Making Arrangements

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Summary

It takes a Village to make a relationship--Or, at least, a bunch of over-reaching grumpy old farts, a military leader with a bit too much to drink, a nosy but well meaning kunoichi, eight ninken, and the power of youth. And a really cranky chakra monster with nine tails and a penchant for swearing.

Notes

This was first posted on fanfiction.net, and as of March, 2014, will be cross-posted and simultaneously updated on both websites.

Yes, I know the amount of chapters differ between the two sites, but its all the same content, I promise. I just got tired of making new chapters when posting this to its new home. In later chapters, additional mature content which isn't included in the original version on fanfiction.net (if any) will appear here.
Today would be the day that Naruto's childhood inattentiveness came back to bite her in the ass. Iruka always told her that it would eventually, but so far she had cleverly avoided the chūnin's inevitably smug "I told you so." Currently, Naruto was standing outside of the Hokage's office, white-knuckled grip tightening on the unassuming scroll in her hand. Her expression hovered somewhere between horror and nausea, something she'd only exhibited once before in her life, when told that Ichiraku would be closed two weeks for renovations.

*What had her academy teachers told her about this type of mission again?*

*Nothing.*

*Absolutely nothing, so when this mess blew up she could completely blame them, right?*

*Right.*

Somehow, her thoughts weren't as comforting as they should have been. Naruto fought off the edge of hysteria threatening to overcome her as she desperately tried to recall anything that she had been taught that might help her with her current situation.

Naruto Uzumaki couldn't tell you a lot about her Academy experience. If asked, she would reply that it was long, and boring, and that she didn't remember most of it. This would be about the time that she realized Iruka was standing behind her and would receive a slap to the back of her head. Iruka would explain that Naruto's memory lapse was most likely due to the fact that as a child, Naruto skipped lessons as much as possible and often had to be deposited kicking and screaming into her chair hours after class had started by whatever unfortunate ANBU drew the short straw for Naruto-catching duty.

Naruto could say with confidence that the Academy had taught her to be a ninja, but words failed her if she attempted to describe her village's teaching process in detail. In actuality, Konoha's Academy had been fine-tuning a training curriculum that spun children into ninja for decades. Other hidden villages might describe Konohagakure as taking a "sensitive" approach to teaching (if they were feeling polite). The Village Hidden in the Leaves was often ridiculed by other nations for being "soft" and "hesitant" when it came to the ninja arts. Most hidden villages took the position that, no matter how one looked at it, a ninja village survived and thrived by teaching young boys and girls how to become effective killers. Therefore, the majority approach regarding teaching strategies was to desensitize children to killing as quickly as possible through brutal training methods.

Konoha had developed its own ways to desensitize children to the idea of killing, but they took a
longer time to do so. This was, of course, unless the village was at war, then they followed the advanced curriculum (which Iruka could tell you about, but it is entirely irrelevant at this point since Naruto had never experienced it). But what made Konoha’s training methods so different is that the village didn’t believe that the primary purpose of a ninja was to kill, but rather, to protect. Konoha ninjas existed to protect their country, their village, their comrades, their precious people, and the future. To protect effectively required a broader and more complex skill set than that of someone who merely needed to know how to kill.

Thus, the Konohagakure Academy curriculum focused on introducing its charges to a wide variety of subjects. Konoha was unique in encouraging its ninja to exchange knowledge and skills. In a profession where lives were won or lost depending on the secrecy of one’s techniques, this was not an easy thing that the village asked of its shinobi. While Konoha ninjas didn’t lay all their cards down on the Academy classroom tables, they emphasized on the importance of giving Academy children as much information and training as possible. Teachers actively tried to ferret out their students’ particular interests and talents, nurture curiosity, and encourage success in areas outside of the classic defensive and offensive techniques: ninjutsu, taijutsu, and genjutsu. Iruka was invested in each and every child that walked through his classroom doors. He would be embarrassed to admit that it took longer than it should have to become invested in Naruto’s life, but she loved him despite this and he was a sucker who increased his weekly ramen budget whenever she brought up the issue, and as such, they'd made their peace.

One of the ways the Academy taught such a broad curriculum was through its famous lecture series. The lecture series consisted of 87 lectures on set topics. One lecture was given every Thursday each week that the Academy was in session. Once the 87th lecture was given, the Academy began the series again with Lecture 1. This way, every child who entered the Academy around the age of five would have an opportunity to hear every lecture by the time they chose to take the graduation exam. Iruka was responsible for Lecture 75, Advanced Trapping, which taught the children how to increase the effectiveness of traps by making minor adjustments to suit the variables in weather and terrain. Naruto skipped the lecture the first time that it was offered, in her third year of schooling. However, when it was time for Iruka to repeat the lecture, Naruto was present and participating as a demonstrative aid, one of Iruka’s more creative punishments for putting mud in the teacher’s lounge coffee maker earlier that week.

The lectures covered in-depth discussions about concepts that could only be touched upon in the regular classwork. They discussed fūinjutsu, juinjutsu, and senjutsu. Several lectures were devoted to medical ninjutsu, hammering in advanced first aid techniques that might one day save a classmate’s life. Some lectures were devoted to specific types of weaponry. Tokubetsu jōnin would lead the students through practice exercises and see if they could find anyone with natural talent for their preferred area of expertise. Naruto remembered the kenjutsu lecture fondly. No one that day had been singled out by showing exceptional promise, but the day had been long and it had been a great stress reliever to knock Kiba senseless with a wooden stick without reprimand.

The lectures weren’t mandatory. Oftentimes, clan children already knew the information offered in the special sessions or had parents who prohibited them from practicing certain areas of techniques. Additionally, some of the lectures were tailored for gender. Naruto had no idea what the boys discussed in their private lectures, she just wasn’t that curious once Chouji had confirmed that they hadn’t been taught any “super-awesome” ninja techniques or better ways to explode things.

Personally, Naruto found the female lectures excruciatingly boring as they often covered subjects such as flower arranging, which, Naruto was distressed to learn, apparently included an entire language in which she was expected to be proficient. Other common topics included how to wear formal kimonos (like she would ever need to do that as a ninja, please), or how to use face-paints to enhance facial features (she lost interest in that as soon as the teacher confiscated the orange paints).
They were also taught proper ways to serve tea, practiced traditional dances, tested for musical ability, and instructed in the language of fans. (Come on, thought Naruto, exactly how many languages were girls supposed to know? No wonder men complained they couldn't understand them…it was a wonder girls understood themselves).

