your chakra steady and sharp."

Naruto did as instructed and took a leaf from the oak. Concentrating his chakra, he released it from his hands and managed to cut the leaf part of the way through.

"Like I said earlier, you're a natural, Kit. Keep going. You want to cut it all the way through in one try. Concentrate on shaping your chakra into a sharp edge, like a blade. You want to release a thin
"and stable pulse. If it's too erratic, the chakra won't cut all the way through the leaf."

Nodding, Naruto continued.

He focused his chakra into his hands and pictured shaping it like the sharp edge of his tanto. Steady and sharp.

Releasing the pulse of chakra, Naruto was surprised when he opened his hands and revealed the leaf cut in half.

"I did it, Kurama!"

"Good job. Now, I want you to grab some more leaves and keep practicing till you can cut it in half every time."

"Right!"

As the late afternoon turned into evening, Naruto's exhausted form could be seen laying on the grass, surrounded by hundreds of split leaves. He was panting from exertion, sweat rolling down his face.

Staring up at the clouds above the treetops, Naruto gave a small, tired smile. "Hey, Kurama?"

"Yes, Kit?"

"Thanks for agreeing to let Sakura train with me. I know it might take a while to get her up to speed, but I'm really excited to have a training partner. Although, I do wonder if I should tell her about you just yet. What do you think?"

Kurama tilted his head. "You can tell her whenever you want to. Though, personally, I would wait until you know you can trust her completely. Are you worried about how she'll react?"

Naruto sighed. "Yeah. It's not that I'm ashamed of being your jinchuuriki, it's just, so many people already scorn me, and I don't want to lose my new friend over something I can't control."

"Don't worry. No matter her reaction I'll be here, always."

Smiling, Naruto responded, "I know. I'll always be here for you, Kurama. No matter what. After all, that's what friends are for, yeah?"

Chuckling, Kurama spoke. "You're one of a kind, Kit. Alright, give me ten laps around the clearing and then I'll walk you through some stretches. After that, head home. You need to be well rested for your morning workout before you meet your Haruno at the library. What are you waiting for? Get started!"

"Here I go!"

That night, as Naruto was making dinner, a thought occurred to him. "Hey, Kurama? Do you think the library would have anything on Uzumaki fuinjutsu? Or would I have to ask Hokage-Jiji?"

"I would say start with the library and see what you can find. Even if what's available isn't Uzumaki in origin, you should still be able to get the basics down from what they have. Then you can go to your Sarutobi and see if they recovered anything from the ruins of Uzushio or if Kushina left anything behind. Maybe, someday, you can go to Uzu yourself. After all, since you have the blood of the Uzumaki flowing through your veins, you should be able to find much more than what someone
not of the bloodline would."

Naruto nodded. "Alright. Are you going to teach me to use my tanto or should I find an instructor?"

Kurama thought for a moment then replied, "I can teach you the basics from what I remember from Kushina. Otherwise, I would suggest finding an instructor."

"Ok. I'll ask Jiji if he can recommend anyone to teach me."

The next morning, Naruto woke before the sun had risen and, after eating breakfast, left his apartment for his clearing.

When he arrived, Kurama had Naruto do one hundred and fifty push-ups, one hundred and fifty sit-ups while standing upside down on a tree branch, and fifty laps around the clearing.

During his workout, the sun crested the horizon and brought a golden outline to the trees in the forest.

By the time he was finished running, the humidity had returned, and Naruto was soaked in sweat.

Collapsing under the shade of the oak, Naruto, on Kurama's orders, started going through the stretches his bijuu had shown him the night before.

When he was finished, Kurama had him jog to the Hokage's office to see about getting someone to teach him how to use his tanto.

Ignoring the glares from the villagers as best as he could, Naruto quickened his pace.

It was still hard, having to deal with the hatred from the civilians and some ninja, but Naruto had Kurama now. And that meant he wasn't alone anymore.

So, he kept his head high and continued on his way to the tower in the distance.

Finally reaching his Jiji's office, Naruto knocked loudly and opened the door. "Hey, Jiji!"

The Hokage just chuckled and welcomed Naruto to his office. "Hello, Naruto. How can I help you today?"

Naruto tried to conceal his excitement and put on his most serious face. "You see, for a while now I've been wanting to learn how to use tanto and I finally saved up enough and went to buy a pair yesterday. But then I realized that I had no one to teach me how to use them. So, I was hoping that maybe you could recommend a teacher. Please?"

The Hokage took a puff of his pipe and thought for a moment. "Naruto, I'm glad you're taking an interest in something besides pranks. Though, learning to use your tanto will take a lot of commitment and hard work. Are you sure you're up to the task?"

Naruto nodded. "Of course, Jiji."

Sarutobi tapped the end of his pipe on his ash tray. "Alright. Let me think for a while about who would be the best teacher for you. Why don't you come back this evening and I'll have your new instructor waiting for you."

Naruto blinked. "You don't need to do all that, Jiji. You could just give me some names and I'll go
ask them myself."

The Hokage shook his head. "No, Naruto. If you're going to do this, I want you to be trained by the best. And the people I have in mind, you wouldn't be able to get to teach you very easily on your own."

"Oh. Thanks so much, Jiji! I've got to go, but I'll see you this evening."

Naruto left the Hokage's office at a run, having glanced at the clock and saw that it was only fifteen minutes till eight.

Reaching the front of the library with seconds to spare, Naruto called out a greeting to Sakura who was waiting on the front steps. "Hey, Sakura. Sorry I'm almost late. How are you?"

Sakura smiled in greeting. "I'm good, Naruto. How are you?"

Naruto smiled in return. "Great! So, let's head in, shall we?"

Leading Sakura through the large double doors, Naruto eventually found a secluded table in the back where they could read without being interrupted.

When they both had sat down, Naruto whispered, "Are there any specialties that interest you? If you don't know, ask yourself what you are good at? Think what you could use those talents for and then find what interests you. If you need any help, just ask."

Sakura nodded. "What are you going to specialize in?"

Naruto tilted his head. "I'm getting an instructor to show me how to use a pair of tanto. But I'm really interested in fuinjutsu. Today I'm planning on looking for the basics on sealing."

Sakura blinked. "Wow, Naruto. Ok, so um, maybe you could help me pick out some things to look into? I've been told that I'm good at chakra control and that I'm book smart. I don't know what else."

Naruto nodded.

He asked his bijuu, "What do you think would be a good specialization for her?"

Kurama took a moment to respond. "I would say iryōjutsu, medical ninjutsu. It requires perfect chakra control to advance in the field and quite a bit of studying."

Naruto spoke at a whisper to Sakura, "Look into iryōjutsu. It requires great chakra control and lots of studying."

Sakura responded, "Alright."

The two then stood from their seats and went over to the aisles that held the books on their interests. For the next few hours, Naruto and Sakura spent the time reading in silence. They would only move to open a new book and take notes.

Around eleven am, Naruto was interrupted in his reading by Sakura who seemed terribly excited about something.

Curious, he asked, "What's up?"
Sakura looked up from her book and gave a quiet squeal of delight. "Naruto, I was just reading about a woman named Senju Tsunade. She's renowned as the greatest medical-nin in the world. She's also a frontline fighter who can make fissures in the ground with just her fists and she's one of the three legendary Sannin. She sounds so amazing! I want to be just like her!"

Naruto chuckled. "I think, instead of being just like her, you should aim to surpass her. After all, aren't we supposed to surpass the generation before us?"

Sakura blinked. "You're right. You're completely right! I'll surpass her no matter what it takes!"

Nodding, Naruto responded, "And I'll be by your side, every step of the way."

Sakura smiled. "We'll climb to the top together and we'll stay together. No matter what."

"No matter what."

An hour later, Naruto called a stop to the reading. "Hey, Sakura. Want to come to my place for lunch?"

Sakura considered the offer for a moment before nodding. "Sure. And then we can go train, right?"

Chuckling, Naruto responded, "Of course!"

The two nine-year-olds made their way to Naruto's apartment.

When they arrived, Naruto immediately started on making lunch for two while Sakura sat in one of the chairs at the kitchen table.

After they finished eating, Sakura spoke. "Hey, Naruto. Can I ask you something?" Getting a nod in response, she continued. "Yesterday, you told me you know what it's like to be hurt for something you can't control. What did you mean by that? Does it have to do with why all the villagers glared at you on our way here?"

Naruto sighed. "Yeah. It's, listen, Sakura, if I'm going to tell you why, I need to know that I can trust you, completely."

Sakura looked affronted. "Of course, you can! We promised we'd stick together, no matter what. I know we only really met yesterday but, Naruto, you're my one of my only friends and I plan on keeping you by my side. Nothing you say will scare me off. I promise."

Kurama chuckled in his cage. "Well, Kit. Looks like you've found yourself a real firecracker for a friend."

Naruto blinked. "Alright then. What do you know about the Kyuubi?"

Sakura narrowed her eyes. "It was defeated by the Yondaime Hokage after attacking Konoha nine years ago."

Naruto rubbed the back of his head. "That's true enough, I guess. But what they don't tell you is that, because the Kyuubi is a mass of chakra and can't be killed, the Yondaime sealed him into a newborn baby. That baby was me."

Sakura stood from where she was sitting and waved a fist around. "That's why the villagers glare at you? Because they can't see the difference between a kunai and a sealing scroll? How stupid! Why, if I could just get my hands on those idiots! How dare they treat you like that for something you can't"
control! How dare they!"

Naruto couldn't help himself, he doubled over laughing.

When Sakura heard the slightly hysterical pitch to Naruto's laughter, her eyes softened. She watched as her new friend laughed for minutes on end and resolved herself to always be there for him.

Eventually, Naruto calmed down and spoke. "Thank you, Sakura. Just those words mean a lot to me. That's not all I have to tell you though. You see, Kurama, that's the Kyuubi's name, and I are friends now. He's the one who's going to help us train and gave me the idea for you to study iryojutsu. He's great once you get to know him."

Sakura nodded in understanding. "Naruto, it's fine with me if you're friends with Kurama. I won't condemn you for it. If you trust him enough to claim him as your friend and to help us train, that's good enough for me."

Naruto looked up at Sakura with wide eyes. "Really?"

"Really."

After that conversation, Naruto led Sakura to his clearing. On the way there, when the villagers glared at Naruto, Sakura glared back, and Naruto had to keep himself from laughing at the faces some of the civilians made.

Reaching the training ground, Naruto stopped under the oak when Kurama said he wanted to try something.

After asking Sakura to stand back and he told his bijuu he was ready, Naruto stood still as blood orange chakra seeped out of his skin and took the shape of a fox about the size of a pony a few feet in front of him.

Naruto gasped in happiness when the shade of Kurama fully coalesced in front of his eyes.

Kurama spoke. "This way I can help you both train."

Sakura blinked out of her shock and gave Kurama a bright smile.

"Alright," Kurama said. "I want the two of you to do as many push-ups as you can. Make sure you keep count. Ready, go!"

Sakura and Naruto dropped to the ground and did as instructed.

By the time they were finished, sweat poured off their bodies and both lay panting on the grass.

Kurama spoke up, "Naruto, how many?"

Naruto answered, "162."

"Good job, Kit. Sakura, how many?"

Sakura sighed and spoke, "105."

Kurama nodded. "Impressive. You're truly not all that far behind Naruto. Ok you two, give me twenty laps around the clearing."
Groans could be heard from the two children as they stood and started running.
I've come to the realization that I have no life. All I've been doing is writing this story the last week or so. Oh well.

Anyway, here's chapter 4. Some of the characters may seem OOC and I hope I explained the reasons why well enough. If not, feel free to give constructive criticism.

Enjoy!

Sakura was weary. She was sweating, and everything hurt. She had never felt so very alive in her life.

After the run from Hell, Kurama had had Naruto show her how to do the tree climbing exercise. And though she didn't have nearly as much chakra as Naruto, she had always prided herself on her chakra control. So, it had come as no surprise to any of them when she made it up the tree on her first try.

And then Kurama spoke. "Good job, Sakura. Now, I want you to walk up and down the tree as many times as you can. It will help build your reserves."

As she kept walking, she watched as Kurama pushed Naruto into exercises for muscles she didn't even know existed. Well, she told herself, she would just have to work harder at her iryojutsu studies.

Next came water walking. Sakura followed Naruto's advice and started with one foot upon the surface of the river. Matching her chakra's rhythm to that of the water was harder than she thought it would be.

She was exhausted, and she wasn't sure how much chakra she had left. But she wouldn't give up.

After all, Naruto stood a few feet in front of her on the river, giving tips and cheering her on, telling her she could do this, ready to catch her on the off chance she fell in.

She wouldn't betray that faith he had in her.

So, she kept going.

And she finally got it.

Racing Naruto over the surface of the river, bounding over boulders, was exhilarating. Their laughter rang across the clearing, full of joy.

Though she was disappointed when Kurama called a stop to their fun, she was just as excited for what was to come next.

Naruto had told her they would be finding her chakra affinity. He had said he had two, wind and water.
So, yes, Sakura was excited. She wanted to be someone Naruto could rely on. Someone who wouldn't fall to the wayside while she watched her friend advance.

She told Kurama as much while Naruto was off doing pull-ups in the trees.

And Kurama's response?

He said, "Don't you worry about that. You have the inner strength and chakra talent to go far. And you have Naruto with you. Naruto protects the few precious people he has with all the fierceness of a mother bear.

However, he also knows that the best way to protect your precious people is to make sure they can protect themselves when he can't be by their side. So, he'll push you to your limits and beyond, motivate you to keep trying no matter what.

Once he claims you as his, you're stuck with him. He won't ever leave you behind.

All you have to do is work your hardest and never stop. Can you do that?"

Sakura nodded. "Hai!"

Kurama smiled. "Good. Now let's find your affinity, shall we? Have you ever meditated before?"

She had, many times. When her mind was overcome with insecurities or her thoughts bunched together, and she couldn't think. But instead of saying all that, she just replied with a quiet, "Hai."

And Kurama, bless him, didn't push for a deeper answer. He just spoke, "Alright. I want you to position yourself like you would if you were meditating." When she was ready, he continued, "Now, I want you to reach deep within yourself and find the core of your chakra. When you find it, tell me how it feels to you."

So, Sakura did. She reached deep inside, down in her abdomen where she knew her core was from previous meditation.

She had never thought to think about how it felt before. Only ever having passed by it on a scan of her body.

Now, she felt it. And she explained to Kurama, "It's steady, like bedrock. I feel like I could rest the weight of the world upon it and it wouldn't break. I wouldn't break. It has an underlying power, hidden away until enough friction and pressure are applied. And then it explodes, turns deadly at a moment's notice. Does that make sense?"

When she opened her eyes, Kurama was giving her a toothy grin. "It makes perfect sense. It would seem your affinity is earth. And it's strong, too. As strong as Naruto's wind, and that's saying something.

Listen, Sakura, earth is the foundation that everything is built upon. It allows the other elements to rest upon it, to be supported when they might otherwise fall. If you can harness that power to its fullest extent, you will be the rock Naruto and your precious people can rely on, always."

Sakura nodded, a little bit in shock at what Kurama was saying. She could be there for Naruto, help to shoulder his burdens. Because she wouldn't break. Not even if the world was depending on her. She was steady, and strong, and she wouldn't shatter. She wouldn't.
Kurama watched as Naruto and Sakura meditated.

It was nearing the end of their training session for the day. Naruto had to meet his Sarutobi at the Hokage tower soon.

Minutes ago, the blonde was vibrating with excitement, pondering with Sakura over who he might get to teach him kenjutsu.

Now, the two were silent and still, the only sound their rhythmic breathing.

Kurama was proud of his brat and the pink-haired girl. They would be great when he was through with them.

Now, all they needed was their missing third and they would be set.

Though, finding someone who could round out the team and keep up with his two little spitfires would be difficult, it wasn't impossible.

All Kurama had to do was wait.

Minutes ago, Naruto had dropped Sakura off at her front door and was now knocking on his Hokage-Jiji's door.

Hearing the shout that bid him entrance, Naruto opened the door and walked through, bouncing on the soles of his feet.

Smiling wide, he exclaimed, "Jiji!"

The aged Hokage chuckled, able to see just how excited Naruto was. "Hello, Naruto. Thank you for coming." Gesturing to the man standing in front of his desk, he continued, "This man is Hatake Kakashi. He will be teaching you kenjutsu. He has also agreed to help you with taijutsu as your academy reports state that you could use some help in that area."

The Hokage turned to Hatake and spoke. "Kakashi, this is Uzumaki Naruto, the one I was telling you about."

Naruto looked the man over. He was tall, with silver hair and was wearing the standard jonin uniform. A mask covered the bottom half of his face up to the tip of his nose and his hitai-ate was slanted over his left eye.

The man greeted Naruto. "Yo."

Naruto blinked and returned the greeting.