But, amidst the kunoichi only lectures, Lecture 39 held a place of prominence. Lecture 39 could only be attended by those ten or older and was offered every year. It was the seduction lecture. Naruto sat in the back and rolled her eyes at her classmates, who maintained a constant stream of giggling throughout the period. It was taught by an elderly woman-thin, petite, and stern with silver hair that she kept tidily piled atop of her head in a simple bun. Kiyomi-sama had a no-nonsense attitude that Naruto usually detested in her teachers, but she had an air of confidence and grace that made Naruto hesitant to test the boundaries of acceptable classroom behavior, which she normally did with the subtlety of a battering ram. It helped that Kiyomi-sama neither singled Naruto out for bullying nor completely ignored her, but instead treated her the same as every other young girl with whose education she'd been entrusted. The woman wasn't compassionate by any means, but as she knelt at the front of the room in her conservative, jewel-tone yukata, she addressed everyone in a detached, composed manner which implied that she had done this more times than they had taken breaths of this world's air and would continue to do so long after most of them stopped. After all, she was retired and they would be active ninja soon, their life expectancies were understandably shorter even compared to her considerable age.

Perhaps part of Naruto admired Kiyomi-sama, even if it was somewhat grudgingly. There had to be some reason that this woman was one of the few instructors who Naruto honored by remembering her name. However, this didn't mean that Naruto remembered or paid attention to all of the woman's instructions in any of the several kunoichi lectures that she taught. Neither did it mean that Naruto was particularly interested in the infamous Lecture 39, which kept her female classmates blushing and giggling at random intervals for weeks before and after it was held, much to Iruka's consternation.

Naruto recalled the telling signs of hard won age in Kiyomi-sama's features as she gently addressed the horde of small girls gathered to listen to her words of wisdom. "Remember," the serene woman had said with a face that neither smiled nor frowned, but looked like the reflection of the sky in the lake on a soft, summer day. "You can't control the intelligence that you're given on a target, if it's bad. Other than what can be adjusted by transformation techniques, or soothed away by genjutsu, you can't control, and are not responsible for, the target's tastes. Seduction missions have the potential to affect you more here," and at this the old woman had raised a soft fist to her heart, "and here," the fist moved to gently knock against her temple, "than any other mission if it goes badly and spirals out of your control." Kiyomi had paused for a minute to take a sip of tea, as she always did before emphasizing an important point to her students. "If you forget all I've said, remember this: No matter the technical outcome of a seduction mission, it will be a personal success for you as long you refrain from becoming emotionally attached to the target. Don't give the target's words, opinions, or actions any weight. The target does not get to determine whether you are beautiful, or valuable, successful or important. The target doesn't have that power unless you give it to them. Without an emotional commitment, the target is powerless and you will emerge from your mission successful in the ways that count the most."

Kiyomi-sama said a lot more in the lecture, but those words were the ones that Naruto clung to now, eight years later. Naruto wished she could track down the old woman and force her to answer all the questions that Naruto hadn't been interested in or aware enough to ask as an obnoxious ten year-old. After all, Kiyomi never told the class what to do in a seduction mission where one was invested emotionally in the target before the mission actually began.

Naruto was so screwed.
"In more than one way," chortled an unwelcome mental presence.

"Shut up, Kurama."

Chapter End Notes

Beta: Eurwen de Vrill
The Mission

Chapter Summary

In which Tsunade and Naruto discuss business. Which means, of course, that Tsunade gets drunk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Naruto knew that something was off when she stepped into the Hokage's office, called out "Hey, Granny, what's shakin'?, and wasn't met with a punch through a wall. She didn't even get a tick of the eyebrow. Naruto paled. "Oh God, who died?"

The older blonde snorted and rolled her eyes, flicking her fingers toward the empty chair across from her desk. "Sit down, Uzumaki."

Naruto relaxed a bit at the familiar address and slumped into her seat. While lately it wasn't unusual for Naruto to keep Tsunade company in the Hokage's private office, it was unusual for the girl to be summoned there for a mission assignment. Typically assignments were distributed at the main mission desk, mostly manned by chūnin with occasional supervision from the Hokage. It was rare for the Hokage to call a ninja in for a private conference regarding a mission assignment. Generally the Godaime gave out private assignments only to ANBU or to experienced jōnin when missions required more confidentiality than usual and/or the risk of compromise was particularly high. For Naruto, it was a bizarre experience to report to the mission desk and be told that the Hokage had requested her presence for a private assignment. After the whole Madara mess two years ago, Naruto was regarded as a war hero and Tsunade's unofficial future successor, but Naruto was still only a chūnin in rank. She technically lacked the appropriate clearance for important solo missions, which was why the younger blonde was feeling out of sorts as she kicked her feet, waiting for the Hokage to break the odd tension.

"Leave us, Shizune." Tsunade's brisk command startled the dark haired woman absently sorting through a stack of haphazardly piled papers on the leader's desk. With only a brief, inquisitive look at the pair, Shizune scooped up a happily snuffling Ton-ton and left, closing the door behind her with a wooden click.

The morning sun warmed the highest room of the Hokage Tower and cast a cheery light over the abnormally calm office. Tsunade rested her elbows on the desktop, fingertips pushed together as she regarded the wary teenager sitting on the opposite side of the desk. Over the past few years, the child had repeatedly proved herself to be more than capable of accomplishing any task that the village set for her. However, she still seemed so young from the Hokage's side of the room. Still a little too young to sit in Tsunade's chair, at least. And perhaps too young for the assignment outlined in the slender scroll that Tsunade retrieved from a locked drawer. She set it down between them. It didn't contain an easy task, and while Tsunade understood the necessity of its contents, it didn't mean that she had to like it.

With a groan, the older woman dropped her head onto her fingertips, then took a breath before
channeling chakra to her palm and activating the privacy seal underneath her desk. "This calls for a drink!" The abrupt change of demeanor, from pensive to business (well, what counted as business-like demeanor for Tsunade), set Naruto even more on edge. Tsunade happily pulled out cups and a bottle from her Shizune-proof hiding spot and poured two glasses. Tsunade downed the entirety of hers in seconds as Naruto regarded the other cup with suspicion. "Trust me," Tsunade gasped as she pushed Naruto's glass forward and poured herself another. "You're going to want more than that in you to have this conversation."

Naruto grimaced and followed the woman's orders, realizing that the other probably wouldn't begin the conversation until the younger blonde cooperated. While age had softened some of Naruto's natural boisterous behavior, she still wasn't one to wait patiently for too long. "Gah—" Naruto sputtered, after attempting to down the concoction in one go, "That tastes like shit, why do you like this?"

"You don't drink this one for the flavor," Tsunade wryly advised. "You drink it for the effect."

"What effect—oh." Naruto stopped mid-sentence, an odd, floating feeling creeping upon the edge of her senses.

"That one." Tsunade refilled their drinks.

"That's really quick, Kurama usually keeps me from feeling drinks like this," Naruto mumbled. "It's kind of nice."

Tsunade's forehead crinkled in slight concern. "I should probably be worried that the fox realizes you're going to need that for this conversation, but I think I'll just be grateful for his foresight and get on with the most awkward talk that the two of us will probably ever have."

Naruto giggled uncharacteristically, and then halted, mildly horrified, looking at the cup in her hands as if it were to blame for the unusually girly response that she'd just exhibited. "Just how strong is this crap?"

"Strong enough," Tsunade replied with a bland tone, fingernails of one hand tapping erratically on her desk. Taking a deep breath, the older woman set her own glass down. Having developed a tolerance for the drink, it took quite a bit more to steady her nerves. It was probably very fortunate that the Kyūbi was apparently keeping his warden from holding her liquor or they would run out of liquid courage before it was truly needed.

Straightening, Tsunade focused on the task at hand. "Look, Naruto." Tsunade paused to make eye contact, making sure that the girl stopped entertaining thoughts about sneaking some of Tsunade's sacred stash and bribing certain ramen-stand owners into spiking the drinks of distracted unnamed teammates.

Naruto blinked in response to Tsunade's use of her first name. Generally, it meant that Tsunade was attempting to beat something into the girl's abnormally thick skull and she only barely stopped her well-conditioned flinch.

"Naruto," Tsunade continued, "before I tell you about this mission, I want you to understand that you have the right to refuse it. You don't have to accept it, and if you choose not to do so there will be absolutely no consequences, for either you or your career. Do you understand?"

Naruto frowned. "I—yes, but, isn't every mission important to the village?" "If it wasn't important, it wouldn't be a mission," Tsunade replied, "but the primary objective of this mission doesn't have to be accomplished by you, someone else can do it."

"Then why was I asked?" "Because," Tsunade
admitted with a sigh, "certain parties believe that you are the most," the Hokage’s face twisted awkwardly as she struggled for the most appropriate descriptors, “suitable person to accomplish this objective and that your participation will minimize certain unavoidable outcomes."

"Well then I'll do it—" Naruto was cut off by the smack of a scroll to the face. "Ow!"

"Don't commit to something before you even know what it is, Brat!" Tsunade snapped with a scowl on her face. "Haven't you learned that yet? I swear I ought to drag that perverted teammate of mine from his grave and demand an accounting of what he actually taught you on that 'training trip'—And pick that up," she added as an afterthought, nodding to the scroll now rolling about on the floor.

Naruto sheepishly retrieved it, but her expression soon gave way to curiosity as she considered the item in her hands. "So, what's this then?"

Tsunade watched her potential successor carefully. "You need to understand that this isn't a typical mission. Accepting it will have life-long consequences and will affect every single relationship you have in some form or fashion."

Naruto's hands stilled as blue eyes regarded brown gravely. "Sounds serious."

"Yes," Tsunade nodded, "it is, and it's not something I like to ask of any of my shinobi, but sometimes these missions do come up and, for the most part, they tend to work out in the end." The older blonde leaned back in her chair. "That being said, this mission wasn't commissioned by your typical client. It's from the elders, most notably Homura and Koharu, who have to have their fingers in every cookie jar in the country, and their request is backed by an evaluation from the Psych Division. It is funded by the village itself." "Eh?" Naruto was now thoroughly confused and Tsunade allowed herself some minor amusement at the expressive young woman's expense.

"What the hell do they want me for?"

"It's not necessarily you they want," Tsunade explained patiently, taking the opportunity to reinforce a political lesson. "Remember, the elders look at the village as a whole, and try to determine what is in its best interests both presently and in the long run. Because of that, they take a special interest in identifying what makes our village strong and what will keep that strength for as long as possible. It's that goal, the desire to make sure that the village continues to be strong, that has the elders occasionally sanction missions like this one. They like to refer to them as 'legacy' missions," Tsunade's lips twitched, "but really, that's just a fancy name trying to hide the fact that at its heart this is a village sanctioned and funded seduction mission."

"Oh," Naruto said, eyes unnaturally wide and voice unnaturally small.

"Unfortunately, it's much more complicated, and lasts longer, than the typical seduction mission. It's not necessary for national security and it's not something we would ever accept from a client, which is why you can refuse it."

Naruto squirmed uneasily in her chair. "What makes it complicated?"

"Because seducing the target isn't the primary objective; rather, the main goal is conception," the Hokage said bluntly.

"Excuse me?" Naruto's squeak was met with a dry smile from Tsunade who handed the girl her glass and encouraged her to take another drink.

"The elders want to make sure that certain genetic traits stay alive in Konoha's shinobi population." Naruto's gaze was distant and Tsunade snapped her fingers impatiently. "Naruto, pay attention."
The girl scowled. "I'm sorry, I'm just having a bit of a panic attack over the fact that your freakin' council is trying to buy my - as of yet - unplanned future offspring."

Tsunade pursed her lips. "This isn't about you having a child. Like I said, you can refuse the mission, it's about the target siring a child." Naruto looked at her blankly and Tsunade put a hand to her forehead in aggravation. "Naruto. Think about—think of the Uchiha for a minute."

Instantly on guard, Naruto's entire body froze. "You want me to have the Bastard's baby!," she cried at a volume only Uzumaki women were capable of reaching, making Tsunade quite thankful for the equally unparalleled silencing seals that particular clan had taught the village.