A thought hit him suddenly. He asked the shinobi, "Hatake-san, would you mind if I brought a friend of mine to our practices? We just started training together and we promised each other that we would work together to reach the top. It just doesn't feel right for me to be practicing my taijutsu with you, without her there."

Kakashi shared a look with the Hokage, then spoke. "Sure, Naruto. That would be fine. Also, call me Kakashi-sensei. Hatake-san is too formal for my tastes."

Naruto nodded. "Alright. Thanks, Kakashi-sensei. When do we start?"

Kakashi tilted his head. "Let's see, what do you have planned for tomorrow?"
Thinking for a moment, Naruto responded, "Well, I'll wake up around 5:00 a.m., eat breakfast, pick up Sakura, then head to our training ground for our morning workout.

After that, we have academy from 9:00 to 3:00. We were just going to train after class let out for the day."

Kakashi scratched his nose. "How about I meet you two outside the academy at, say, 3:10? Then you can show me your training ground and we'll work until you drop. Sound good?"

Naruto nodded. "Yeah! If that's all, I need to head over to Sakura's house to let her know the change in plans."

When Kakashi nodded, Naruto left the room with a shout of 'bye, Jiji, Kakashi-sensei!' and hurried on his way.

Knocking on Sakura's front door, Naruto was nervous. What if Sakura's parents were like the rest of the villagers and didn't like him? Hopefully they were like Sakura, kind and accepting. But who knew?

When the door opened, Naruto snapped out of his thoughts when he heard Sakura's voice.

"Naruto? Is everything ok?"

He blinked and let his excitement for tomorrow fade back into his mind. "Yeah, Sakura. Sorry for coming over so late but there was something I needed to tell you right away."

Sakura tilted her head. "Well, come on in. Mom and I just started making dinner, so we'll have to wait a bit to talk, if that's ok?"

Naruto nodded. "Yeah, that's fine."

Following Sakura through the entryway into her kitchen, Naruto was surprised when her mom greeted him warmly, even though her eyes lit up in recognition.

Sakura spoke. "Mom, this is Uzumaki Naruto, he's the one I'm going to be training with from now on."

Sakura's mom greeted him, "Hello, Naruto-kun. My name is Haruno Mebuki. Call me Mebuki. Thank you for letting my Sakura train with you. Would you like to stay for dinner?"

Naruto beamed. "I would love to, Mebuki-san. Thank you. Would you like some help?"

Mebuki smiled. "If you would like to help, so be it. Can you chop the vegetables for me?"

Nodding, Naruto did as asked.

The three then spent the next half an hour bantering and laughing as they cooked.

When Mebuki shooed the children out of the kitchen to set up for dinner, Naruto finally got his chance to speak with Sakura about their training. "Sakura, remember how I told you I was going to get an instructor for kenjutsu?"

Sakura nodded.

Naruto continued, "Well, he also wants to help me with taijutsu and when I asked if he would allow
you to train with us, he agreed."

Sakura looked at Naruto with excitement. "Really?"

Naruto nodded. "Really. He's going to meet us outside the academy at 3:10 tomorrow after class."

Sakura squealed in delight. "What's his name? Is he strong?"

Naruto laughed. "His name is Hatake Kakashi and he was wearing a jonin vest, so he must be strong. Plus, Hokage-Jiji said he would find me the best instructor he could."

Sakura bounced in place. "I can't wait!"

When Naruto woke that morning, he immediately jumped into getting ready for the day. After eating a hearty breakfast, he raced out the door to pick up Sakura.

When he got to her house, she was already waiting outside for him, dressed in one of the new outfits they had picked up yesterday on the way home. It consisted of a red, zip up top, a short black apron skirt with black shorts underneath, black gloves, and low-heeled, knee-high boots.

Naruto smiled in greeting and they both took off at a light jog to their clearing. When they arrived, Kurama's shade materialized. He set them to doing push-ups and sit-ups, pull-ups and sprints from one end of the clearing to another.

He had them play tag in the trees, taking turns being it. Made them walk the length of the river on their hands over and over again.

Kurama had Naruto work on soaking a leaf with water chakra while Sakura worked to make her leaf crumble.

By the time they had to leave for academy, Naruto and Sakura were exhausted but happy with their progress. They had both gotten half way through their elemental exercises.

Naruto had soaked half his leaf and Sakura had made half of her's crumble.

Excited for the day ahead, the two pre-genin made their way to class.

Uchiha Sasuke wasn't one to pay attention to his classmates. But today, two in particular caught his eye.

Uzumaki Naruto was the dead last. He was loud and obnoxious, typically wearing a kill-me-orange jumpsuit. He was always late and got scolded for it.

Haruno Sakura was smart but shy. Unremarkable in everything but academics. She had no friends and was bullied constantly.

The two never spoke to each other, much less interact on a daily basis. So, to see them both, on time, dressed in practical clothing, and talking like old friends was a shock.

While the rest of his classmates burst into frantic whispers, Sasuke continued watching the pair.

When the two took a seat in the second row to the back, right in front of him, Sasuke noticed how the way they held themselves had changed.
There was a confidence like steel lining every inch of their bodies. Their heads held high and proud, they sat tall.

Sasuke wondered how they could have changed so much in just two days.

Sasuke shook off his thoughts when the teacher called for class to begin. He had plenty of time to think later.

When class ended that day, Naruto and Sakura were two of the first out of the building, unaware of the dark eyes following their exit.

They waited for their new Sensei at the old, yellow swing by the academy entrance. Both were buzzing with excitement and could barely stand still.

At 3:10 on the dot, Kakashi appeared in front of them. "Yo."

Naruto and Sakura blinked in unison.

Naruto spoke, "Kakashi-sensei, this is Haruno Sakura. Sakura, this is Hatake Kakashi. Now that everyone is introduced, let's get to training!"

Sakura grabbed Naruto's collar to keep him from running off.

Kakashi chuckled. "Alright, Naruto, Sakura. Show me this training ground of yours and we can get to work."

Nodding, the two nine-year-olds led Kakashi to their clearing, chatting all the way.

As Kakashi looked over the clearing he was led to, he whistled in appreciation. It was a beautiful spot, peaceful in its existence.

One side was pressed up against a wall of rock, with a waterfall creating a decent sized river scattered with boulders.

Trees surrounded the clearing on the other three sides and lush grass covered the ground.

If one were to lay on their back, they would have a direct view of the sky, clouds and all.

He asked his two charges, "How did you find this place?"

Naruto answered, "I stumbled across it one day when I was exploring. It's great, isn't it?"

Kakashi nodded. "That it is. Alright we'll start with taijutsu. Take a basic stance."

Kakashi spent the next few hours correcting stances and teaching basic moves.

When he called a stop to practice, he was thoroughly impressed with his students' abilities.

If this was what they could do with a proper Sensei, he couldn't wait to see how far they would advance.

After taijutsu came kenjutsu practice. Naruto, despite being exhausted, was excited. Finally, he could learn how to use his tanto.
For this part, Sakura continued practicing her taijutsu katas under the watchful eye of Kakashi-sensei’s shadow clone.

Naruto blinked when he saw another Kakashi pop into view. "Kakashi-sensei, what kind of clone is that? It seems different."

Kakashi nodded. "That it is, my little minion. It's called a shadow clone. It's solid and basically a complete copy of myself. It requires quite a bit of chakra, too."

Naruto nodded. "Say, Sensei, could you teach me that jutsu? I can't perform the basic clone jutsu and I read somewhere that it's because I have too much chakra and not enough control."

Kakashi tilted his head. "Hm. I would have to get permission from Hokage-sama first because it's considered a kinjutsu. Though, I don't see why he would deny the request.

Though, there's something you need to know about shadow clones before I even consider getting permission. When you dispel a shadow clone, all of its memory, and that includes muscle memory, transfers to you. So, you can use it to learn more things at a time and for things like scouting.

I need you to promise me that you won't let this jutsu become a crutch. You can use it to study multiple things at a time and for chakra control exercises, but if you're going to use it to practice new techniques, make sure you don't cut any corners.

For example, say, you have a jutsu that you're supposed to do one handed, but you use a clone to help form it because you want to spend less time training. That's cutting corners.

Learn your jutsu properly or it won't be as strong as it should be. Cutting corners could give you fatal weakness for the enemy to exploit.

Can you promise me you won't let shadow clones become a crutch instead of the tool they are?"

Naruto nodded with a determined face. "Hai, Sensei!"

Kakashi eye smiled. "Good. I'll ask Hokage-sama permission today after training is over. Now, let's start on kenjutsu. Grab your tanto and I'll start you on basic katas."

The next morning Naruto rolled out of bed and promptly fell flat on his face.

"Ow. Ow. Ow. Ow. That hurt! Everything hurts!"

Hearing Kurama's roaring laughter in the back of his head didn't help his pain. At all.

Kurama spoke, "*See, Kit. This is why we stretch after training. But, you didn't. You were too eager to get home for dinner last night. This pain is all on you.*"

Sighing, Naruto gingerly wrenched his body off the floor and got started on his day.

When he showed up at Sakura's house to pick her up for morning training, the pain was already gone.

'Ah,' Naruto thought. 'The perks of being a Jinchuuriki.'

Morning training that day was efficient and rewarding.
By the time they had to leave for academy, both Naruto and Sakura had finished the first stage of their respective elemental training.

They were both happy with the rate at which they were progressing.

When Iruka-sensei announced that they would be practicing their taijutsu that day, Sasuke was admittedly surprised when both the Uzumaki and the Haruno seemed excited and still entirely confident.

Neither Naruto nor Sakura had ever been the best with hand-to-hand, so he wondered if their skill level was another thing that had changed about them.

Minutes later, he got his answer.

Sakura, who was usually about average in taijutsu, managed to just barely beat Hyūga Hinata, the strongest female in the class.

And instead of bragging about her win, Sakura just smiled and went to stand next to Naruto.

So, the confidence was justified, then.

Interesting.

Then, it was his turn to spar against Naruto. He would get a chance to test out the dobe's new skills himself.

'Maybe he'll present an actual challenge,' he mused.

Taking his stance across from Naruto who was doing the same, Sasuke waited for his opponent to make the first move.

Surprisingly, Naruto just stood still, analyzing the situation instead of rushing in unprepared like usual.

He gave him points for that.

Eventually, Sasuke got tired of waiting and made the first move.

Fighting this new Naruto was exhilarating.

Naruto dodged and moved with a grace he didn't possess just the week before. All sharp edges and smooth, steady movements. Sasuke had to dodge more often than not as the hits carried a new weight to them.

The only thing that didn't change was Naruto's tendency to bounce back from a hit that would leave anyone else on the ground.

With his new fighting prowess and never-say-die attitude, Naruto was a force to be reckoned with.

Sasuke had to give his all to beat the blonde, but he came out on top, though just barely.

With a new outlook on the class's resident dobe, Sasuke walked away from their spar feeling gratified for the challenge and resolved to find out just how Haruno and Uzumaki changed so much.

When class let out that day, Naruto was excited to find their Sensei already waiting for them.
“Kakashi-sensei!” Naruto called out in greeting.

Kakashi looked up from his ever present, orange book and waved to his two energetic charges. "Yo. Ready for training?"

The two youngsters nodded enthusiastically. "Hai, Sensei," they spoke in unison.

Kakashi eye smiled. "Good, good. Though, first, it looks like someone wants to speak with you two."

Naruto blinked and turned around at the same time as Sakura.

There standing in front of them was Uchiha Sasuke, trying his best not to look awkward.

Titling his head to the side, Naruto spoke, "Sasuke? Can we help you with something?"

Sasuke hesitated for a moment before visibly pulling up his confidence and speaking. "The last two days I've noticed that the two of you seem more confident. Today, I saw a major increase in your skill levels than what they were just last week. I was hoping that you might give me some tips on how to train since whatever you're doing is definitely helping."

Naruto spoke, "Give us a second, ok?" Getting a nod in response, he and Sakura huddled together to discuss their options.

Coming to a decision, Naruto looked back to Sasuke and spoke. "Would you like to train with us, Sasuke? I'm sure Sensei wouldn't mind. Right, Kakashi-sensei?"

Kakashi nodded. "I wouldn't mind, at all."

Sasuke nodded slowly. "Yeah, ok. Do we start now?"

Naruto grinned and nodded. "Yeah! Come on, let's go."

Sakura chuckled. "Don't run, Naruto. Sasuke doesn't know where our clearing is."

Naruto rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "Whoops, sorry."

Kurama grinned in his cage.

His brats had found their third and, together, the three would be unstoppable.

Upon reaching the clearing, Kakashi spoke. "Alright. Naruto, I got permission from Hokage-sama for me to teach you the shadow clone jutsu."

Naruto nodded in acknowledgment.

Kakashi continued. "Okay, warmups. Give me one hundred each of sit-ups, pull-ups, and squats. Then I want forty laps around the clearing. Ready, go!"

While the kids got to work, Kakashi watched them over the top of his book and got lost in thought.

Most people would be surprised if they heard he had been on time the last few days. Some might even think the world was ending as he's generally hours late for nearly everything.
He admits that he's been stuck in a rut the last few years.

But now, he has children to train and nurture. One of them is even his Sensei's son. There's no way in hell he would slack on training these kids.

And even if one of them wasn't Minato-sensei's son, the amount of talent these three give off in waves demand nothing less than the best. So, that's what Kakashi will give. His best.

He'll turn these three into little monsters and set them loose on the poor, unsuspecting, enemy ninja.

He chuckled just thinking about the carnage they would leave in their wake.

Oh, how the mighty fall and Kakashi's new charges would be the cause.

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After the running was over, all three pre-genin collapsed next to each other on the ground.

Sasuke was the first to speak through his panting. "Okay, how can you call that a warmup?"

Naruto chuckled. "Welcome to Hell, my friend. There's no going back."

Sakura slapped Naruto's arm weakly. "Don't scare him off, Naruto."

The sickly-sweet voice of Kakashi cut into the conversation. "My little minions, is that complaining I hear?"

The three quickly chorused, "No, Sensei."

Kakashi shook his head. "Alright, if you say so. Anyway, I'm going to send a shadow clone with Sasuke and Sakura to help you two with your taijutsu. Naruto, you're with me."

The three quickly split up and went to different areas of the clearing to train with their respective Kakashi.

"Okay, Naruto," Kakashi began. "We'll start with the shadow clone jutsu. Do you remember what I told you about the jutsu yesterday?"

Naruto nodded.

Kakashi then went on to show Naruto the hand signs for the Kage Bunshin no Jutsu, the shadow clone technique. He accurately corrected the mistakes Naruto made when trying the jutsu for the first time.

When Naruto tried again, he made a perfect clone.

Kakashi spoke, "Good job, Naruto. Now, I want you to try a few more times and familiarize yourself with the way you mold your chakra when doing the hand signs. Then, when you think you have it down, try the jutsu without hand signs."

Nodding Naruto did as instructed and performed the Kage Bunshin no jutsu over and over again.

When he thought he had it memorized, he attempted the jutsu without the hand signs.

On his first try, a rough copy of himself was made. Dispelling that clone, Naruto tried again and again and again.
Finally, after about an hour, he got it right.

Naruto pumped his fist in the air. "Yatta! I did it!"

Kakashi nodded. "Yes, that you did. Great job. Let's work on your taijutsu now."

After two hours, Kakashi put a stop to the taijutsu practice and called his students over to him.

"Ok, minions. As you know, Konoha is big on teamwork and you'll be put into four-man-squads when you become genin. There will be three genin and one jonin-sensei per team. Right now, I want to work on getting you three used to working as a team. So, we're going to spar, you three against me.

Here's some advice for you, make a plan that utilizes each of your strengths and where you can cover for each other's weaknesses. You're a well-rounded group so that shouldn't be too hard. I'll give you ten minutes to come up with a plan. Ready? Go!"

The three nine-year-olds grouped together by the waterfall hoping that the roaring would drown out their voices, so their Sensei couldn't hear their plan.

The ten minutes passed by in what seemed to be moments. Ideas were passed around, some considered, others discarded immediately for one reason or another.

When Kakashi called time, the expressions of his students actually gave him pause for a moment.

Naruto and Sakura were both giving him sickly sweet smiles that itched at his sense of self-preservation. And Sasuke, he was smirking like the cat that got the cream.

Altogether, the three made Kakashi's shinobi senses scream 'run, run and never look back'.

His senses were proven right half an hour later when he barely dodged a fireball aimed at his precious Icha Icha.

Sasuke would be the first to admit he was cold and closed off from the world. He had been that way ever since the night his clan was massacred.

He didn't form bonds for, in his opinion, they would just slow him down.

His brother, Itachi, had told him as much, standing, drenched in the blood of their relatives, a lone tear rolling down his face while he told Sasuke to get strong enough to kill him, to avenge their family.

Itachi had tried to hide that tear, to make Sasuke believe he was had killed their clan for power. He wanted Sasuke to hate him and to use that hate to get strong.

But Sasuke had paid more attention to the fact that his normally composed nii-san was crying than to the words he spoke.

Someone who killed for power wouldn't cry over the lives they took.

And when Itachi had put him under a genjutsu, made him watch over and over as their clan members died, all Sasuke could think about was the pain his brother must have felt.

He asked himself, why, why, why? Why would his kind nii-san do such a thing if he was going to
mourn the deaths caused by his hand? Why would he put himself through the agony of losing everyone and making Sasuke hate him? All for power?

He didn't think so.

The Itachi he knew, the loving, kind brother who made him feel safe, would never have done such a thing.

So, he promised himself he would get strong enough to confront Itachi for answers.

Sasuke thought that he should do so on his own. Forming friendships would only hold him back, would only become a weakness he couldn't afford.

But then, Kakashi's Kage Bunshin said something that struck him and made him think.

"A ninja, like every other creature, has things they excel at and things they can't do. You can't always train in everything, so you have to pick and choose. That's what specialties are for.

Teammates are those who build upon each other's strengths, and cover for each other's weaknesses. They make each other stronger.

A lone ninja, on the other hand, has nothing to protect their blind spots, no one to lend a helping hand when times get rough.

Friends and comrades are what keep you going, anchor you against the tide.

If you have nothing and no one when your objective is finished, what's there to live for?

Duty? Honor? Glory?

They all pale in comparison to having those you can trust to always watch your back.

Don't lose yourself in your ambition and forget the world around you. People are here, now, and they're willing to help. You only need to give them a chance."

So, when Kakashi called for a three-against-one spar, Sasuke decided to see if his Sensei was right.

And here, executing a well thought out plan with two comrades at his back, Sasuke had never felt so free, so whole.

He intercepted hits meant for Naruto or Sakura just as they did the same for him and each other.

They complemented each other, he realized. Naruto and Sakura had strength where he had none and vice versa.

Spitting out a goukakyuu at what Naruto had said was Kakashi's precious book, Sasuke felt a strange sort of warmth lodge itself under his ribs when Sakura and Naruto immediately smacked shoulders with him, the three of them standing back to back, searching for any sign of their wayward Sensei.

When Naruto yelled, "Jump!", Sasuke did so without thinking and watched as Kakashi emerged from the ground.

This was a jonin they were fighting and, while Kakashi was not going all out, Sasuke thought that he never would have lasted this long without Naruto and Sakura with him.
The strange warmth stayed with him well after the spar was over and Sasuke caught himself thinking that he didn't want it to go away, didn't want to lose whatever he had gained.

If these two could always make him feel so complete, then Sasuke would do whatever it took to keep them by his side.

Nothing would take them from him. Nothing.

Naruto lay panting on the ground, limbs entangled with Sakura and Sasuke.

The spar has lasted hours, and he barely had any feeling in his limbs. But that was just fine because they had lasted hours in a spar against a jonin.

Kakashi was standing over them, a proud glint in his eye while Kurama's rumbling voice praised his efforts in his head and Naruto had never felt so very happy in his life.

He had friends and, dare he say it, parental figures and Naruto didn't know what to do with all the warmth lodged in his chest.

So, he listened when Kakashi spoke, voice clear with an approving undertone.

"Good job, minions. Now, I'm going to impart a little something to you. My best friend once told me, 'Those who break the rules are trash, but those who abandon their comrades are worse than trash.'

I once made the mistake of putting the mission first and it cost my best friend his life saving our other teammate from enemy shinobi.

It's something that I regret to this day and I never want you three to have to feel the same pain.

You three make an incredible team and you barely know each other. I can't wait to see what you can do once you're each familiar with each other's skill sets and fully trust each other."

Naruto nodded and then a thought struck him. "Hey, Kurama? Should I tell Sasuke and Kakashi-sensei about you? If we're supposed to trust each other, I don't want to hide you from them. Especially since Sakura already knows."

Kurama hummed. "It's a good idea, Kit. If you keep me a secret and then tell them sometime down the road, it could cause a rift in your friendship."

Naruto nodded in agreement.

He spoke, "Kakashi-sensei, Sasuke, I have something I need to tell you."

Naruto heard Sakura's quick intake of breath and felt her grab his hand for support. Nodding to her in thanks, he turned back to face the two males.

Kakashi sat down. "You can tell us anything, Naruto. Teammates support each other, no matter what."

Naruto saw Sasuke nod in agreement.

He took a deep breath then spoke, "The Yondaime sealed the Kyuubi inside me the night I was born. I met him a few days ago in my mindscape and we became friends. He's even helping Sakura and I with our training in the mornings. Oh, and his name is Kurama."
While he was looking down at his hands, Naruto missed the look Sakura was giving Kakashi and Sasuke that said they better not hurt her friend or they would be in a world of pain.

Kakashi put a hand on Naruto's shoulder, causing him to look up into one dark eye. "Naruto, I already knew about you having the Kyuubi-er Kurama sealed inside you. It's never mattered to me. You and he are different beings as far as I'm concerned and if you trust him, well, I trust your judgement."

Sasuke spoke up. "Sensei's right, you know. It doesn't matter that you have an ancient chakra being sealed inside you. I've already resolved myself to having both you and Sakura by my side, a little something like this won't change my mind."

Naruto rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. "Thank you. This means so much to me."

Kakashi nodded. "It's no problem, Naruto."

Kurama chimed in, "I'm happy for you, Kit."

"Thanks, Kurama."

Chapter End Notes

What do you guys think of a Naruto/Sakura/Sasuke pairing?

Let me know in the comments.
"Kit, let me introduce myself to your Hatake and Uchiha."

It was only minutes after Naruto had told Sasuke and Kakashi about Kurama with Sakura's silent support, and the four of them were basking in their newly formed bonds.

Kurama had been silent until then, allowing Naruto to relax in the company of his newfound comrades.

"Alright, Kurama."

Naruto turned to Kakashi and Sasuke and spoke. "Kurama wants to introduce himself to you two."

Sasuke tilted his head. "How would that work?"

Naruto grinned. "Just watch."

Kurama's shade materialized as the size of a panther and curled himself around Naruto's body.

Kakashi looked Kurama over. "So, this is how you help Naruto and Sakura with their training, huh Kurama?"

Kurama gave a toothy grin. "Yup."

Sasuke looked to Naruto and Sakura. "When exactly do you two have time to train with him?"

Naruto answered, "We meet up at Sakura's house about 5:30 every morning then train here until it's time for academy."

Sasuke nodded. "Can I be included in this training?"

Sakura responded, "Of course! You're our friend now, we wouldn't leave you out, right Naruto?"

Naruto nodded. "Right. Kakashi-sensei can come too, if he wants."

The three pre-genin looked to their Sensei.

Kakashi gave an eye smile. "I wouldn't miss it for the world. Now, it's getting late. You three should get home."

Naruto visibly deflated at that.

Sasuke noticed and asked, "What's wrong, Naruto?"

Naruto blinked. "It's just, my apartment is old and rundown. The hot water barely works, and my neighbors aren't fond of me. I know I have Kurama now, but I would rather not go home to such a
depressing place."

Sasuke thought for a moment. "Why don't you stay with me? I have enough room and, since it's only me in the compound, it gets lonely."

Naruto gave a shy smile. "Are you sure that's fine?"

Sasuke nodded. "Of course."

"Alright, Sasuke, now that you've found your core, tell me what it reminds you of?"

Naruto and Sakura were meditating nearby, Kakashi-sensei had joined them moments ago, while Sasuke sat immersed in his chakra network.

He spoke. "It's like a dry thunderstorm caused by a forest fire. Raging infernos combined with bolts of superheated lightning to wreak havoc and decimate everything in their path."

When Sasuke opened his eyes, the bijuu was nodding.

Kurama said, "So, you have lightning for a primary and fire for a secondary affinity. I thought as much. And they're both very strong.

Listen, Sasuke, fire and lightning is a deadly combination. They're both offensive affinities with a lot of power behind them.

Whether you use that power to protect your comrades or destroy your enemies is up to you."

Sasuke tilted his head. "Is there a difference between the two?"

Kurama nodded. "It's the purpose with which you use your strength that makes the difference.

Going into battle with only the thought of defeating your enemies can make you reckless and give you tunnel vision.

Fighting to protect your comrades, on the other hand, gives you a goal, a reason to live another day.

It comes down to which is more important to you, your friends, or testing your strength?"

Sasuke looked Kurama in the eye. "My friends, any day."

The bijuu grinned. "Good."

Kurama looked to those that were meditating and called them over.

When they were seated in front of him, he spoke. "Ok, now that Sasuke has finished tree climbing, water walking, and finding his affinities, it's time for you three to work on elemental manipulation.

Naruto, Sakura, you're going to be working on stage two of your respective elements. Sasuke will start with stage one.

Naruto, you can start with wind or water. Stage two for wind is hovering a leaf above your palm. Stage two for water is creating a ball of water in your hand.

Sakura, stage two for earth is making a rock crumble.

Sasuke, I want you to start with lightning. Stage one is to diffuse your chakra over the leaf and make
it wrinkle. When you're done with that, stage one for fire is to make the leaf burn. What are you waiting for? Get to work!"

The three pre-genin scrambled to start their elemental manipulation practice.

Kakashi chased his students through the trees, masking his chakra so as not to be caught.

He was testing their ability to sense chakra signatures and it seemed that Naruto was a natural sensor-nin.

Kurama had told him that it was an Uzumaki trait, though it wasn't present in every generation. It seemed that Naruto was lucky enough to gain the ability and, according to the bijuu, it was enhanced by being the Kyuubi's Jinchuuriki.

Kakashi thought of that as a plus, as frustrating as it was right then.

Apparently, along with being able to sense chakra signatures, Naruto, thanks to Kurama, could sense emotions.

Which was great, unless you were the one trying to sneak around unseen. Which Kakashi was.

"Found you, Kakashi-sensei! I can sense your frustration from a mile away."

Yes, Kakashi was frustrated. He was also immensely proud of how well Naruto was doing and the fact that Sasuke and Sakura were following the blonde's lead so easily.

It was good practice for building Naruto's leadership skills for the future.

Yes, this team would be a force to be reckoned with.

Because that's what they were, a team. And Kakashi was planning on keeping them together and with him.

He just had to talk the Hokage into it.

Nara Shikamaru, to those that didn't know him, was lazy, unproductive, but extremely smart. People would lament about how he was wasting his genius and Shikamaru would just shake his head and go back to sleep.

To those that did know him, on the other hand, he was kind and fiercely protective of the few friends he had. They knew he required more sleep than the average person, as his mind was always running on overdrive, analyzing everything around him.

And Shikamaru, though he hadn't spoken much to Naruto lately, still considered the blonde to be one of his friends.

He knew that Naruto's prankster persona was just that, a facade.

So, when the blonde came into class one day, dressed practically and talking like old friends with the pink-haired kunoichi-hopeful, he was curious about what could have changed.

The worry set in minutes later when he saw Naruto was actually paying attention in class and grew
by leaps and bounds when the blonde and the Haruno rushed out of the classroom.

The next day was the same, and Shikamaru still didn't get a chance to speak with his friend. Though he did notice that Naruto had gotten much more skilled in taijutsu which set off his curiosity again.

So, when the third day came, and Naruto walked into class with not only the Haruno but also the Uchiha, and all three had their heads together, whispering so no one could hear, Shikamaru resolved to get answers from his friend.

Don't get him wrong, Shikamaru was glad that Naruto seemed happier than ever. But the blonde was his friend, he would do anything for his friends, and he didn't like not knowing what had caused such a huge change in the way Naruto was acting.

Shikamaru had a suspicion that it was something big, something that Naruto needed all the support he could get to deal with it. And not being part of that support didn't sit right with him.

During lunch break, Shikamaru finally got his chance to question the blonde. When he went to find Naruto and his two companions, Shikamaru was surprised to find someone else already there who had the same idea as himself.

Hyūga Hinata was a shy girl, prone to bouts of stuttering, but had one of the kindest hearts you would ever see.

She was mocked by her fellow clan members for being too weak to strike another in a spar and scorned by her father for what he perceived to her weakness.

In reality, what her father thought was wrong. Her kindness was the foundation of her strength. She had been told as much by her inspiration, Uzumaki Naruto, after he saved her from being bullied while she tried to stop some older boys from hurting a kitten.

When she had been scolded for trying to help the animal by her guard, Naruto had heard and said, "There's nothing wrong with being kind or helping a being in need. It shows that you have strength and bravery, standing up to those who would hurt a defenseless creature. Not everyone is willing to that, even if they are able.

The foundation of everyone's strength is different, kindness just happens to be yours. There's no need to change, keep going and never give up."

Hinata took those words to heart and tried her very best. She cut down on her stuttering and trained harder, but no matter what she did, it wasn't good enough for her clan. Especially for her father and the elders.

But she wouldn't give up. She would work harder for her sister and her Neji nii-san's sake and become clan head. She would abolish the practice of using the cage bird seal and find an alternative, one that couldn't be used to cause pain to her people.

Hinata knew it would be hard, nearly impossible even, but that didn't matter. Naruto had said there was no need for her to change, so she wouldn't.

When she first saw Naruto in class, she was surprised by his behavior. And when she approached him about it, he told her, 'sometimes people wear a mask to hide their true self from the world' and left it at that.

She could understand why he would wear a mask, had seen the way the villagers treated him.
So, she was surprised when he came to academy one day without the act. He was showing his true self and making friends and Hinata wasn't there with him, to support him when he needed it like he had for her.

She resolved to confront him, and she finally got her chance at lunch one day.

When she approached Naruto and his companions, Naruto was the first to notice her.

He said, "Hey, Hinata. Can I help you with something?"

Hinata took a deep breath and dragged up her confidence. This was Naruto, she told herself, he wouldn't begrudge her worrying.

She spoke, "Naruto, is everything alright? Did something happen?"

Hinata startled when a voice spoke from behind her.

"That's what I would like to know."

Naruto was surprised when Hinata had come up asking about his wellbeing and doubly shocked when Shikamaru showed up concerned about the same thing.

He had known that people were going to question his new behavior, but never had he suspected anyone would be worried about his change.

And while he had once been close to both Shikamaru and Hinata, they had grown apart recently, so he never would have thought they would still worry about him.

Kurama chuckled. "It seems there's more people who care about you than you thought, Kit."

Naruto smiled. "Yeah, guys. I'm—"

Shikamaru interrupted, "Don't say you're fine or that nothing happened. We know you better than that, Naruto. Tell us the truth."

Hinata nodded in agreement.

Naruto sighed. "Fine, fine. I'll tell you, but it can't be now. Meet us after class is over in front of the academy."

Naruto saw Shikamaru and Hinata nod before they walked off.

Sighing again, he put his head in his hands.

He felt Sakura place a hand on his shoulder. "Naruto," she said. "Why are you worried? They obviously care a lot about you. They won't scorn you because of Kurama. And if they do, well, then they weren't worth having as friends. Besides, you'll always have Sasuke and I, and Kakashi-sensei."

Sasuke spoke up. "She's right, Naruto. We're not going anywhere."

Naruto's smiled at his friends. They were the best.

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Kakashi was contemplating how to get his students the training they wanted.
Naruto wanted to study fuinjutsu, Sakura wanted to master iryōjutsu, and Sasuke wanted to specialize in ninjutsu.

The only fuinjutsu master Kakashi knew of was one of the Sannin. And while Jiraiya may be good, he was nothing compared to Kushina and the Uzumaki Clan. Even Minato couldn't compare to his wife and her clan when it came to the sealing arts.

And hadn't it come as a surprise when Naruto had told him, Sasuke, and Sakura about his heritage earlier that morning. Apparently, it was one of the first things Kurama had told him, who his parents were.

Of course, Kakashi then admitted that he had known who Naruto's parents were, had been the student of his father. He admitted that, no matter how much he wanted to see the boy he considered to be his little brother, he had been ordered not to interact with Naruto. And it had nearly destroyed him to be kept apart from the only person he had left that he considered family.

Kakashi had told his students that, when the Hokage had approached him about training Naruto, he had jumped at the chance, even if he still wouldn't be allowed to tell Naruto about his parents.

But he was never ordered to keep his silence if Naruto already knew he was the son of Kushina and Minato. So, he wouldn't.

He would tell Naruto everything he could and Kakashi would make sure he grew to be everything his parents hoped for and more.

Kakashi would start with getting permission for his little idea to help Naruto become the greatest seal master the world had ever seen.

Sasuke was the one he himself could help with his desired specialty. And because they both possessed lightning for a primary affinity, Kakashi could even teach him his prized chidori.

Yes, Sasuke wouldn't be a problem.

Sakura could go to the hospital to get training in iryōjutsu but that seemed too ordinary a route for someone as driven as her to be the best.

There was one medical-nin Kakashi was contemplating sending her too. The head of the hospital and an old friend of Tsunade of the Sannin, Sasaki Daiki. If anyone could help Sakura surpass her idol, it would be him.

There was just one problem.