"No! The target isn't the Uchiha, but just," her sentence was broken with a loud sigh, "consider him for a moment," the Godaime hissed through clenched teeth. "He's the last of a very powerful bloodline with a dojutsu feared and appreciated by every major power player in our world. In the past, that same dojutsu has been essential in taming out-of-control bijū that have killed thousands. What happens if that boy dies childless?"

Naruto thought for a moment. "No more sharingan?"

"Yes," the older blonde bit out.

"That doesn't seem like that big of a deal." Naruto offered hesitantly. *Or a bad thing*, she thought privately.

"At first glance, perhaps not," admitted the Hokage, "But think about it on a larger scale. Think about Yamato, we shouldn't have him, his bloodline limit should have died long ago with my ancestors but due to genetic experimentation, which I certainly don't plan on encouraging and I would strongly advise you to adhere to the same policy, he's here. How essential has Yamato been in helping you maintain control when you had difficulties with the fox? What happens if he dies childless and we lose that ability again? What happens if your friends, the Nara and the Yamanaka and the Hyūga become the last of their clans and they die childless?"

"That's not going to happen." Naruto's firm declaration was met with a roll of Tsunade's eyes.

"Think hypothetically with me Naruto, please. It can take centuries for bloodline limits to develop but it took only one night to wipe out almost all of the Uchiha, didn't it? The only reason that didn't happen was because of what many would consider to be misplaced sentiment."

"That wasn't—" Naruto's eyes flashed in anger.

"I know," Tsunade said firmly, "and I pray every day that the same situation doesn't happen on either of our watches. But the fact is that these unique bloodline abilities, whether they are officially classified as bloodline limits or are just genetically inherited propensities for centuries of clan-developed techniques, are invaluable. And they are part of what makes the ninja in our village so strong," Tsunade finished tiredly.

Naruto twiddled her fingers nervously. "What about the seal and Kurama? Isn't childbirth supposed to weaken that?"

"You know that your seal is different from your mother's. Your father designed that thing to avoid the weaknesses inherent in Kushina's seal. Both Minato and Jiraiya were confident that your seal would hold up well no matter the stress on your body. We'll take precautions anyway, but the potential for an incident isn't so high that it should keep you from having children, if you want them." Tsunade stopped and looked to be considering her words for a moment before choosing to continue.
"I'll go ahead and tell you that the elders are in favor of you having children sooner rather than later. They'd like to preserve the Uzumaki traits you inherited."

“That's just silly,” Naruto snorted, "I don't think I got half the cool stuff my Mom could do. I can't even make my hair go all scary like hers."

Tsunade's flat stare put an end to the girl's mutterings. "You inherited longevity, not immortality, brat. One day you won't be the jinchuriki any longer and hopefully we'll be able to transfer the fox… like the situation with Mito-sama and Kushina. It will be easier, and more likely to be successful, if you have direct descendants at the time who have inherited some of your Uzumaki traits."

"Huh, hadn't thought of that." Naruto blinked and Tsunade turned her eyes heavenward, although whether this was in supplication for patience or for her drink to kick in more quickly was up for debate. The two sat in silence, each lost in their own separate thoughts, until it was broken with a sulky, "You don't have any children."

Tsunade graced her with a hard laugh. "That is very much on purpose…and is a private, personal matter."

Naruto looked at the woman in disbelief.

Tsunade glared back, stubbornly refusing to give ground for all of thirty seconds before she diplomatically conceded, "But as this entire conversation is private and personal I'll tell you that once upon a time I very much wanted children. I thought about them and dreamt about what they would be like…” She trailed off, then gathered herself to continue. "But when Dan died, I didn't want them anymore. I couldn't—no child I had then would live up to expectations. I would constantly be comparing, it wouldn't be fair. To anybody. So," she cleared her throat, "I have very purposefully avoided having children much to the dismay of the entire village council. And if you decide to go that route," Tsunade added with a lighter voice, "I will, of course, respect your decision, but you should be aware that even menopause won't stop the village council from getting on your case about propagating your bloodline."

Naruto winced, "That's ok. I think I want kids, someday, that is.” She accompanied her words with an awkward shrug. "Did Ero-sennin have kids?"

Tsunade raised an eyebrow, "No, but it wasn't for lack of trying. I'm sure he would have loved children, but as his doctor, and I'm only saying this because the dead don't really care about medical privileges and he probably would have told you yourself if you'd asked, he couldn't. There was a mission that went badly, we were fed false information about our opponent and expected different strategies and techniques than what we wound up facing. Jiraiya took a blow that was meant for me actually and—well, I could determine the blade was poisoned, but I couldn't identify the substance and couldn't detect any immediate damage. We weren't in a place that we could stop and analyze what he'd been hit with and by the time we were the damage was irreversible."

Naruto grimaced and inspected her empty cup.

Tsunade rolled her shoulders. "That happens in our line of business, couple those kinds of circumstances with serious battle wounds for kunoichi and the short life expectancy…well, the council tends to get nervous when certain people don't reproduce at a young age. But typically," Tsunade said thoughtfully, “they don't intervene unless someone is at high risk and hits thirty with no signs of slowing down."

Naruto choked. "Thirty? Who the hell do they want me to sleep with?" she asked in a high, breathy squeak.
Tsunade pursed her lips and studied the capable young woman sitting in the chair across her desk. "Normally, I'd ask you to accept or refuse without knowing the identity of the target as this is a fairly private matter. If you refuse we'd like to preserve the mission and offer it to another without potential interference on your part."

Naruto turned a rather interesting shade of purple.

"However," Tsunade continued, leaning forward and gesturing for Naruto's empty cup so that she could refill it. "Considering that you already have a relationship with this person, I believe that it's best for you to know what you might be getting into, before you make a decision that will have permanent consequences for the rest of your life. Don't tell the elders," Tsunade added, although neither of them was sure if that last sentence was said in jest.

"So, whose kid do they want me to have then?" Naruto demanded, before taking a big gulp of liquor in preparation for the announcement.

Konoha's Godaime Hokage leaned back in her chair and intertwined her fingers, the perfect picture of serenity. "Hatake Kakashi."

Naruto spewed out her drink in shock, leaving Tsunade scowling and grimacing at the sticky liquid drops now covering the paperwork on her desk.

Naruto laughed loudly and felt a telling wetness in the corners of her eyes as she gulped for air, teetering on the edge of what she suspected was a hysterical breakdown. "That's a good one, Granny. You had me going there for a minute."