Sasaki was notorious for his foul moods and ruthless training methods.

And it wasn't that Kakashi thought Sakura couldn't handle the training.

No, it was that he knew Sakura would take to the training like a fish to water and then she would end up a little monster who could break the village with her pinky finger.

Though, it wouldn't be just Sakura, now that he thought about it. Kakashi knew all three of his students would turn out to be monsters on the battle field. They were already well on their way.

All it would take was a little nudge in certain directions and they would be unstoppable.

Ok, so maybe he didn't actually have a problem with that. The stronger they were, the less chance
they would end up like his team, after all.

With that thought, Kakashi resolved to turn his charges into the most powerful shinobi this world had ever seen.

And if he enjoyed the thought of the chaos his minions would no doubt create, well, no one ever claimed to think he was entirely right in the head.

When class let out for the day, Naruto anxiously waited for Hinata and Shikamaru while Sakura and Sasuke explained the situation to Kakashi-sensei.

When the two finally showed up, Naruto hurriedly led them all to the clearing, silent all the way.

When they arrived, the group formed a circle by sitting on the soft grass. Hinata and Shikamaru looked to Naruto.

Naruto sighed. "Alright. So, long story short, this past weekend a few things happened. I learned that the Kyuubi no Yoko was sealed inside me the day I was born, I managed to befriend him and learned his name is Kurama, Sakura and I became friends, and the two of us started training with Kakashi-sensei."

Shikamaru spoke up, "Where does Sasuke fit into this?"

Naruto answered, "He wanted to know how Sakura and I had gotten so strong and we invited him to train with us."

Shikamaru nodded his understanding.

Naruto asked, "You two are truly ok with this?"

Hinata spoke. "Naruto, we're your friends. We won't leave you over something like this."

Shikamaru added, "She's right. It doesn't matter. And if you trust Kurama, So will we."

A bright smile lit Naruto's face. "Thanks, you two."

Naruto thought for a moment then spoke, "Would you two like to join us for morning practice? After class we do specialized training, but the morning is for general training. Oh, be warned, Kurama usually directs morning training and he's a real slave driver."

Hinata spoke up, "I would love to train with you guys."

Naruto nodded. "What about you, Shikamaru?"

Shikamaru tilted his head. "Sure, why not."

Naruto smiled. "Ok. We meet here at 5:45 every morning then train until it's time for academy."

Shikamaru and Hinata nodded.

Kakashi spoke. "Naruto, why don't you see if Kurama would be willing to start these two now. That way they have a head start for tomorrow morning."

He nodded. "Kurama, did you hear Kakashi-sensei?"
Kurama answered, "Yes, Kit. I'll help your Nara and Hyūga."

Naruto nodded and stepped away from his friends so Kurama's shade had room to coalesce.

The bijuu gave the two newcomers a toothy grin. "Alright, I'm Kurama, the Kyuubi no Yoko. Thanks to Naruto, you two get the pleasure of having me as an instructor."

Hinata and Shikamaru introduced themselves.

Kurama continued, "We'll start with a warmup."

While Kurama was instructing Hinata and Shikamaru, Kakashi led his three minions over to one side of the clearing.

He spoke. "So, before we start, I wanted to speak with you three about your specialties. Sasuke, I'll be helping you with your ninjutsu training. We'll start with lightning and fire and work our way to the other elements.

Sakura, I want you to go to Sasaki Daiki, the head medic at the hospital. If anyone can convince him to train a student, it would be you. You'll want to visit him after morning practice on the weekends.

Lastly, Naruto, I have plans for getting you what you need to study fuinjutsu. I just need permission from the Hokage before I can act on any of them."

His students nodded.

He continued, "Now that that's settled, today we'll be sparring. Naruto, I've taught you the basics of kenjutsu. Use the spar today to help create your own style.

I want all three of you to go all out today. Use every ability you have and discover ones you didn't know about.

Like last time, I'll give you ten minutes. Come up with a plan. Ready? Time starts, now!"

The five pre-genin were collapsed in a heap after their training for the day.

Hinata spoke. "Kurama-san is an incredible teacher. I'm both exhausted from all the training and exhilarated from the progress I made today."

Shikamaru said, "I feel the same way. How troublesome."

Naruto laughed. "That's just how training with Kurama is."

Sakura spoke up, "Did you find your affinities?"

Hinata replied, "Yup. I have earth."

Shikamaru said, "I have fire."

Sakura smiled. "Then I can help you, Hinata, since I also have earth. Sasuke can help Shikamaru with fire."

Sasuke nodded. "Yeah. If you need help, Shikamaru, just ask."
Shikamaru nodded. "That spar was something else. How do you three last that long against a jonin?"

Sasuke answered, "It's our teamwork. We work to cover the holes in each other's fighting styles. Though, admittedly, Kakashi-sensei wasn't going all out. He was using just enough strength to push us to surpass our limits. He could easily crush us as we are now if he went all out."

Hinata spoke up. "Still, that spar was incredible to watch. I hope I'll be able to work that well with my genin team when we graduate."

Naruto thought for a moment then an idea came to him. "Hey, Hinata, Shikamaru? Who do you think you'll end up on a team with?"

Shikamaru was the first to answer. "Ino and Choji. They'll make it another generation of the Ino-Shika-Cho combination."

Hinata thought for a moment. "Maybe Kiba and Shino? It would make sense to put the three of us together to form a tracking squad."

Naruto nodded. "Why don't you two invite those four to train after class so you can build up your teamwork? You can still train with us in the mornings. And maybe on weekends all nine of us can train together in the afternoon."

Hinata and Shikamaru thought the idea over.

Shikamaru answered, "Ok. That sounds like a good idea."

Hinata nodded in agreement.

It had been a month since Hinata and Shikamaru had invited their future teammates to train with them.

Everything was going well.

Ino, Choji, Shino, and Kiba had taken to the practices Shikamaru and Hinata showed them and advanced rapidly.

Sasuke had finished the first stages of his elemental manipulation training and moved onto the second stages. Sakura was almost finished with earth's second stage and Naruto, thanks to his clones, had completed the second stage for wind and was working on water.

On the weekends, after Sakura was finished with the iryojutsu training she had talked the head medic into, the nine pre-genin got together and exchanged training tips, sparred, and just had fun under the watchful eye of Kakashi.

They had all grown close and learned to respect each other's strengths.

Ino and Sakura, who had once been friends but had grown apart, found they had much in common now and pushed each other to train harder.

Hinata wasn't stuttering at all anymore, even when she was nervous, and had gained confidence thanks to her ever-growing skills and the praise from her friends and instructors. Even when she had trouble with her clan, instead of being meek, she was patient, spoke her views, and didn't let anyone push her around.

Naruto had decided it was time to tell the four newcomers about Kurama. With their easy support
and acceptance of him even when most adults and children continued to shun him, they had proven to be great friends.

So, there he was, sitting in the clearing with his friends surrounding him one day after class, about to entrust his secret to four more people.

He took a deep breath and started to speak.

When he was done speaking, Naruto noticed that the four who weren't already in the know seemed surprised but that was it.

And then Kiba spoke, "That's why the villagers go out of their way to be rude to you? How stupid!"

The other three nodded in agreement.

Ino spoke up, "But having an ancient being as a Sensei is really cool. Kurama can probably teach you all kinds of things. Can we come to your morning practice now that we know about him?"

Naruto gave his newest friends a blinding smile. "Of course!"

Kakashi stood in front of the Sandaime, hoping to convince the man to agree to his plan.

He didn't think there would be much trouble, after all, his plan was for Naruto's benefit and the Hokage always had had a soft spot for the blonde Jinchuuriki.

The Sandaime stared him down. "You want me to approve of you taking three nine-year-olds out of Konoha to search through the rubble of an abandoned village in hopes that you'll find something of importance to Naruto's training?"

Kakashi nodded. "Hai, Hokage-sama."

Sarutobi sighed and took a draw on his pipe. "You can see why I'm hesitant to allow this, yes Kakashi? I mean, I can see why you would take Naruto, but the other two?"

Kakashi nodded again. "Hokage-sama, Sasuke, Sakura, and Naruto have become very close. Where one goes, you'll almost always find the others. There's no way I could take Naruto out of the village without them. They wouldn't allow it."

The Hokage contemplated his options.

Before he could speak, there was a hurried knocking on his door. He called out a loud, 'come in'.

A tired looking chunin hurried into the room.

"Hokage-sama," he spoke. "A shinobi just returned from a border crawl with serious injuries. His team encountered a group of missing-nin's while on mission and, after taking out the enemy nin, he was the only one to survive. He did manage to hand over the bodies of his team and the missing-nin's in storage scrolls before he passed out from exhaustion. Sasaki-san doesn't believe he'll survive the night."

The Hokage held out his hand. "The scrolls?"

After receiving the storage scrolls from the chunin, the Sandaime dismissed the man and read over the names of the Konoha shinobi who had died.
He paused at two of the names. "Kakashi, you said that the Sakura girl, Naruto's friend, is Haruno Sakura, Mebuki and Kizashi's daughter?"

Kakashi had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Hai."

Sarutobi sighed. "Would you be willing to break the news to the child that her parents have been killed while on mission?"

Kakashi swallowed. "Hai."

Sasuke was in the kitchen making enough food for three people.

Naruto had moved into one of the old guest rooms after the first week where he stayed over at Sasuke's every night. The two of them and Sakura had worked together to move all of Naruto's stuff to the compound.

Sakura was currently staying with them because her parents were on mission and she didn't want to stay at her house all alone.

While Sasuke cooked, he listened to the friendly bickering of Naruto and Sakura in the background.

They had been having the same conversation for a while now and Sasuke still couldn't figure out what it was about.

Something about the merits of yakiniku versus ramen?

When there was a knock on the door, Sasuke called out, "It's open".

Kakashi entered the kitchen, his aura gloomy.

Sakura and Naruto immediately stopped their conversation to greet their Sensei who seemed distressed.

Sakura asked, "Kakashi-sensei, is something wrong?"

Kakashi nodded. "Sakura, I'm not sure how to say this so I'll just go ahead. Haruno Kizashi and Haruno Mebuki were killed while on mission. Their bodies were brought back by their last remaining teammate, who's currently in intensive care, along with the bodies of the missing-nin's they fought and killed. I'm so sorry, Sakura."

Sakura collapsed with a sob.

Naruto and Sasuke, after he turned off the stove, were immediately by her side.

Kakashi sat down next to his three students and wrapped them in his arms.

Sakura spoke through her tears. "What's going to happen now?"

Kakashi spoke. "First, we decide where you're going to live. Then, we plan the funeral."

Sasuke cut in, "Sakura can live here."

Sakura looked up. "I can stay with you two?"

Sasuke nodded. "Of course. There's no way we're going to let you live on your own, not after
something like this."

Naruto added, "Agreed."

Sakura wrapped her arms around the boys. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

After several minutes of silence, only broken by Sakura's sobs, Kakashi cleared his throat.

When he had the attention of his students, he spoke. "There's something I've been meaning to bring up with Naruto and Sasuke, but it now includes Sakura. I was hoping to get your approval to ask the Hokage for guardianship of you three, if that's alright with you guys."

Kakashi became worried when all his students did was stare wide-eyed at him for several seconds.

Naruto was the first to speak and he sounded so hopeful, Kakashi's heart hurt. "You mean it, Sensei? You want to be our family?"

Kakashi nodded. "Of course. You three are my cubs and I want to have the legal right to take care of you."

His students shared a look and then all three threw themselves at him, thanking him repeatedly.

And if there were tears streaming down the faces of all four of those present, well, there was no one but family to see.

Sakura stood in the rain, Naruto, Sasuke, Kakashi-sensei, and the rest of her friends surrounding her.

Her parents' funeral had just finished, and she was stuck, rooted to the ground, staring at the smiling faces of her mother and father looking back at her from picture frames.

The Hokage had said that their names would be carved onto the monument for those killed in action.

And it finally hit her, all she would have left of them are two names carved into rock and pictures from better times.

Tears started mixing with the rain pouring down Sakura's face. Naruto and Sasuke each held one of her hands and Kakashi-sensei stood behind her, a silent protector.

The hands gripping her's squeezed and Sakura stilled.

She wasn't alone. She had her boys and her Sensei, all of whom knew what it was like to lose your parents.

She still had a family, she told herself. And she wouldn't lose them too.

She was the rock, the foundation, and she wouldn't crack, wouldn't break. She would train and train and train until she could protect her precious people from anything. Until nothing could take them away from her.

And like Kurama had told her, back in the beginning, she would make sure her precious people were strong enough to protect themselves.

She wouldn't let them fall, wouldn't let them shatter. She would support them through everything.
Nothing would take her family from her. Together, they could handle anything. She would make sure they stayed strong. Always. Always.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I'm not sure when I'll get the next update out. My brother and his girlfriend are coming to visit for a few days, so I'll be busy with that. I'll still try to write as much as possible.

Anyway, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Hokage-sama, Hatake Kakashi is here to see you."

Sarutobi looked up from his desk to see his secretary standing in front of him. "Let him in."

The woman nodded and closed the door. Moments later Kakashi was walking into the office, a stack of paper clutched in his hands and determination in his eye.

The Sandaime regarded Kakashi curiously for a moment. "Kakashi, how can I help you today?"

Giving an eye smile, Kakashi spoke. "I need you to approve of these." He placed the stack of paper on the desk.

Hiruzen pulled the stack closer to himself and read over the paperwork.

His eyebrow climbed higher on his face the farther he read.

The Hokage looked Kakashi in the eye. "These are guardianship papers for Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura. I take it you have your students' approval for this?"

Kakashi nodded.

Sarutobi sighed. "You're sure you want to do this? It's a big responsibility. You won't just be training them, but providing for their needs."

Kakashi looked the Hokage in the eye. "They're my cubs, Hokage-sama. Even if I wasn't their guardian, I would take care of them. They've become my family, the only family I have left. I just want to make it official."

The Sandaime smiled. "I just wanted to make sure. Take care of them, Kakashi."

Hiruzen took his time making sure the forms were filled out correctly. When he was done, he signed his approval.

Kakashi bowed. "Thank you, Sandaime-sama."

The Hokage waved him off. "Now, Kakashi, I wanted to continue our conversation from the other day. As you've now claimed guardianship of your students, there's nothing stopping you from taking them out of the village. Go ahead with your plans for Naruto's training. Let me know when you're planning on leaving, I'll clear your students' absences with the academy."
And I won't be sending you out on any other missions unless there's a need for you specifically. Your current mission is the same, train your three charges. You will, of course, be paid accordingly. And don't fight me on this, Kakashi. I understand that you still have your Hatake Clan assets and you haven't touched them in years, but you have three growing children to take care of now. You will continue to be paid for training them as it's a mission I gave to you. Think of yourself as their jonin sensei, just a few years early."

Kakashi nodded. "Alright. Thank you."

Sarutobi smiled. "It's no problem. Now, get out of here and go tell your charges the good news."

Naruto was nervous. Kakashi-sensei had left to get Jiji-sama's approval to become his, Sakura, and Sasuke's guardian.

He and his companions were in the process of moving all of their things into the largest bedroom of the Uchiha main house. It had been a few days since Sakura had moved in with them and she had had nightmares every night so far.

Because she wouldn't calm down until both Naruto and Sasuke were by her side, they had decided that it would be best if they all shared a room. So, Sasuke suggested they use the master bedroom as their own.

Naruto was currently laying out the large futon and he couldn't help but wonder if his Jiji would allow Kakashi to be their guardian. He knew that there shouldn't be any problem, but he just couldn't help but worry.

In his life, good things only started happening just recently. He was used to things going wrong and he couldn't shake the thought that something might happen and Jiji wouldn't approve.

His thoughts were cut short when he heard the front door open and Kakashi’s voice call out that he was home.

He shared a look with Sasuke and Sakura and the three raced into the living room to find Kakashi standing there with a smile on his face.

Sakura was the first to speak up. "So, are you our guardian now?"

Kakashi nodded. "Yep. That I am."

Naruto nearly sobbed in relief. His family was official now. They couldn't be separated from each other. Thank the Sage.

Naruto looked up when a hand landed on his shoulder and two sets of arms wrapped around him.

"It's alright," Kakashi spoke. "We're not going anywhere."

He swallowed back another sob and whispered, "Thank you."

Kakashi ruffled Naruto's hair and wrapped his arms around his charges. He hadn't felt so much warmth in years.

He had once thought that his heart was dead, unable to love. But slowly, thanks to these three children, he was healing.
He had a family and he would fight through hell and back to keep them by his side.

After a few more minutes of basking in each other's warmth, Kakashi spoke. "I have some more good news." He smiled when his students looked up at him, and continued, "Hokage-sama has approved of my plans for Naruto's fuinjutsu training."

Naruto asked, "What are your plans, exactly?"

Kakashi gave his students an eye smile. "We'll be going to Uzushiogakure to search for their lost knowledge on seals. Nothing has ever been recovered from the rubble and Kushina theorized that whatever they left behind was hidden with blood seals so only an Uzumaki could access it.

Unfortunately, with the third shinobi war going on at the time and then starting a family, Kushina never got the chance to visit Uzu after its destruction.

But we have Naruto, one of, if not the, last Uzumaki in existence. There should be a wealth of knowledge hidden there on fuinjutsu and all kinds of other arts."

Sakura tilted her head. "And you're going to take all three of us to look, right?"

Kakashi nodded. "Of course. I wouldn't leave any of you behind. We're in this together."

The three pre-genin smiled at him.

Sasuke spoke. "So, when do we leave?"

Kakashi laughed. "We'll leave late on Sunday. As it's Friday night, I want Sakura to be able to go to her irojutsu training for the weekend and I don't want you three to miss your weekend training with your friends. We should be back in about a week but pack for two weeks, just in case.

Also, make sure to tell the other six that we'll be leaving the village for a few days. Leave them instructions for their training so they can stay on track while we're gone. Got it?"

"Hai, Sensei."

Sakura walked through the halls of the hospital, exchanging greetings with those she knew as they passed by.

She had been a frequent visitor over the last month and a half, and the staff had come to respect her for her tenacity and dedication.

It also helped that she was able to keep up with the lessons Sasaki-sensei gave her. Sasaki Daiki was well known for his merciless training methods and to see a small, pink haired girl not just enduring, but thriving under his watch was awe inspiring.

She hummed to herself as she neared Sasaki's office. She and her new family would be leaving for Uzu that night and she was excited.

Sakura had never been outside the village, so this would be a first for her. She knew it could be dangerous, but she had Kakashi-sensei, Naruto, and Sasuke to watch her back. She wasn't worried.

Knocking on Sasaki-sensei's door, she waited for the voice telling her she could enter before she walked into the office.

"Sasaki-sensei," she said. "I think I mentioned this yesterday, but I'll say it again. Kakashi-sensei is
taking Naruto, Sasuke, and I out of the village for a few days. He thinks we'll be back by late Friday or early Saturday, but he's having us pack for two weeks, just in case."

Sasaki was sitting at his desk, reading through some paperwork. He blinked at his student and stood. Walking over to a table in the corner of the room, he picked up a small backpack and handed it to Sakura.

"It's a field medic kit. You've started being able to heal small cuts and bruises but you're not yet advanced enough for the bigger stuff. Inside this is everything you'll need to patch up a wound without using chakra. Take it on your trip, it could be useful."

Sakura beamed. "Thank you, Sasaki-sensei!"

Sasaki's eyes grew fond and he nodded. "Now, let's start where we left off yesterday."

Sakura hurriedly pulled out her notebook and started taking notes on her Sensei's lecture.

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Naruto was bouncing on his feet, excited to start the journey to Uzushiogakure. It was his clan's homeland and he would finally get to see it, even if it was destroyed.

They had brought everything they would need to training that afternoon, so they could leave right after.

The six other pre-genin walked them to the gate to see them off. He exchanged hugs goodbye with his friends who were staying in the village, as did Sasuke and Sakura.

Kakashi-sensei stood off to the side, watching the group fondly and speaking with the gate guards, Izumo and Kotetsu.

When the farewells were finished, Naruto and his companions left through the gate and took to the trees.

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It took a day and a half of nonstop running to reach the land of whirlpools. They only rested when the moon was high in the sky, and woke at the crack of dawn to start running again.

They were passing another abandoned village, the third so far, overgrown with vegetation, when Naruto felt it. A shift in the air, a whisper of home upon the wind. Longing tugged at his core, urging him forward. Faster. Faster.

The smell of the sea was filling the air around him, filling him with a sense of belonging he had only ever gotten to know recently among his family and friends.

When they crested a hill, he quickened his pace, catching sight of a port.

Reaching the end of a dock, Naruto came to a realization.

There were no boats.

The wind picked up and mussed the locks of Naruto's hair. The tugging in his core became stronger, urging him over the waves and into the distance.

Never one to ignore his instincts, he stepped off the dock onto the water below and ran, his companions following.
Naruto laughed as he dashed over the water, wind nipping at his heels, afternoon sun beating down on his skin.

He could see an island in the distance, hear it calling out to him, bringing his chakra to life and making it sing.

He could hear his companions behind him, feel their contentment, and their love for him shone bright. Their hope that he would gain a piece of his Clan, his legacy, here in their homeland.

When he came near to Uzu, his core urged him to round the island to the west. There he found a black sand beach, and stopped short.

His joy died in his throat and grief, mixing with the despair flowing upon the wind, took its place. Bones, untouched by the elements, protruded from the sand.

Naruto took a step forward, and another, and another, until he was once again running. When he had both feet upon the beach, he fell to his knees, overwhelmed by the pain and misery coming off the island in waves.

A sob broke free from his throat and tears cascaded down his face.

This was what his ancestors' home was reduced to. Rubble and bones, nothing more.

He cried for the fate of the once beautiful village. For the lives that were snuffed out by the tragedy of war at the hands of those who had their orders to destroy, even if they themselves held no ill will against those of Uzu.

It was at that moment, with his silent companions at his back, that he resolved to never let Konoha come to the same fate as Uzu. He would keep his precious people and their home safe.

Naruto promised himself that he would find a way to end war, to stop this tragedy from repeating.

He wiped the tears from his eyes and stood up. Walking forward, he started collecting the bones of his people, his core directing him to those that were hidden.

His companions helped, carefully pulling bones from the rubble where Naruto directed them.

Naruto felt warmth and gratitude fill him and patted the ground under his hand.

Uzu was alive, she felt and understood the world around her. She had been left to grieve for her people for years, preserving their bones in the hope that, someday, they would be given a proper rest.

They took a full day to collect all of the bones, only taking a short rest here and there.

It was nearing sunset, the final skeleton had been placed upon the pyre they had built moments ago.

When the sun was resting on the horizon, Naruto nodded his head at his Sensei.

Kakashi took a deep breath and called out, "Katon: Dragon's rebirth."

A dragon made of blue flames rushed forward and lit the pyre, letting out a great roar.

The flames danced and swayed, drawing in the eyes of those present. Naruto stood silently, watching the fire burn down to its last ember.
When the last flicker of flame had burned out, a large gust of wind picked up the ashes and carried them out to sea.

A small smile lit Naruto's face as he felt the thankfulness of Uzu course through him. He turned to his companions to speak when a wave of darkness overcame him.

When Naruto collapsed, Kakashi rushed forward and caught him before he could hit the ground.

Laying his student gently on the grass, he stepped back to let Sakura examine him. Sasuke stood on his right, watching Sakura work with concern in his eyes.

Sakura sat back on her heels, shaking her head. "He's alright. Just passed out. It was probably the emotional strain he's been under ever since we got here. Combine that with the small amounts of rest he took, and he was bound to be exhausted."

Kakashi let out a sigh of relief. "Why don't you two get some rest for a few hours? I'll keep watch."

Sakura looked up. "Are you sure, Sensei? You must be tired too."

Kakashi gave an eye smile. "I'll be fine. I'm used to going a while without rest. Plus, I have more stamina than you three. Get some sleep."

Sakura nodded and settled down to sleep, Sasuke joining her a moment later.

The first thing Naruto noticed when he woke was the pair of hands threading through his hair. The sound of dripping water and quiet conversation filtered in next.

Kurama's deep, rumbling laugh washed over him and Naruto couldn't help but let a small smile curl his lips.

"Ah," a woman's voice said. "He's awake."

Naruto stilled.

He knew that voice. It was the same from his memory. The only memory he had of his mother.

Blinking his eyes open, Naruto cane face to face with large, violet eyes and crimson red hair.

"Mum?" He choked out.

The woman raised a hand to cup his cheek.

"Yes, sweetheart. It's me."

Naruto reached out a hand to his mother's arm. She was solid, real. This wasn't a figment of his imagination. His mother was really here.

He launched himself up and into her arms, holding on as tight as his nine-year-old body could in the fear that she would disappear.

A second voice cut into the moment, this one masculine in nature.

"Don't forget about me, you two."
Naruto let go of Kushina with one arm, so he could turn to look at the origin of the second voice. There, sat a man with eyes like the sea and a yellow mane of hair atop his head. The man had a large smile on his face and wore a long, white coat with flames licking the bottom edge.

Naruto's eyes widened. "Dad?"

The man, Namikaze Minato, smiled a little wider and move closer to his son and wife. "Yes, son. I'm so glad to finally be able to meet you."

Naruto let himself be embraced by both of his parents, tears brimming from his eyes. The family of three sat, wallowing in the warmth radiating from each other, for several moments.

Naruto reluctantly pulled back from the embrace enough, so he could see his parents faces. "Mum, Dad, how are you here?"

Minato looked at his son, his pride and joy, and answered, "When I sealed Kurama into you, I also sealed in some of my and Kushina's chakra, so we could help you if you ever needed it. Though, as you've become great friends with Kurama, that help isn't needed, so we decided to come meet you. While we were waiting for you to wake up, Kurama has been explaining everything that has happened in the outside world to us as we could only see what was happening when you visited Kurama here, in your mindscape."

Kushina cut in, "We could also hear your mental conversations with Kurama, so we did have a general idea of what was going on the last month or so."

Minato nodded and continued, "We've been told everything you went through, and we're so proud of you, Naruto. So very proud. You are everything we could have ever wanted in a son and more.

I'm truly sorry for everything that you've gone through because of the villagers. I wanted you to be seen as a hero, but instead you were shunned by those you helped save. I hope you can forgive me for being the cause of so much of your pain."

Minato had dropped his eyes to his lap while he was speaking, so he missed the small smile that came over Naruto's face.

"It's alright, dad," Naruto said. "You have nothing to be sorry for. Yes, the villagers hate my existence, but I was able to meet Kurama thanks to you, my first ever friend, and if I'm being honest, he's like a parent to me.

I've made friends and become family with people who see me for me and not as a Jinchuuriki. They accept who I am, and they accept Kurama.

I'm happy now. Sure, my life wasn't that great until recently, but there's people out there who have it much worse than I ever had.

So, it's fine. Please don't beat yourself up over this. Nothing that's happened to me is your fault. The villagers decided how they wanted to treat me on their own."

Minato looked up at his son with hope in his eyes. "You forgive me?"

Naruto smiled. "Yes, I forgive you."
Father and son stared at each other for several moments.

Tears started falling from Minato's eyes and he whispered, "Thank you."

Kushina looked at her son, tears brimming from her own eyes, with pride. He was still young, but so very wise, and he had such a big heart. She wished she could have been there to see him grow.

Naruto looked to Kurama who had been watching everything with a smile.

Kurama noticed his Kit's gaze. "You really see me as a parent?"

Naruto stood up from where he was kneeling between his parents and walked towards the bars of the cage. "Kurama, you've been there for me, taught me, and cared for me when no one else did. I can't ever repay you for what you've given me, and I hope you don't mind, but I really do see you as a parent."

Kurama smiled down at Naruto, "Why would I mind? You're my Kit. And I'll always be here for you. I wouldn't go anywhere even if I could."

Naruto felt his eyes start to sting. "Thank you, Kurama."

Minato and Kushina watched their son and Kurama fondly. They shared a look and, after a moment, both of them nodded.

Minato stood and helped Kushina to her feet. Together, they walked towards Naruto with determination lining their every feature.

Naruto turned to look at his parents when they approached. "Mum? Dad?"

Kushina smiled at her son. "Naruto, Minato and I want to help you and Kurama."

Naruto tilted his head. "How?"

Minato answered, "We're going to alter the seal to get rid of the cage. That way there's nothing blocking you from fully mastering the strength Kurama can provide."

Kurama blinked. "You would do that?"

Minato and Kushina nodded.

Kushina spoke. "The two of us are just residual chakra that will run out soon. We're entrusting you with the care of our son, as we won't be here for much longer. We can trust you to protect Naruto, right Kurama?"

Kurama immediately answered, "I'll protect him with my life."

Minato looked upon the bijuu fondly. "Thank you." Turning to his son he asked, "Is this okay with you, Naruto? It'll be a lot of power to master, but we believe, if anyone can do it, it's you."

Naruto nodded. "I won't let you down."

Kushina ruffled his hair. "We know you won't."

Kushina and Minato walked up to the seal placed on the golden cage bars. They made several hand signs, bit their thumbs and thrust their hands out to the seal. "Fuin."
The seal split down the middle with a great gust of wind and disintegrated. The cage bars groaned as they split in the middle and retracted into the walls on either side of the large space.

Minato turned to his son. "Now that the cage is gone, you can change your mindscape as you wish. All you have to do is will the space to become what you want."

Naruto closed his eyes and thought. When he opened them, the space had changed into a vast, open field. There was a cave far in the distance with more than enough room to fit Kurama.

A weeping willow stood on a lone hill, branches swaying in the breeze.

The sound of flowing water reached his ears and he turned. Behind him was a bubbling brook, flowing into a forest that reminded him of the trees surrounding Konoha.

Flowers in shades of reds and yellows dotted the field here and there, standing tall and proud.

Naruto felt at peace here.

He turned and found his mother and father sitting on the grass, smiling fondly at him. Kurama was looking around in wonder, a large grin plastered on his face.

Naruto walked toward Kushina and Minato. He let out a gasp as he noticed they were becoming transparent and rushed to their side.

"What's happening?" He asked.

Minato smiled at his son, a mix of pride and sadness in his eyes. "Our chakra is running out. We can't stay for much longer."

Kushina put a hand on her son's cheek. "Know that we will always love you, Naruto. We're so very proud of you."

Minato added, "Never give up on your goal. If anyone can bring peace to the ninja world, it's you. We believe in you."

Naruto wrapped his arms around his mom and dad, tears falling down his cheeks. "I'm so glad I got to meet you two. Thank you, for everything. I love you, Mum, Dad."

Minato looked to Kurama. "Take care of our son."

Kurama dipped his head. "I will."

Kushina and Minato stood. They were fading fast, growing more transparent by the second.

Kushina placed a kiss on Naruto's brow. "Goodbye, sweetheart. Take care of yourself. Tell Kakashi we said hello."

Minato nodded. "Goodbye, son."

The family of three all had tears running down their cheeks and large smiles on their lips.

Naruto looked over his mother and father one more time, memorizing their appearances.

"Goodbye."
Naruto sat with Kurama long after his mother and father disappeared, fits curled into the blood orange fur.

He hadn't stopped crying until moments ago, the fox allowing him to seek comfort from his presence.

The blonde wiped the back of his hands across his eyes and stretched his arms above his head. He knew he should wake up soon, his companions were probably worried, but he couldn't bring himself to leave Kurama's warmth.

Kurama noticed his Kit's movements and looked down at him. "Are you okay, Kit?"

Naruto took a moment to think. "I think so. I feel refreshed, somehow. More balanced? I don't know if that makes sense."

Kurama chuckled. "I wouldn't know, myself."

Naruto smiled. "I should probably wake up, huh?"

Kurama hummed. "It would seem your Haruno and Uchiha are asleep. Your Hatake is keeping watch."

Naruto nodded. "I guess I'll go take over his watch until the others wake." Naruto stood. "Thank you, Kurama."

The bijuu smiled fondly. "No problem, Kit."

When Naruto opened his eyes, he spread out his senses to take stock of his surroundings.

Sasuke and Sakura were sleeping to the right of him, Sakura in between him and Sasuke. Kakashi-sensei was sitting to his left, stoking a fire with practiced movements.

Naruto sat up, careful not to nudge Sakura, and went to sit by his Sensei.

"Hey, Kakashi-sensei. How long was I out?"

Kakashi turned to his cub with an eye smile. "A few hours."

Naruto nodded. "You can get some sleep, Sensei. I'll keep watch."

Kakashi dipped his head in acknowledgment but didn't move.

Naruto asked, "Is something wrong?"

Kakashi hummed. "I can't help but thinking you've changed a bit from how you were before you passed out."

"Ah," Naruto said. "I guess I have."

Kakashi tilted his head. "Are you going to tell me why?"

Naruto smiled. "I would rather wait to talk about it when all three of you are awake."

Kakashi nodded. "Fair enough. Goodnight, Naruto."

"Goodnight, Sensei."
The warmth from the fire wrapped itself around him and chased off the chill in the air as he kept watch.

Naruto let the steady breathing of his companions and the distant crashing of waves upon the beach lull him into a relaxed state.

As the night wore on, he focused on the emotions Uzu was giving off. Contentment, gratitude, peace.

Naruto pulled these feelings around himself like a warm blanket, and reached out his senses as far as they could go.

He was sitting just outside the courtyard that made up the exact center of the island, trees all around him.

There were no animals on Uzu, no life except him and his companions.

A whisper brushed past his ear, words unintelligible. The wind tugged at his hair, swirling sparks from the fire into the sky.