"Naruto," Tsunade said patiently, with just a hint of aggravation coloring her tone.

Naruto slapped her knee and jumped from the chair, jumping to address the walls. "You can come out now guys, the joke's on me. It was really funny, totally deserved this as comeuppance for the hell I put all you ANBU through as a kid."

"Naruto," Tsunade repeated not so patiently, eyes narrowing.

"Wow-ee, but that was a laugh," Naruto said, throwing her hands in the air, "who thought of it? Yamato? Kiba? I tip my head to you good sir---Ack!" Naruto's abuse of metaphors was cut off as the Godaime stood, reached over her desk, grabbed a haphazardly bobbing blonde pigtail and yanked the girl back so hard that her head ricocheted off the desk like a rubber ball. "That was uncalled for!" Naruto whined, returning to her seat and rubbing her injury gently.

"Act your age!" Tsunade barked. "And take another drink."

After complying, Naruto gave a small sniff. "So, no joke then?" "No joke." "Argghhh," Naruto cried, somewhat muffled as she threw herself forward against the desk, head resting in her arms and voice carrying through her jacket. "Buddeezzzzzooo0llllleeeee," the girl sobbed.

Tsunade watched, unamused. "I'm sorry, I can't understand you. I'm not sure if it's because you're currently trying to smother yourself to death in horror or because you've reverted to the mentality of a three year old from shock."

Naruto peeked out from her shelter with one blue eye, bitterly regarding her attacker. "I said he's so old! He's Sensei! He's like, ancient, Grandma!"

Tsunade tsked, "First: I'm not old enough to be your grandmother," Ignoring the mumbled "liar" she boldly trudged forward. "Second: Kakashi is only fourteen years older than you, making him thirty
two. While he's outstripped the life expectancy for his gender and profession, he's far from ancient, and he probably still has enough tricks up his sleeves to kick your ass a couple of times if he needs to prove that to you."

Naruto's face took on a sickening shade of green, "Oh please, please, never mention Sensei and the word 'ass' again in the same sentence now that we've had this conversation."

Tsunade raised an eyebrow, "Why, you don't like it?"

"Oh, God!"

"I mean, I'm more of an abs-woman myself, but I can appreciate a fine specimen—"

"Stop! Just stop, crap, whatever you want Godaime-hime-sama, Supreme Ruler of All, I'll give it to you, just stop scarring my brain, oh the pain!" Naruto wailed and Tsunade relented, but not without snickering.

After giving the younger woman a few moments to compose herself, Tsunade broached the subject again. "In all seriousness, Naruto, what are your thoughts on this? The elders are dead set on having this mission begin within the month. These things take time and can be a trial and error process and time may not be something Kakashi has to give. He tends to put himself in increasingly dangerous situations. He was actually better about self-preservation once he left ANBU and took on you kids, but you've all advanced to chūnin now and won't be taking many missions with your genin teammates anymore."

Naruto gazed at her uncomprehendingly.

Tsunade sighed and set down her cup. "Chūnin tend to work with other chūnin, they don't take missions with jōnin very often because they don't need the supervision. We work hard so that we can spare jōnin to supervise genin on their missions but we can't afford to do that with chūnin. That doesn't stop you from training with your team, which I know you've been doing, but surely you've noticed the lack of missions you've been sent out on with your old teammates."

Naruto kept her eyes on the floor. "I just thought that, you know, because of Sasuke's probationary status--I thought that kept him from the missions. And Sakura's needed at the hospital and we're short on ninja so I know that Sensei's been needed for solo missions. I just thought it was a temporary thing because of the hit our manpower took in the last war."

Tsunade frowned. "You've just misinterpreted the temporary part. We are low on manpower, and we need to build up the ranks again. But all countries do. Because of this, every country is in danger of being overworked right now. So yes, Sakura's medical expertise is often needed at the hospital and Sasuke's probation terms keep him from many of the missions you're sent on and Kakashi, as one of our most experienced jōnin, is in high demand. However, this isn't a temporary thing Naruto, it's a natural progression. Think forward a few years: you will have specialized and will probably be tapped to lead a genin squad. As the only better doctor in the village is me, Sakura's skills will be best used by being at the hospital and occasionally taking missions requiring a highly capable field medic—which you don't need. You have your own healing abilities and a genin squad won't require someone of Sakura's level on their missions. The Uchiha will be off probation, maybe, and will most likely apply for ANBU. If he's not there, well, I won't ever trust him with a genin squad. Maybe he'll retire and try to tackle politics as a clan head or try to reform the military police. At the least he'll be taking missions like those Kakashi takes, which tend to be solo assignments. You won't see him."

"I don't understand what any of this has to do with causing Sensei to take more dangerous missions," Naruto bit out, shoulders set, the stubborn line of her jaw highlighting the offense she took to
Tsunade's words.

"I'm not the villain here Naruto." Tsunade frowned at the young blonde. "This is just part of growing up. It’s a good thing that all three of Hatake's students are alive and capable of holding their own in their areas of specialization. Everyone on Team Seven has done their jobs well, and now you are all doing what you can to protect the village and make it stronger, to make it a safer and better world for those that follow you."

Naruto's posture softened slightly in acknowledgment of Tsunade's words. "However, it is no hidden secret that Hatake isn't as mentally stable—" the Hokage raised a hand to stop Naruto's protesting voice. "He's not as sound as I'd like him to be. He's lived a hard life. Oh yes, he meets Psych Division's standards for fitness for active duty, but the last few years haven't passed without consequences."

Naruto seemed bewildered. "He seems happy enough to me. I mean, he's still reading those damn perverted books all the time and showing up late to everything."

"Naruto," Tsunade said in exasperation, "look underneath the underneath. This is a man whose mother died giving birth to him, who found his father's body after said father committed suicide, who lost his second set of parental figures and all his teammates before he finished puberty. Frankly, I'm shocked he lived through ANBU. I've read his records, so has Psych Division—the kid had a death wish back then. He didn't stop taking high-risk missions until he accepted a genin squad—you. From that point on he turned down potentially life-threatening solo missions. He went out on some solo missions yes, but he only started taking high-risk missions about five months ago."

"What, why?" Naruto blurted out.

"Think, Naruto," Tsunade said, rolling her eyes, "What happened five months ago?"

Naruto bit her lip. "Sasuke-bastard and I finally officially passed the chūnin exams?"