A faint spot of chakra caught his senses, further into the trees. There was nothing there, Naruto knew, just a wall of rock. They had searched that area, found the bones of two children, both younger than him, buried in what looked to be shallow graves.

Sakura and Naruto had broken down crying and even the ever stoic Sasuke and Kakashi had looked visibly disturbed. They may be shinobi, but facing the skeletons of children, barely old enough to be enrolled in academy, would get to anyone.

The whisper sounded again, the chakra spot pulsing in time to an unheard beat. Naruto could have sworn he heard, was that, chanting?

There was that feeling of being directed, of a tugging at his core.

Naruto knew something was calling him, felt it in every fiber of his being. But he wouldn't leave his companions, his family, alone here. Kakashi-sensei had trusted him to keep watch, and he wouldn't break that trust.

He told Uzu as much, when the whispers became too loud and the pulsing of the chakra, too bright. He whispered a plea for her to wait, just a little longer. He would go when his family was awake to come with him, but not a second sooner.

The tugging calmed, whispers died down, chanting stopped. The world around him returned to silence, but for gentle breathing and the crackle of a fire.

Kakashi was the first to stir.

Keeping his breathing even, not allowing a single muscle to so much as twitch, he took stock of his surroundings.

Sakura and Sasuke were sleeping to his right and Naruto was still awake, keeping watch by the dimming fire.

When he sat up, he caught sight of a silent Naruto, staring off into the distant trees.

The sun was just rising over the horizon, rays of light reflecting off dew drops and casting a golden
hue over the vegetation.

Kakashi moved quietly so as not to wake his sleeping charges, and went to sit by his blonde student.

Naruto acknowledged him with a nod and a quiet, "Good morning, Sensei".

Kakashi tipped his head in greeting.

The two spent the next half an hour sitting in silence, side by side. Kakashi couldn't help but notice the changes in Naruto.

The boy seemed older, more sure of himself.

Kakashi knew Naruto had trouble with his confidence, knew he was slowly growing out of the insecurities that the neglect and hate from the villagers had instilled in him.

He was so very thankful for the thoughtless loyalty Naruto's friends had given him, the way they accepted the blonde with nary a hesitation.

But it seemed that, in just a few hours, Naruto had gained something he had been looking for all his life. Something precious, some knowledge that was to be treasured.

Kakashi didn't know what it was that his student had found, but he would respect Naruto's request to wait to speak about it.

After all, there was no need to rush. Naruto would tell him when he was ready.

Kakashi was broken out of his thoughts when he heard yawning from behind him. Sakura and Sasuke has woken up.

He smiled fondly as he watched Sasuke climb to his feet and help Sakura stand. His two sleepy students shuffled their way over to stand next to Naruto.

Yes, he adored these cubs. He would do anything for them. Anything.

Chapter End Notes

Was it good? Was it bad? Absolutely terrible?

Let me know!
Sorry for the delay. I have family visiting until Friday this week, so, the next chapter might take a little while. Forgive me.

In other news, my favorite Naruto fanfiction just updated tonight and that makes me super happy. It's called 'Of Harrowed Hearts', and I believe it is only on Ao3. If you haven't read it yet, please do so. In my opinion, it's a masterpiece. The author is the kind of writer I strive to be. This story was actually somewhat inspired by 'Of Harrowed Hearts'. So, if you like my story, check it out. It's a thousand times better than this one.

Anyway, enjoy!

"Kakashi-sensei, mum and dad say hello."

Kakashi blinked. "What?"

Naruto and his companions were sitting around the remains of the fire, having just finished breakfast. He decided it was time to explain what had happened when he had passed out.

Throughout his story, Naruto's audience listened, enraptured by the many emotions playing over the blonde's face.

When Naruto ended his tale, tears were brimming in his eyes, and his companions were visibly saddened by what they had heard.

Kakashi reached out a hand and pulled the blonde into his side. He leaned down and kissed the top of Naruto's head.

With that gesture, Naruto let his tears fall.

Sakura crawled over to sit in Naruto's lap, resting her head on his left shoulder. Sasuke moved to sit on Naruto's right and placed an arm around his back.

Naruto wrapped one arm around Sasuke and Sakura and cried harder. He let all of the emotion he had felt from meeting his parents and then losing them, all of the emotional pain he was subjected to by the villagers, pour out of him.

The dam keeping back the emotional stress of every bad day he had ever lived through, every insult and glare directed at him, all of the neglect he had experienced, finally broke. He let all of his pain drain from him with his tears, wrapped in the arms of his family.

Kakashi had expected Naruto to break down at some point. It was one of the main reasons he had wanted to get the blonde away from the village for a while.

And though it had taken much longer for Naruto to break than he had thought, that just proved how strong the boy was.
Naruto was nine and, if what his instincts were telling him was right, even with everything the boy had been through, this was the first time he had truly let out all of his pain.

That's nine years of constant neglect and misery and, for someone so young to be able to deal with it for so long on his own, was incredible.

Kakashi knew battle hardened shinobi who would have broken down much earlier than Naruto, had they been living the boy’s life.

He had a feeling that, had Naruto still been alone, the child would have kept his emotions bottled up until he couldn't take it anymore and completely shattered beyond repair.

So, this, this small break down, was good for Naruto. It would help him with the process of healing.

And Kakashi would be there for every step of the way.

It had taken an hour for Naruto to calm down.

Sakura had sat there, holding on to the blonde the entire time, unwilling to let go for fear that she would lose him somehow. She had a feeling that Kakashi-sensei and Sasuke had the same fear.

Sakura was the rock, her boys' foundation, and how could she have been so blind as to not have seen Naruto's suffering.

She knew that she had been hurting, had been relying on her family and friends to help with the pain of losing her parents, but she didn't think that was an excuse.

She wouldn't use it as an excuse.

The nightmares she had most nights, when they started, were of her parents dying. At some point, though, they had morphed into the deaths of her family and friends.

Most of her nightmares now centered around Naruto, Sasuke, and Kakashi-sensei. Watching their deaths always hurt the most, felt like she had been stabbed directly in her heart with a blunt knife.

She always woke screaming, feeling like she had failed the most important people in her life.

During the day, her dreams haunted her steps, willing her to train harder, faster, become stronger. She wouldn't lose her family like she had her biological parents.

But now, holding onto Naruto while he cried his heart out, she felt like maybe she had come close to losing him.

And that just wouldn't do.

She was still grieving for her parents, but she wouldn't let that blind her to the suffering of her boys and Sensei. Not anymore.

Sakura would help shoulder their pain because she could. It was as simple as that.

Sasuke hated seeing his blonde so miserable. It tore at his heart, his mind screaming to protect his friend, to destroy any threats to his family.

But he couldn't.
He couldn't destroy the villagers because Naruto, with a heart as vast as the oceans, still had hope that they would accept him someday. The boy wanted to protect his precious village, become Hokage, and that meant protecting those living in Konoha.

No matter what Sasuke thought of the villagers, he wouldn't hurt Naruto, not ever.

And hurting the villagers, the very people the Hokage had to protect with their life, would be hurting Naruto.

So, instead, Sasuke held the blonde close, let the boy break down. Because Sasuke, with the help of Sakura and Kakashi-sensei, would build Naruto back up, stronger than ever.

Sakura was the foundation, Kakashi, the guiding force, Naruto was the glue that held them together, and Sasuke, Sasuke was the protector.

He wouldn't let his family down.

Naruto finally got a hold of himself, feeling like a huge weight had lifted from his shoulders.

He never would have imagined, just months ago, that he would allow himself to break down in the presence of others.

But, he trusted these people with his life. They knew his biggest secrets and had stayed by his side. They were family and nothing, nothing would break them apart.

Naruto wiped his eyes with the back of his hands and looked at his companions. A small smile lit his face as he saw each of them looking at him in concern.

"Thank you," he said. "I'm so glad I have you three."

Kakashi eye smiled at him. "It's no problem."

Sakura nodded. "We'll always be here to catch you when you fall."

Sasuke squeezed Naruto's side. "Hn."

Naruto laughed. "Still, thank you." He sighed. "I hate to break this moment up, but last night, Uzu was trying to get me to go somewhere. I told her I would wait until you three were awake to come with me. My instincts tell me it's safe."

Kakashi looked to Naruto. "Well, what are we waiting for? Listening to your instincts has gotten us this far. Let's go."

Naruto looked to Sakura and Sasuke who nodded.

"Alright," he said. "I'll lead you there."

Once the four of them untangled their limbs, Naruto stood and collected his stuff while the others did the same, and then led the way to the wall of rock where the strange spot of chakra was still glowing.

As they approached, the wind picked up and a whisper brushed past Naruto's ear. Though the words were unintelligible, Naruto got the distinct feeling that his blood was needed to solve this riddle.

He remembered how Kakashi-sensei had said that Kushina had thought the Uzumaki had hid their legacy behind a blood seal.
But this, this was much more complicated than a just a blood seal.

Now that Naruto was closer, he could feel the connection that this seal had to Uzu herself, and the many different chakra signatures layered over each other.

Emotions were pouring from the chakra, gratitude, pride, sadness, and many others.

Naruto thought that maybe whoever had put this seal together, had left behind chakra imprints of themselves, like how his parents had in Kurama's seal.

As Uzu had told him he was correct in his theory, then accessing whatever was behind the seal would take the approval of the chakra imprints.

But, Uzu was telling him not to worry, and his instincts were telling him she was right, so, he bit his thumb and smeared the blood on the rock.

The stone started to glow, and Naruto covered his eyes when the light got too bright for his sensitive sense.

When the glow died down, a loud click sounded and the stone in front of him receded into the ground to create an opening large enough for them to walk through.

Behind the opening was pitch black, no light to be seen.

Sasuke and Kakashi-sensei both created small balls of fire in their hands to light the way.

Naruto exchanged a look with his companions, Sasuke at his side and Sakura and Kakashi behind them.

Taking a deep breath, Naruto started forward into the dark, his family by his side.

After they entered the passage, the opening in the rock shut behind them.

The four ninja turned and stared at the way they came from.


Naruto received deadpan stares from his companions.

He blinked. "What?"

Kakashi let out a chuckle and shook his head. "Nothing, Naruto. Absolutely nothing."

Before Naruto could respond, he whipped his head around to peer into the darkness further into the passage. His ears twitched, picking up on quiet chanting.

"Naruto?" Sakura asked. "What is it?"

"Shh," Naruto hushed her. "I hear voices. It sounds like the chanting I was hearing last night."

Kakashi put a hand on Naruto's shoulder. "What are your instincts telling you? Is it safe to proceed?"

Naruto tilted his head. "Yeah, there's nothing hostile in here."

He took a sniff of the air. "What's that smell? Oil?"
The group of four looked around the passage for the origin of the smell.

Sasuke spoke up from over by one of the walls. "Found it."

The other three walked to his side.

Kakashi looked down to the recess in the wall where his student was pointing. "It's filled with oil. It must be for light. Sasuke, check the other wall, it should have another one of these."

After Sasuke confirmed that there was one on the other wall, Kakashi spoke again.

"On the count of three we light the oil. Ready? One, two, three."

Lowering the ball of flame in their palms to the recesses, the four stepped back as the oil caught fire. The flames spread farther into the passage, lighting their way.

Naruto started forward down the hall, his companions following.

The deeper in they went, the louder the chanting became. Though, no matter how close they got to the origin of the sound, the words never became intelligible. It was as if whoever was speaking was doing so in another language unfamiliar to the four.

Further and further they walked until, finally, they came upon a chamber. To their surprise, in the center of the room sat five, middle aged ninja in the pattern of a star.

The ninja were concentrating while giving out pulses of chakra in time to the rhythm of their chant, as if their survival rested on their doing so.

Turning away from the ninja to survey the rest of the room, as he felt no hostile emotions from those absorbed in their chanting, Naruto found five wooden arches built into the walls situated directly behind the five ninjas. Above the arches were wooden carvings, each with their own design.

The floor, upon closer examination, held a large, complex sealing matrix carved into the stone. Each of the chanting ninja sat upon a specific point of the matrix and, it seemed, were allowing their chakra to slowly mix with that already in the seal.

When Naruto focused upon the energy built up in the center of the seal, he was able to pick out thousands of separate chakra signatures, some of which he recognized from the seal on the door they came through.

The rest of the room was bare, stone walls and a high, vaulted ceiling.

Naruto focused back on the ninja when their bodies gained a slight glow and their chant seemed to reach the coda, moving faster and becoming louder.

He and his companions stood, ready for anything as the chant ended, and a bright glow filled the chamber.

When it died down, the five ninjas were now slumped over, breathing hard.

Naruto shifted on his feet, worried for the unfamiliar ninja but unsure what to do. He took a step forward but stopped when the ninja turned to look at him.

Suddenly there was a gasp from one of them. The man stood and was in front of Naruto in the blink of an eye. He placed his hands on Naruto's shoulders, hesitantly, as if afraid he was a dream.
The man had long, red hair reaching to his hips and violet eyes. When he saw this, Naruto gasped. The man looked just like his mother, with only a few differences.

"Um," Naruto said with a shaky voice. "Sir, are you related to Uzumaki Kushina?"

The man blinked and nodded slowly. "Kushina is my daughter. How do you know her?"

Naruto inhaled a quick intake of breath. "Kushina is my mother." He swallowed. "Does that make you my grandfather?"

The man nodded, and a large smile split his face. "Yes, that it does. My name is Uzumaki Akihito. You are?"

"Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto," Naruto replied.

Akihito looked Naruto over and smiled wider. "You must look like your father, but you still have some of my Kushina in you. Tell me, what happened to her?"

Naruto's face took on a gloomy overcast. "The short story? She died when someone attacked to free the Kyuubi from her and used him to attack the village the day I was born."

Akihito nodded solemnly. "And your father?"

Naruto had tears brimming in his eyes. "He died sealing the Kyuubi into me."

Akihito pulled his grandson into a hug and held him while he cried. He whispered soothing words into Naruto's ear, trying his best to calm the distraught child.

When Naruto pulled back from the embrace after several minutes, it was to see the kind face of Akihito.

"Thank you," Naruto spoke.

Akihito's eyes grew fond. "It was no problem." He stepped back from Naruto and gestured to the other ninja. "Let me introduce you to my friends.

First, is Yukihira Akane, Head of the Yukihira Clan here on Uzu. Next, we have, Ikaru Hitomi, Head of the Ikaru Clan. Third, Morioka Daichi, Head of the Morioka Clan. And finally, there's Hayashi Itama, Head of the Hayashi Clan."

Naruto tilted his head. "What about you, Jiji?"

Akihito ruffled Naruto's hair. "Me? Well, I'm the Sandaime Uzukage and Head of the Uzumaki Clan."

"That's awesome!" Naruto exclaimed.

The others in the room chuckled.

"Naruto," Akihito started. "Will you introduce me to your companions?"

Naruto blinked. "Oh, right! I forgot." Turning around to face his adopted family, Naruto rubbed the back of his head. "Sorry guys."

Kakashi eye smiled. "Maa, it's alright."
Naruto smiled and turned back to face his grandfather. "Jiji, the cyclops is Hatake Kakashi-sensei, the student of my father, Minato, and our guardian. The pinkette is Haruno Sakura, aspiring medic-nin. The raven is Uchiha Sasuke, ninjutsu and taijutsu prodigy. Lastly, again, I'm Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto, Jinchuuriki and Kit of Kurama the Kyuubi no Yoko."

Kurama spoke up in Naruto's mind. "Hey, Kit. Let me introduce myself."

Naruto nodded and stepped back to give Kurama's shade room to coalesce.

Kurama grinned at the clan heads. "I'm Kurama, the Kyuubi no Yoko."

Akihito and his companions blinked.

Akane shook her head. "Only someone from your line would manage to befriend the strongest of the bijuu, Akihito."

Akihito ignored her and greeted Kurama. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Kurama. Is it correct to assume you've been looking after my grandson?"

Kurama nodded. "Yes, that I have."

The Uzukage nodded. "Then I must thank you, for doing what I could not."


"I'm glad to hear that," Akihito spoke. He turned to Naruto. "Child, my companions and I don't have long for this world. We are only chakra imprints that were tied into this seal."

There's something we would like to gift you, as the heir to Uzu. Gathered here are the legacies of her clans and citizens. It's yours to take and to use as you will.

To go along with that is the collective knowledge of the people of Uzu. It's all stored in the seal in this chamber. The process will hurt, but I believe you can handle it. What do you say? Will you receive your people's knowledge?"

Naruto thought for a moment, then turned to his companions. The four of them shared a look and nodded. Nothing worth gaining was ever easy.

He turned back to his grandfather. "I'll do it."

Akihito smiled. "Alright. It's probably best if Kurama returns to his seal to help manage the influx of information." After Kurama did so, he continued. "Okay, Naruto. Sit on the center of the seal and try to relax. Keep your mind open and don't fight the process."

Naruto nodded and did as told.

After he felt Akihito and the man's companions settle around him, his grandfather called a start to the process, and Naruto was hit with a wave of intense burning.