"Yes." The Hokage waved a finger at her companion. "You, and the Uchiha, and Sakura--all his students were finally chūnin. He wasn't needed to supervise a genin team anymore."

"That's not fair," muttered Naruto. "It doesn't mean we don't need him."

"Well, then maybe you need to find a way to make him realize that…regardless of whether you accept this mission or not."

"So," began Naruto, "Kaka-Sensei recently started taking super dangerous missions and now that the war’s been over for a while and the rebuilding efforts are almost completed, the elders are thinking about ways to brace our limited manpower…and somehow that got them thinking about who was at risk for dying without an heir?"

"Very good, now that I know that you get it, tell me what you think about it." The Hokage rocked back and folded her arms, scrutinizing the young woman's face carefully as she pondered a response.

"I dunno," Naruto pulled absently on a pig tail, worrying the end of the strands between her fingers. "I never thought," the normally vocal girl grew strangely quiet, "it’s my sensei, you know? What would you have done if they’d asked you to sleep with your sensei?"

"I would have refused." Tsunade answered promptly. "But my situation was much different from yours. At your age, I was in a fairly serious relationship with a man I loved and my sensei was very much happily married with a sickeningly adorable snot-nosed brat and plans for more."
"Ahhh!" Naruto voice was frustrated and she grabbed her knees with her hands. "What happens if I say no?" she asked weakly.

"To you? Absolutely nothing. I told you earlier that you have the right to refuse this mission and that if you do so there will be no negative consequences for your career."

Naruto's eyes reflected an unusual (and most likely temporary) maturity. "But the mission doesn't end, does it? You'll ask someone else to do it?"

Tsunade inclined her head. "The elders will, yes."

Naruto cast her gaze toward the floor, taking on what Tsunade had come to label as her 'thinking' posture. Eventually, she spoke. "You said earlier that I was being asked because someone thought I was the best person for the job, and that maybe if I took the job, certain things wouldn't happen. Could you tell me more about that?"

Tsunade smiled, "Always good to hear proof that head of yours has more than wool in it." Ignoring the responsive huff, the older blonde continued. "When the elders decide that a legacy mission is in order, they turn the target’s name over to the Psych Division. The elders don't actually determine who they ask to accomplish the mission. In fact, the Psych Division and the Hokage are the only ones who have access to the mission file, which will never be recorded and will be destroyed upon completion. All the information that the elders will receive regarding the mission are basic status updates: that it has been accepted, is ongoing, encountering setbacks, completed, and so on."

"Why all the secrecy?" Naruto asked with interest.

"These are people's families, Naruto. How the mission is carried out is left up to the person who agrees to take it. It is not uncommon for the mission to be carried out by someone who is already close to the target. Nor is it uncommon for this type of mission to conclude in a marriage, or a serious long-term relationship. It creates unnecessary drama to leave records around indicating that someone's child was conceived as the result of village interference."

"I want to know how that works exactly, I mean with the kid and all, but first, why does Psych think I'm the best for this?" Naruto, who normally had the attention span shorter than an Inuzuka puppy's, refused to be distracted.

"Psych thinks," Tsunade drawled, "that, quite frankly, this mission isn't going to be successful."

Naruto's eyes bulged. "Then why in the names of the nine bijū are you asking me to do this?"

The Sannin laughed. "Considering all the variables, Psych thinks that if anyone has a chance at making this work, it's you. Kakashi, despite his public devotion to porn, has, for all appearances, been in a committed relationship with his books and his hands for the past decade or so."

Naruto's face scrunched in distaste, more likely at hearing her sensei's sex life described at all than for the acts described.

Tsunade waved a hand amiably. "We have nothing on Hatake ever having a romantic attachment. I don't have a single mission report from him where he noted that he had to do so much as kiss a serving girl for information. The only time he ever set foot in a brothel was with his sensei to retrieve my teammate's sorry ass. If he didn't read those books, Psych wouldn't even know that he was interested in women. Hell," Tsunade shrugged a shoulder, "for all I know, he's overcompensating for the fact that he likes men and no one ever taught him how to deal with it."

Naruto choked and flailed a bit. "How am I supposed to be any help then?" "Psych evaluated his
known connections for levels of attachment." Tsunade held up two fingers. "Of those, the highest are you and Sakura." "Can't you give it to her, she'd probably be so much better at this type of thing. I mean, she's practically a closet pervert herself, have you seen those girly magazines she and Ino read and how they talk about men—"

Tsunade cut off Naruto's increasingly hysterical blather. "Sakura can't be considered."

"Why the hell not?" Naruto shrieked.

"Because Sakura is already, at least Psych considers her to be, in a relationship with Uchiha. Yes, shut up, I know they say they aren't together, but Psych doesn't take words at face value and from their interviews and observations they've concluded that because of Uchiha's trust issues and Sakura's own feelings, it's most likely that if Sasuke ever settles down it will be with her." Tsunade paused, and then added, "Or you---"

"No!" Naruto said quickly, with unexpected force. "I couldn't—not after…" Naruto's vision was clouded with red eyes, lightning tearing apart her chest and making it hard to breathe and the memory of running, and searching, and wanting only to be abandoned again. "I could never trust him for that," she finished with a raspy voice, leaning forward to fill her glass on her own and gulping down the mess without wincing.

"Yes," Tsunade said, face emotionless, "Psych thought so too. It's very likely that if the Uchiha and Sakura don't come together naturally within a few years that Sakura will find herself having a similar conversation with me. Or perhaps," Tsunade added with a dry smile, "if I'm lucky, you'll be having that conversation with Sakura by that time."

Naruto grimaced. "That's not funny."

"No," Tsunade agreed. "But that's life." Tsunade took another drink and sighed. "Anyway, since Sakura is, well, spoken for, in a sense, you are Kakashi's most important female relationship, congratulations."

"But why me and not some stranger?"

Tsunade looked at the girl incredulously. "You don't know what your sensei's face looks like and you've known the man for over five years. You think that he's going to let some strange woman close enough for sex?"

"Oh. Good point."

"Besides," Tsunade huffed, "Psych thinks that you and Hatake have an acceptable potential compatibility as long-term partners—don't ask, I don't know what the hell they mean. And they think that Kakashi is more likely to indulge and open up to you emotionally." Tsunade blinked and regarded the girl she fondly, privately thought of as a sister as seriously as she could with her current level of inebriation. "Good luck with that."

"So, how do they expect me to do this? Am I supposed to get him drunk? Is this supposed to be a one night stand or do they want me to marry the guy?" Naruto pulled her knees to her chest and twitched anxiously.

Tsunade just shrugged. "It's completely up to you about how to approach this and how long or short term you want this thing to be. You're not even required to raise the child or tell Hatake that it's his, and if you wanted to you could place it for adoption."

Naruto stilled. "I wouldn't do that."
Tsunade's lips twitched gently, fighting a smile, as she softly said, "I didn't think you would. But I have to inform you that it's an option."

Naruto rubbed at her eyes. The pair had been talking for almost an hour and the emotional toll of the conversation was severe. "So, I'm just supposed to come up with this by myself? Do this all on my own? Raise this kid on my own?"

"You don't have to." Tsunade slapped a palm on the desk to gain attention. "Look at me, Naruto. You don't have to accept this mission. And if you do, you won't be entirely on your own. You'll have some support. First, this is a mission and it does come with a certain pay and benefits." Naruto blanched slightly, but Tsunade raised a hand to caution her from speaking. "Hear me out, Naruto. It's true that some women refuse to accept payment for this type of mission. But regardless of whether or not you accept the 'official' payment, know that all of your medical bills related to the mission will be covered by the Village, not just the 60% that are usually covered for regular mission related hospital fees." Naruto nodded weakly. Tsunade frowned, but continued. "Also, I would recommend accepting the payment if you take the mission. Consider it a trust fund for your child and use it to buy baby supplies...those little things are awfully expensive."

Naruto scrunched her face but didn't comment on the money issue, instead asking, "Can I talk to others about this? Get some opinions?"

Tsunade's gaze was compassionate but her answer was a firm no. "You can't talk to others about the 'mission,' but you can talk to them about relationships you are in, events you experience, your physical condition and who is responsible for that condition."

Tsunade worded her response carefully and Naruto absently noted that she'd probably have to check in again with Tsunade about what she could and couldn't talk about if she decided to go through with this.

"However," Tsunade hesitated, then grimaced and continued. "If you decide to accept this mission, you'll be assigned a 'mentor' of sorts. That woman will have accepted a similar mission and successfully completed it. You will be able to fully share all aspects of the mission with this woman and she will be willing to advise you and offer emotional support."

Naruto looked hopefully at the Hokage. "Can I talk with her now?"

"No," said Tsunade regretfully, "For the security reasons I mentioned earlier, the policy is not to disclose this mentor unless you have accepted the mission. You have to decide whether to accept or reject this mission based entirely on your own thoughts and desires."

Naruto bowed her head.

"I can give you a day or two to think on it," the older blonde said gently, "this decision doesn't have to be made immediately."

Naruto nodded, thoughts clearly elsewhere. Hesitantly she asked, "What happens...if this ends badly?"

Tsunade straightened and settled back in her chair. "Let's think about it for a moment. If you agree to this, you could attempt to seduce Kakashi and nothing could happen. Maybe he's asexual...maybe he's into men...maybe he's completely oblivious and can only think of you as an adorable child and sees himself as a doting father."

"Oh crap." Naruto cradled head in her hands.
Tsunade scoffed, "Psych thinks that is highly unlikely, by the way. If they thought he saw you in a paternal light they wouldn't have recommended this strategy. You're an emotional pillar for Kakashi, they don't want to cost him that."

Naruto just flinched and waved at the woman to continue.

Tsunade rolled her eyes. "So, you try to sleep with your sensei and nothing happens. You might have a few awkward memories but other than that you've not rocked the status quo. Possibility Two: You sleep with your sensei once or twice, however many times, but you don't conceive. Results: Kakashi has a freak-out, which you can probably work through, or you develop a long-term relationship which lasts for however long you both like and I imagine it'll be fulfilling enough even without children. Possibility Three: He knocks you up. It depends on you, then, and whether or not you tell him about the child, decide to keep the child, or how involved you let him be in the child's life."

Naruto looked at her miserably. "What if he hates me forever?"

Tsunade gently chided the girl. "That man loves you, and he loves this village too. Even if he finds out you seduced him on orders, even if you ditch him the moment you get pregnant and let the kid be adopted by the Kazekage, he wouldn't hate you. He might be a bit miffed, but Hatake is an intelligent and mostly rational man, he'll at least hear you out and respect your decisions as a kunoichi of the village."

Naruto gave a weak laugh. "Oh hell no, can you imagine how traumatized that kid would be with Kankuro as an Uncle? Those puppets are freaky." She sniffed, "That kid would have complexes within complexes before he could hold a kunai."

"Well we can't have that, can we?" Tsunade stood and stretched. "Take a few days and think about it. I have a meeting with the military police and I——"

"No." Naruto shook her head. She took a shaky breath and rose from her seat. "I already know my answer."

"Brat," Tsunade scowled, hands planted aggressively on her hips, "What did I say about rushing into things?"

"I'm not." Naruto's voice gained confidence. "I mean, we've been talking about this for ages, at least an hour, and I can't talk to anybody else about it, I've already thought through everything I can think about it."

"Well, that's reassuring," mumbled Tsunade.

Naruto flicked antsy blue eyes at the woman. "I mean, I know it's not an ideal situation, you know. But like you said, it's not like I've got other plans——"

"I never said that——"

"You implied it."

"What country were you in for the past hour?"

"Granny! It's like, Psych thinks I'm the best for this right? That it was either me or Sakura. But, you said the mission would still go on even if I turned it down. So who else is being considered then?"

The two fierce women locked eyes in a brief battle of wills before Tsunade reluctantly admitted,
"There are some other women who are being considered, but Psych thinks that the best approach in this situation is to use someone who Hatake is already emotionally invested in…the others are acquaintances at best and Psych worries about introducing them to the man in such a manner."

"Right," Naruto stated. "So, it's either let me have a go at it and even see if Sensei can be seduced or let some other strange girls try to squirm their way into his heart on orders as a mission and cross my fingers and hope for the best, right?"