He clenched his fists against the pain that intensified every second and screamed when it nearly overwhelmed him.

He kept screaming for what seemed like hours, barely breathing, and, when the pain died down, his world went dark.
When Naruto started screaming, Kakashi had to hold his other two students back while he himself barely resisted the urge to run to the blonde's side.

It was hard, seeing his student in pain. But while he didn't know much, he knew just enough of sealing to know that interrupting a process as complex as what was happening before him would result in dire consequences for Naruto.

So, he held himself and his students back and promised Sakura she could go to her friend to look him over for injuries after whatever was happening was finished.

No matter how the blonde's pain wrenched at his heart.

No matter how much he felt like he was failing to protect his family.

So, when the screaming stopped and the visible chakra that had been flowing into Naruto disappeared, Kakashi let go of his students and the three of them rushed forward.

When Sakura reached the unconscious blonde's side, she immediately started running diagnostics on him.

There were small burns here and there where the chakra had nearly overloaded Naruto's already full system. His palms had blood flowing from them from where he had pressed his nails in too hard. His eyes were bloodshot, and he had bitten his lip.

Sakura could feel Kurama's chakra running through Naruto's body, working overtime to heal the internal damage. She wasn't yet advanced enough to tell the extent of his internal injuries, but, from how much chakra Kurama was pumping through the boy's system and the state of his chakra pathways, it had been extensive.

She worked on healing the small burns and the cuts on his hands and lip. It seemed Kurama was so preoccupied he couldn't handle the outside damage just yet. But Sakura was there, she was a medic-in-training, and she wouldn't be useless.

She had promised herself after her parents had died that she wouldn't lose any of her adopted family. But there she was, not strong enough to heal Naruto's internal injuries and, without Kurama being there, the blonde probably would have died. Which wasn't acceptable.

She knew she was still young, some of the nurses and doctors at the hospital called her a prodigy. But she didn't think she was, had gotten as far as she had on hard work and incredible teachers.

Sure, she was smart. Sure, she could heal small injuries after only months of working at it. But that wasn't good enough. She wasn't good enough.

She couldn't lose any of her family, not again. She didn't think she could handle it. The only reason she was still going after her parents died was because she had her boys and Kakashi-sensei.

She couldn't live without them.

Sakura knew they were co-dependent on each other. But there were worse quirks for a ninja to develop.

She was their rock, but they were her protectors, her safety net.

They made each other stronger. And, if she needed them by her side, well, it didn't matter what
anyone else thought. They needed her, too.

Her eyes started stinging and she blinked them furiously. She wouldn't cry, dammit. She wouldn't. She was stronger than that. Just because she wasn't there for her parents doesn't mean she can't be there for her adopted family.

She would train harder, study more, and never, *never* let her team down. Not again. Next time she would be prepared.

Medics shouldn't be on the front lines?

Screw that!

Sakura thought it was time to start spending more time learning Tsunade of the Sannin's taijutsu technique.

She would be there, protecting her comrades. She wouldn't sit around, waiting and worrying over her boys and then have to patch them up after they came back from a mission.

She needed better chakra control, she needed to perfect her iryojutsu techniques, so she could move on to healing bigger injuries.

Sakura wanted so much to be stronger, tougher, faster. She wanted it with all her heart. And not for herself, but for her family and friends.

She couldn't very well protect them if she wasn't good enough, now could she?

She would do better.

She would.

So, Naruto needed to wake up, needed to be alright. She would do anything for her family and friends, just like they would do anything for her.

She knew that.

But that didn't matter if she couldn't heal them. Didn't matter if she wasn't there for them.

A thought hit her suddenly.

What if she introduced Hinata and Shikamaru to Sasaki-sensei? They had great chakra control, they had to for their clan jutsu. If there were more medics among her friends, one on each team, she wouldn't have to worry about always helping them.

Sasaki-sensei might not appreciate more 'brats', as he called them, being thrust into his care, but that wouldn't stop her. She knew how to get on his good side. Coffee, the darker the better.

Sometimes, Sakura thought, that maybe she should talk to someone about what happened with her parents, about how losing them made her cling to her family and friends like a life line.

But then she realized, no matter what, she wouldn't let go of those she cared about. It didn't matter if her bond with her comrades was considered unhealthy. They were ninja. They all had their coping mechanisms.

Sakura would become strong for them. She had all the acknowledgement she needed. She didn't need the power strength would give her for anything but them, her family.
She wouldn't let it corrupt her, wouldn't let herself shatter. A corrupted foundation can, and will, affect the whole structure. She wouldn't let herself break, if only to save her family from experiencing the same fate.

A single tear fell down her cheek.

Her family showed her how to live, had saved her from her pit of despair.

She would repay that any way she could.

She wouldn't let them fall.

Sasuke watched as Sakura's hands trembled as she worked, saw a tear slide down her cheek.

He knew what she was thinking, hell, he was thinking the same thing.

He was supposed to protect his family. He needed to become stronger for his family. Everything was for his adopted family.

They were his life.

When he was with them, Itachi didn't matter, his clan didn't matter. He became his own person, not the 'last loyal Uchiha'.

He would do anything for them. They were his, just like he was theirs.

His to protect, his to cherish.

He wasn't good enough as he was now. Wasn't strong enough.

And, even though he knew this was a burden Naruto had to bear on his own, it didn't make watching him in pain any easier.

Sasuke wanted to be strong enough to help shoulder his family and friend's burdens. He never wanted to see them suffering alone like he had after the massacre.

It would be hard, he knew, to gain the strength he needed to protect. But it would be worth it.

It would always be worth it.

His family was lodged deep into his heart, his soul. He would keep them there, always.

But, *he wasn't strong enough.*

He could lose them as he was now. That could not happen. He would rather die than live without them.

It was unhealthy, he knew, but he didn't care. It didn't matter.

He would train and train and train to get stronger. And he would make sure his family and friends became stronger with him.

But first, Naruto had to wake up.

Naruto had brought them together and kept them there. He was the glue that held a bunch of strong personalities together and helped them to be the best they could.
Naruto wouldn't give up on them, so they would never give up on him.

Period.

Akihito watched as his grandson's team surrounded him and worried over the boy's safety.

He could see the love they had for the blonde displayed clearly in their eyes and actions.

Even as drained as he was from guiding the chakra in the seal to Naruto, he still smiled fondly.

Only an Uzumaki could have survived what they just did. Being the Jinchuuriki of the Kyuubi also had a profound help in keeping the boy alive.

Akihito never would have taken the chance to use the sealing matrix on Naruto if he wasn't absolutely sure the child would be fine.

Naruto may have been injured, but he was almost healed already, and the gains outweighed the cons.

When the boy woke, he would be in possession of every piece of knowledge the inhabitants of Uzu had ever obtained or thought up.

This information would be a disaster waiting to happen in anyone else's hands. But Naruto, kind of heart and strong willed, would only use it to help better those around him and himself.

After all, that's the only way he would have been able to open the sealed door leading to this chamber.

And Uzu herself had deemed Naruto worthy.

So, Akihito was very proud of his grandson.

Very, very proud.

The boy would be the one to change the world for the better, he knew. And the only way he could help his daughter's precious child was to give him the knowledge and the tools to begin that change.

Naming Naruto the heir of Uzu was both the boy's birthright and something he had earned.

Akihito could feel himself begin to fade. He smiled sadly and turned to his companions. They were all running out of chakra.

He stood along with his dear friends and approached his grandson and the boy's family.

About to speak, Akihito was cut off by a loud groan.

Naruto was drifting in the dark, barely able to move a muscle. He was filled with an odd sense of peace, every muscle relaxed and mind quiet.

Suddenly, he heard a voice, soft as a whisper, calling his name. Tilting his head, he kept listening. The voice was strangely familiar. It was deep and had a rumbling quality to it.

Strange, he couldn’t remember where he had heard it before. Actually, he couldn't remember much of anything.
Feeling that something wasn't right, Naruto opened his eyes, surprised to find himself in a field, surrounded by red and yellow flowers.

Looking up, a large, red eye filled his view.

Blinking, something clicked into place and Naruto remembered.

He remembered the pain, the burning through his chakra pathways. Meeting his grandfather came back to him, as did the man telling him he was the heir to Uzu. His agreement to be given the knowledge of his people came last, and Naruto realized he now knew a lot more than he did previously.

His head was jam packed with facts and information that was still sorting itself out.

He figured he had Kurama to thank for that one. The fox was organizing everything he had received so he could access it quickly and efficiently.

Sitting up, Naruto looked to the bijuu. "Thank you, Kurama. I should probably wake up before they worry themselves to death."

Kurama smiled. "It was no problem. Get going."

Naruto nodded and woke up.

The first thing he saw upon waking was his team looking worried. He gave them a smile and sat up, wincing in pain as he did so.

The next thing he registered was his grandfather standing back with his companions, all of them becoming transparent.

Naruto shot up, uncaring of his pain, and ran over to Akihito. "You're leaving already?"

Akihito nodded. "That we are. We used most of our chakra, we're just barely hanging on. I wish I had more time to spend with you, but sadly, I must leave soon. You now know everything I could tell think to tell you and more. Protect our legacy, will ya?"

Getting a nod in response, he continued. "You're going to do great things, Naruto. I believe in you. Live your life to the fullest. Goodbye, child."

Naruto has tears in his eyes. "Goodbye."

The five Uzushio ninja disappeared in a flash of light, leaving nothing behind but their legacies.

Naruto turned to his team, his family, and gave them a watery smile. Wiping his eyes, he spoke. "I'm sorry I worried you guys. I didn't think it would hurt that much."

Suddenly, Naruto had his arms full of a pinkette and a raven by his side. Their Sensei placed a hand on his shoulder and gave him an eye smile.

"It's alright," Kakashi spoke. "We're just glad you're okay."

Sasuke nodded and wrapped his arms around the blonde. "Hn."

Sakura had tears rolling down her face when she looked up. "Don't scare us like that."
Naruto smiled. "I'll try not to make it a habit."

"Good." The three replied in synch.

Naruto pulled back from the embrace. "Now, who wants to go collect the legacy of Uzushiogakure?"

Sakura’s eyes lit up and she excitedly asked if they had anything on iredjutsu.

Sasuke and Kakashi face palmed.

Naruto laughed.

Everything would be alright.
I'm so sorry for the delay! Shit hit the fan in my life. First, my dad was in the ER for chest pain (which turned out to be nothing serious, but they're monitoring him closely because he has an aortic aneurysm). Then, I was in the ER for elevated blood pressure and pulse (which we're still trying to figure out the cause of). I've been going to doctor appointment after appointment and I've been feeling terrible. But, I still managed to write this chapter. So, yay! I'll try to get the next chapter out faster.

Anyway, Enjoy!

Naruto walked through the arch to the room containing that which the Uzumaki had left behind, his family at his back.

As there were five rooms and only Naruto and his three companions, it was decided that they would work through one room at a time.

If they wanted to be back in Konoha by Saturday morning, they would have to work fast. It was already late Thursday morning. That gave them half a day at the most to collect everything, and a day and a half to travel back, not including any accidents that might befall them on their way.

Looking around the room before him, Naruto blinked, unsure of where to start and how to pack everything.

There were rows of shelves lining the room, every inch of space covered with scrolls, artifacts, weapons, and more.

A thought filtered through his mind.

*Mass storage scrolls. Each clan has their own set. Uzumaki, second row to the right, third shelf down.*

Naruto blinked again. Snippets of information flowed through his mind, unintelligible until he had reason to need them.

It seemed there was a safety measure built into the knowledge he had received, kept his mind from being overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information. He couldn't access a single fact or idea unless he had need of it. And then it came to him, popping into his head.

For this, Naruto was grateful.

He may have Kurama to help monitor his mind, but that didn't mean he could handle such a large influx of information without getting hurt. He was only nine, after all. His brain wasn't yet fully developed.

Finding the scrolls where he knew they would be, Naruto picked up a large, red scroll edged in black, a medium, blue scroll edged in silver, two small scrolls, one black edged in gold, and the other gold edged in black, and a pocket sized, white scroll edged in silver.
Turning to find his companions standing a few feet away, Naruto led them to a circular area in the center of the rows of shelves. He laid the scrolls on the ground and used a pulse of chakra to open them.

*Red is for weapons, blue for scrolls, black for kinjutsu, gold for artifacts, and white for carrying them all.*

Naruto repeated the information to his companions and asked them who wanted to handle which scroll.

"I'll take the kinjutsu. Where would that be located?" Kakashi asked.

Naruto tilted his head.

*Left side of the room, the back three rows.*

He told his Sensei as much and the copy nin nodded. Kakashi walked away, taking the black scroll with him.

Naruto added, "I'll handle the artifacts." *Right side, the back five rows.* "What about you two?"

Sasuke looked up. "Weapons."

*Right side, the first five rows.*

Sasuke nodded, picked up his scroll, and walked away.

Sakura looked to Naruto. "That leaves me with the scrolls."

*Left side, the first seven rows.*

Sakura picked up her scroll and went to work.

Once she was gone, Naruto picked up his scroll and walked to his rows.

It took two hours for the room to be completely packed away. During that time, the only conversation to be had was the occasional question asked of Naruto, who answered with the response given to him by the knowledge he was gifted.

Naruto was finished with his section first, moving to help Sakura who had the largest job. Kakashi finished next and joined them. Sasuke finished minutes after that, and all four of them worked together to pack the last of the scrolls up in minutes.

"Don't worry," Naruto said to Sakura in answer to a question. "We don't have time to completely sort everything right now. We'll do that with the help of the others back in Konoha. Right now, just worry about getting everything packed. We don't have much time."

When the Uzumaki room was finished and all the scrolls were sealed into the white scroll in Naruto's pocket, they moved onto the Yukihira room.

Naruto blinked at a piece of information that flitted into his mind.

He turned to his companions after he found the storage scrolls. "The Yukihira were a small clan of medical-nin's with prodigious chakra control while also being front line fighters. Interesting." He handed a green scroll to Sakura. "You can take care of the iryojutsu section. Left side, all five rows."
Sakura squealed in delight and rushed off.

The other three chuckled.

Naruto continued, "Sasuke, can you handle the weapons?" Right side, back two rows.

"Hn."

Naruto nodded and handed the raven a yellow scroll.

He turned to Kakashi after Sasuke had walked off. "Sensei, you and I will handle the first three rows of the right side. Those shelves contain the work of ninja's that didn't belong to any clan."

Kakashi nodded and Naruto laid a purple scroll on the floor between them.

After Kakashi and Naruto finished with their section, they, along with Sasuke, went to help Sakura who had gotten slightly distracted by the amount of iryojutsu knowledge perfectly preserved upon the shelves.

When Naruto and the other two approached her, she turned to them and exclaimed, "There's scrolls here on things that could be revolutionary to the medical community in Konoha! The amount of lost information I'm finding is incredible!"

Kakashi chuckled and ruffled the pinkette's hair. "I'm glad you're excited, but we really need to work faster, so we can get back to Konoha."

Naruto nodded. "If you want, Sakura, you can ask Sasaki-sensei if he would be willing to help sort out the iryojutsu stuff. I've met him before and he never treated me badly because of Kurama. So, I don't mind if he joins our group."

Sakura turned to Naruto. "Thank you, Naruto. I needed a way to introduce Sasaki-sensei to Shikamaru and Hinata, anyway." Seeing the looks on her family's faces, she elaborated. "I want to have a trained medic on all three of our genin teams. Hinata and Shikamaru have the best chakra control in our group, other than me."

The males nodded and the four of them went back to work on packing.

After finishing with the Yukihira, everything packed up tight in a small, blue scroll with golden edging, came the Ikaru Clan.

"Now, the Ikaru clan was the second largest on Uzu, just behind the Uzumaki. Half the clan were merchants, meaning we'll be dealing with money and expensive items. The other half were Ninja who specialized in ninjutsu of every affinity.

Sasuke, Kakashi-sensei, you two handle the left side, ninjutsu scrolls and books. Sakura, you and I will handle the right, the merchant side."

When everything of the Ikaru Clan was tucked away in a black scroll with red edging, the four moved on to the Morioka Clan.

Blacksmiths. Forged the weapons of Uzushio. Kenjutsu and bukijutsu masters.

Among the weapons laid out upon the shelves of the Morioka clan room, a pair of tanto called to Naruto.
Uzu no Ryuu. Made of chakric steel. Commissioned by the Sandaime Uzukage to give to his successor.

Naruto swallowed.

His grandfather had said he was the heir of Uzu, meaning he was his grandfather's successor. So, these tanto belonged to him.

They were truly a work of art. The blades, eight inches long, still as sharp as the day they were made, were pitch black with a slight shine. There was no handguard, only a black handle, a red dragon wrapping around it. The sheath was entirely black.

The tanto were weighted perfectly and, when tested, were capable of sliding through solid stone. He couldn't wait to see how they would do when channeling his wind nature.

Replacing the tanto he already had on his back with the new ones, Naruto hurried to finish packing everything with his companion's help.

They moved to the last room, filled with the Hayashi Clan's legacy.

Taijutsu masters. Created thousands of fighting styles.

Naruto groaned looking over the room. There were thousands of scrolls, all on taijutsu, placed upon the shelves. It was a good thing there were four of them or this room alone would have taken half a day to pack.

Naruto and Sasuke started from the back, while Sakura and Kakashi started from the front rows. Each of them had their own sealing scroll in their hands.

Finally finished, Naruto and his companions returned to the main chamber.

He was counting out the five scrolls in his hands.

White and silver for Uzumaki, blue and gold for Yukihira, black and red for Ikaru, green and bronze for Morioka, brown and black for Hayashi, and silver for all.

Naruto blinked. "We're missing a scroll."

His companions turned to look at him.

"Any idea where it would be?" Kakashi asked.

He tilted his head.


Following his instincts, Naruto walked to the center of the sealing matrix, bit his thumb, and spread the blood on the center of the seal.

A click resounded throughout the chamber. He stepped back as a pillar started rising from the floor.

Naruto saw a hollow in the stone pillar. He reached in and pulled out a silver scroll.

When he opened it, there were six seals. Five to store the Clan scrolls and a sixth that was locked by
a blood and chakra seal which hummed when he touched a hand to it.

Curious, but out of time, Naruto placed the other five scrolls in their respective seals, closed the scroll, and resolved to find out what was in the sixth seal when they were back in Konoha.

Sometimes, Ino wondered how she had gotten here, training day in and day out, never stopping until she dropped.

She wondered what had motivated her to take the ninja life so seriously, what had brought her to this point where she wouldn't feel right if she hadn't pushed herself past her limits in training that day.

Then, she would look at her friends, see the determination in their eyes and think, 'hell, that's what I see in the mirror.'

Ino would look to her father and see the pride in his eyes, the approval.

She would realize that she had never felt more alive, surrounded by friends (family family family), working harder each day to make sure she could protect them, always.

So, maybe this isn't what her mother would have wanted for her, had she still been alive. But her mother had been a civilian, barely knew what the ninja life was like.

Ino knew now, that the way her mother wanted to raise her would never have prepared her for the life of a kunoichi.

And while she loved her mother, missed her dearly, Ino loved the life she had now.

There was no need to compete with Sakura or any of the other girls in the academy for the love of a boy, no need to starve herself and call it dieting, no need to worry about how she looked in an outfit or if her hair was a mess.

She had real friends who cared for her because of who she was. They understood her, pushed her to better herself, made her feel like she meant something.

Even Sasuke, the boy she had been fawning over for years, was now a friend. She had gotten to know him as a person, not a romantic interest, and, while he was completely different than she had thought, Ino found that she preferred this version of Sasuke.

She preferred the easy camaraderie that came with being friends, the way Sasuke actually looked at her as a person and not as something to be avoided.

And even though her crush on him had died a quick death, she was okay with that.

Ino was young still, and so were her friends. She would find someone someday, but for now, she would live her life and become the best she could.

Kiba has always known there was something different about Naruto.

His instincts had told him that those who shunned the blonde boy, those who hurt him with words and tried to break the boy's spirit, were the ones in the wrong.

He didn't know why adults would be so horrible to a young child, but when he asked his mom, all she told him was that the villagers were cruel to Naruto for something the boy couldn't help.
And Kiba, he didn’t like that.

His pack instincts told him Naruto was someone who should be respected, someone who had the makings of a leader.

He had spent time with the boy before Hinata had dragged him into training with them, had thought that Naruto was a pretty cool guy.

When Kiba had been trusted with Naruto's secret, the reason he was shunned by the civilians, he had been livid.

Naruto was an alpha in his own right, one with a spirit made of steel. The villagers had tried to beat him down, but he always got back up.

That was someone he would follow.

Hell, he could admit it, Naruto was his alpha.

And Kiba would fight to protect his alpha's happiness.

But he knew that hurting the villagers would be hurting Naruto, the blonde had told them all as much.

So, instead, Kiba would become strong enough that he could support his alpha through anything.

Kiba would see to it that the world burned if his alpha asked it of him.

His loyalty was to his pack.

And pack was for life.

Chouji used to worry that he wasn't good enough, would never be good enough.

Kids had made fun of him, excluded him. But at least he still had Shikamaru and Ino. At least he wasn't alone.

Chouji, while not the smartest, paid attention to even the smallest things. He saw things others his age wouldn't bother with.

That's how he knew about Naruto, had learned of the villagers' contempt for the blonde. It's when he paid attention, when he watched the world around him, that he saw Naruto's will of fire.

The blonde boy never gave up, never took things lying down. He didn't have any hate in him, either.

Naruto put on a cheerful facade, but Chouji could see that, sometimes, his smile was a little too wide, his laugh, too high pitched.

Some days, Chouji would find that everything about Naruto was forced. Every mannerism, faked.

And, no matter how much he wanted to help the blonde, Chouji knew he wasn't the best with words, didn't even know where to start.

When he had brought it up with his dad, the man had said to be genuine, to be himself.

So, Chouji would share his chips with Naruto and sit in companionable silence. He would be there
for the blonde, a shoulder to lean on.

When Shikamaru had invited him to train, Chouji was hesitant. He knew that he seemed weak in spars, but really, he just never wanted to hurt his friends.

But Ino had dragged him along and Shikamaru had said it would be good for him, so he went. After all, he trusted those two, they were practically siblings.

Plus, Shikamaru had hinted that, at some point, he would find out why Naruto had changed so much if he went to the group training.

And Chouji had to admit he wanted to know what had happened to his friend.

The first day of training was hell, but Chouji found he enjoyed it.

So, he kept going back.

He made friends, found a joy in training that had never been there before.

Chouji was happy.

And then he was angry.

How dare the villagers treat Naruto like they did because of something he couldn't control!

It made no sense to Chouji.

But Naruto didn't need his anger, didn't want the villagers to pay for their actions.

What Naruto wanted was for the villagers to realize their mistake, to accept him for who he was.

Naruto wanted friends, a family.

And the blonde accepted Chouji into his group, considered him a comrade.

So, he calmed himself, and decided that he would become strong enough to protect his newfound bonds, his precious people, from anything.

He wouldn't care if people said he couldn't do it, if people belittled him. His friends believed in him, encouraged him to do his best every day.

They believed in him, so, he would believe in himself.

It was as simple as that.

Shino didn't think of himself as odd, though he knew other people, mostly civilians and young children, did. It came with being a part of the Aburame Clan.

He grew up mostly alone but for those in his clan, no friends to speak of.

When he started academy, not much changed. Kids still avoided him, and he rarely spoke.

So, it was to his surprise that, one day, he was approached by the Hyūga heiress with an invitation to train with her and a few others.

Never having been offered an opportunity to do something with others his age, even just to train,
Shino gladly accepted the invitation.

Training with a group of what turned out to be six clan kids, led by the supposed lazy genius and the shy Hyūga, turned out to be extremely fulfilling.

It was hell on his body, but the encouragement from the entire group and the sense of camaraderie they gave off kept him coming back.

The first weekend training was when he showed his kikaichu for the first time and, to his surprise, no one was disgusted. Naruto actually thought they were interesting.

Something warm bloomed in his chest.

He was accepted here, with these people, as himself. He wasn’t alone anymore.

Then, weeks later, Naruto was spilling his secret, and Shino could see the worry radiating off of the blonde boy.

Shino’s reaction was half quiet acknowledgement, half anger at the world.

How could the people of this village treat an innocent child so cruelly? How could they treat such a bright star like the dirt beneath their feet?

But, instead of raging at the world, he decided to train to be stronger, to help Naruto accomplish his dream.

He told the blonde as much during a quiet moment when the rest of their group was occupied.

The small, almost unbelieving, smile he got in return strengthened his resolve.

Naruto would never be alone again.

Shino would make sure of that.

Stepping through the gate to Konoha, the sun barely peeking over Hokage mountain and bathing the streets in golden light, Naruto took a deep breath and let a small smile form on his lips.

He was finally home.

Uzushio may have called to him, made his Chakra sing, but Konoha was where he grew up, where his precious people lived.

Even if most of the villagers still shunned him, Naruto had hope that someday, things would be different for him.

He had family here, comrades to protect.

Konoha would always be his home, no matter where he went.

Catching sight of Izumi and Kotetsu struggling to stay awake at the guard station, Naruto chuckled.

Yes, he would protect this peace.

Kakashi held the door open to the Uchiha main house while his three cubs staggered through the
door, barely awake.

It seemed the last week of barely resting had finally caught up to the kids. Even he himself was visibly tired.

Though, he was proud to say, none of them had shown their exhaustion until they were safely behind the gates to the Uchiha compound.

Closing the door behind him, Kakashi chuckled at the sight of his kids collapsed on the couches in the front room.

"Alright you three," he spoke. "Off to bed. We have a few hours to rest and then Sakura needs to head to the hospital and the rest of us need to unpack and get ready for afternoon training."

Naruto was the first to drag himself off the couch and give Sakura and Sasuke help getting up.

Kakashi watched as his three charges walked down the hallway to their room, stumbling and leaning on each other the whole way.

After the door to his cubs' room closed behind them, Kakashi made his way to his own room, immediately changing into his civs.

After putting out his futon, he laid down and fell asleep, dreaming of family and his cubs.

"Sasaki-sensei, Naruto wanted me to invite you to look through the iryojutsu texts we brought back from Uzushiogakure."

Sakura had just entered his office and, before he could get a word out, the pink-haired spitfire had spoken.

Thinking over what she said, Sasaki paused. He had known she was leaving the village, but to go to Uzushio? And she brought back iryojutsu texts?

He was well aware of how much medical knowledge was lost when the Yukihiira Clan was destroyed along with their village.

Of course, he would accept the invitation. A chance to look through the work of some of the finest minds in the medical field was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

And she said Naruto was the one who was inviting him?

Well, actually, that would make sense. The kid was an Uzumaki, had their blood flowing through his veins. If anyone could find the lost knowledge of Uzushio, it would be him.

He looked at his student. "I accept."

Sakura beamed at him. "That's great, Sensei. We're going to be sorting out everything we brought back, with the help of our friends, this afternoon during our usual training. Is that okay with you?"

Sasaki nodded. "I don't have anything important scheduled for today, so that will be fine. Now, let's start your lesson so we'll make it to your training on time."

Sakura pulled out a notebook. "Okay, Sensei. I'm ready when you are."

Sasaki gave her a small smile. He enjoyed teaching students who were so dedicated.
Maybe some of Sakura's friends would have the same drive as her?

Well, he would find out that afternoon.

Naruto hummed under his breath as he unsealed the scrolls and placed them in a line in front of him.

He, Sasuke, and Kakashi had arrived in their clearing moments ago and they were waiting for the rest of their group to show up.

Kakashi-sensei and Sasuke were sitting to either side of him, chatting about random things as they waited.

Naruto stood as he felt familiar chakra signatures approaching the clearing. "Shikamaru, Ino, Chouji!"

Ino and Chouji looked up from their conversation and waved. Shikamaru nodded in Naruto's direction.

A moment later Kiba, Shino, and Hinata entered the clearing.

Naruto, with Sasuke joining him, exchanged hugs with his friends.

Kiba looked around. "Is Sakura still in training?"

Naruto nodded. "Yup. She's gonna bring Sasaki-sensei to help us sort out the iryojutsu scrolls we brought back." He looked to his left. "Speaking of Sakura, there she is."

True to his word, Sakura emerged from the trees, Sasaki Daiki on her heels.

Sakura looked up, "Hey guys! Sorry we're almost late."

After another round of hugs, all nine pre-genin, Kakashi, and Sasaki we're sitting in a circle on the ground.

Naruto looked over the group and nodded. "Alright. Before we get to our training for today, we'll be sorting out everything we brought back from Uzushio. I already promised Sakura and Sasaki-sensei that they could handle the iryojutsu texts." He turned to Sakura. "There's a lot of them, though. Anyone else you want to help you?"

Sakura turned to Hinata and Shikamaru. "If it's okay with you two, I would like your help."

Hinata and Shikamaru nodded and moved to sit by Sakura and Sasaki.

Naruto handed Sakura the scroll containing everything they had on Iryojutsu.

Sakura thanked Naruto and her group moved to a side of the clearing to get to work.

Naruto cleared his throat. "Next, taijutsu. Any volunteers?"

Kiba and Chouji raised their hands.

Naruto nodded. "Okay. Have fun, you two."

Kiba grinned and took their scrolls so they could get to work.

"I'll take the fuinjutsu texts," Naruto spoke. "The kinjutsu and artifacts are already sorted. I know
Sasuke wanted to sort the ninjutsu, and I'll leave the non-clan ninja work to Kakashi-sensei. Ino, Shino, I'll leave you two to sort the weapons, that okay?"

The two nodded and took their scrolls from Naruto.

When Naruto was left alone, he took one last look at everyone scattered around the clearing and then got to work.

"Say, Hinata, Shikamaru, I've been thinking."

Sakura was reading through a text on bone regeneration, keeping her eyes on the book as she spoke.

They had sorted the majority of the medical texts already and Sakura had thought it was time to bring up what was on her mind.

Shikamaru and Hinata stopped what they were doing to look at the pinkette.

Sakura put her book down and looked the two in their eyes, well aware that Sasaki-sensei was paying attention to the conversation.

"I want to have a trained medic on each of our genin teams. You two have the best chakra control on your respective teams, so I thought you would be the best candidates to learn."

Shikamaru hummed. "What brought this idea on?"

Sighing, Sakura looked over Hinata's shoulder, her eyes going unfocused. "When we were on Uzu, if it wasn't for Kurama, Naruto would have died. And it got me thinking. I'm only one person. I can't be there for all eight of you, all the time. Especially right now, when I'm still not skilled enough to treat major injuries.

I just felt so useless, only patching up his small injuries while Kurama worked overtime to heal the internal damage.

I don't want to ever watch any of you get hurt like that and have me be unable to treat you, not again.

Everyone here, they're the only family I've got left. I don't know what I would do without you guys." She fixed her gaze on Shikamaru and Hinata. "Again, I'm only one person. There needs to be more medics among us. Would you two be willing to train in iryojutsu, for the sake of our family?"

Hinata was the first to respond. "Hai. If it's for our family, I'll do anything."

Sakura nodded and looked to Shikamaru.

He sighed. "Troublesome. But, oh well. I'm in."

Sakura beamed. "Thank you so, so much."

Hinata smiled. "It's no problem. But, who will be teaching us?"

Sasaki spoke up. "That would be me."

Sakura blinked. "Really, Sensei? I haven't even asked you yet."

Sasaki nodded. "If your friends are anything like you, spitfire, no one else would be able to handle
training them."

"Oh," Sakura replied. "Thank you, Sensei!"

Sasaki chuckled and ruffled her hair. "It's no problem. I enjoy teaching you, I'm sure I'll enjoy teaching your friends."

Umino Iruka was a young academy teacher. He was fair towards every student, kind, and strong willed.

Being the youngest academy teacher in the history of Konoha was sometimes more trouble than it was worth.

But, he loved teaching, wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. No matter how hard it was sometimes.

He made a point to watch his students, look for concerning signs, things that maybe he could help with.

Lately, a few of his students had changed drastically.

There were nine in total who had banded together, one of them being the blonde Jinchuuriki who seemed like the leader of the group.

If Iruka had been anyone else, he would be worried.

But Iruka had noticed the little things in Naruto, noticed the boy wasn't what he seemed on the outside.

And then, nearly two months ago, Naruto had come to class with a friend by his side, having ditched the idiot persona he usually showed to the world.

Iruka had watched as the blonde boy gained more friends over a short period of time. He had seen as Naruto and his friends left the academy with a silver-haired jonin they called Sensei.

And that jonin just happened to be the Hatake Kakashi, elite jonin, ex-anbu, 'should never be allowed around children' Kakashi.

But the man seemed different to Iruka, less unstable. Maybe the kids were having a good influence on him?

What little Iruka had seen of Kakashi’s interactions with the children showed that he seemed to adore them and they him. So, maybe he wasn't all bad.

But still, those nine were also Iruka's students and he was partially respond for them. He wanted to make sure they were in good hands, were being taken care of.

Because even if he didn't show it much, Iruka cared for all of his kids. But those nine, they were his favorite.

And while they seemed happy, he had to make sure.

They were his kids, dammit!

If anyone hurt them, well, he couldn't be blamed for what he would do.
They should have known better than to mess with Iruka's kids.

Okay, so, maybe that was his ex-anbu side talking.

But, still.

The ex-anbu was as much a part of him as being an academy teacher. It may have been pushed to the wayside, but it was still there.

Maybe he was being paranoid.

Maybe he wasn't.

But Iruka would make sure his kids were safe and happy, even if it killed him.

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