"Well," Tsunade said wryly, "when you put it that way…"

"Put it this way, Hokage-sama," Naruto said with conviction, swiping the scroll batted around throughout the conversation from the older woman's desk. "People who abandon the mission are trash, but people who abandon their teammates are worse than trash. I'm not going to abandon Sensei to this crazy scheme or let other people try to play him and mess him up and then have control over his kid. I'll do this myself and try to do the least amount of damage I can, since those smelly old geezers say it must be done." With that declaration off her chest, the girl marched out of the room.

The Hokage rolled her eyes and returned to her desk, tearing off a corner of a document awaiting her signature, carefully writing on the small slip of paper. By the time she blew the ink dry, Naruto had sheepishly returned to the room.

"Can I know who my mentor is supposed to be now?"

Tsunade held out the scrap of paper with an admonishing gaze. "This is her address, she knows to expect a girl, but she doesn't know who she is expecting or who the target is. You can tell her as much or as little about the mission as you like. Don't visit too late, she's got a kid."

Naruto mumbled her thanks and nodded, slinking out of the room and brushing shoulders with Shizune as she made a less dramatic exit.

Shizune, Ton-ton trotting behind her, approached her mentor curiously. "What was that all about?"

"Classified. She accepted a mission." The Hokage sighed and downed the last of her cup before Shizune could realize what was in it. "I bet you she completes it successfully and that in five years there will be absolute hell to pay because of it."

Shizune sniffed. "Ha. I'll take that bet and if you lose, you have to hand over every bottle you have of this brand." She took the empty liquor bottle from the desk and waved it reproachfully in her mentors face. "You told me you got rid of all this! I specifically remember a promise not to bring this particular brand in for meetings."

"Don't take me up on a bet!" Tsunade hissed. "Now look what you've done," she said with a grumble as she miserably regarded the paperwork that Shizune had added to her desk upon returning to the office. "I don't know which is worse, the consoling I'll have to do if she fails or the chaos that could happen if she succeeds."

Chapter End Notes

Beta: Eurwen de Vrill
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Naruto breaks her nose, drinks twenty seven different kinds of alcohol, and gets Kyūbi's blessing…sort of.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Three: Frienemies

THWACK.

Naruto groaned and stumbled backward, tripping over some dropped weaponry and falling roughly on her butt in the mud. Her hands instinctively flew to her face as she gingerly touched her nose. Tears of pain gathered in the corners of her eyes as she confirmed that it was broken.

"Naruto!" A voice called out in concern and Naruto focused just long enough to make out the blurry image of a pink-haired female leaning over her. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

Naruto closed her eyes. "Twelve."

"She'll be fine," huffed Sakura, leaning forward with glowing green hands to assess the damage.

Naruto clenched her hand around a discarded kunai and dug it into the ground as Sakura, without warning, set her nose. At least I didn't cry. Naruto blinked rapidly, trying to make good on that thought as Sakura began to heal the broken blood vessels in her face and soothe out the blood that would normally cause bruising.

When her vision cleared and the several hazy versions of Sakura solidified into one, Naruto relocated her attacker standing a dozen feet away, arms crossed and scowling, katana stuck in the ground by his side. The grim young man didn't look the least bit sorry that his roundhouse kick had almost shattered his teammate's face.

"What's wrong with you, Loser?" Sasuke eyed the sprawled blonde with contempt, sounding personally offended. "You've been off all day."

"Good as new." Sakura announced, rocking back on her heels. "With Kurama's help, by suppertime you won't even feel sore." She sighed. "So unfair."

Naruto forlornly tore at the forest floor with her kunai. "I just have a lot on my mind today. Sorry, I probably should have passed on sparring."

"Moron." Sasuke sheathed his katana and turned away. "Come find me when your brain is working again…or, rather, since I've never actually known it to work in the first place, come find me when you can put one foot in front of another without eating dirt." He stalked off, clearly dismissing the situation as beneath his concern.
"Jackass!" Naruto yelled at his retreating back, watching him disappear, presumably heading for another training ground and partners capable of combating basic taijutsu. Naruto collapsed flat onto her back with a sigh, looking for glimpses of the sunset through the dense green canopy overhead.

Sakura watched their teammate leave with a stony expression. It had been a long time since she'd rushed to Sasuke's defense at Naruto's name-calling. At the moment, she was still struggling with the urge to chase after the boy, but now the urge was to chase after him and scold him for his poor treatment of a friend rather than an attempt to capture his affection. She pushed thoughts of Sasuke away with practiced determination and sat down cross-legged next to the sprawling blonde.

"Must really be something to distract you mid-spar." The medic-nin watched her companion's unusually pensive face carefully for anything that might shed light on the girl's troubles.

Naruto just shrugged slightly, as best she could when lying flat against the ground. "I've just got a lot on my mind. I'll deal with it, I just need some time to wrap my head around it all."

Naruto normally enjoyed the afternoon sparring sessions with her teammates. Tsunade had been right when she had noted that the trio tried to spend every afternoon possible training together. It was more of an unspoken tradition that whenever anyone was free for an afternoon they headed to Training Ground Three and sparred with whoever they met. These days, when Naruto came, it was more likely than not that the forest and field would be empty. It made it all the more special when the three of them actually were able to meet, which was why Naruto hadn't begged off sparring for the afternoon.

Sakura relaxed in the quiet for a few moments, listening to the birds beginning to chirp again now that the ninja had halted their unpredictable and violent movements. "Did you get a mission?"

Naruto grimaced, pulling herself up so that she was sitting next to the girl. "I can't talk about it," she answered honestly. Naruto knew herself well enough to acknowledge that she wasn't a good liar and it would be better to let Sakura know that the information was classified than to arouse the girl's curiosity with lies or pathetic attempts to change the subject. Sakura could respect "classified," but if she thought that Naruto was lying to her then any investigation into the cause was fair game, including raiding Tsunade's desk in a moment of distraction. They were ninja after all, information meant power and survival.

Sakura sighed, slightly disappointed. "Anything I can do to help?" She didn't truly expect an answer. When her teammate got into a funk like this, typically the only thing that could solve it was Naruto personally working through her feelings on the issue. A few days of gloominess, which would put all the girl's friends on edge, and Naruto would pop back to her bright, buoyant self.

Surprisingly, Naruto stopped herself in the midst of shaking her head. "Actually," said the blonde seriously, "I think I should try to get drunk."

Sakura's green eyes widened. Then she stood and held out her hands to pull her companion to her feet. "I think I can manage that," she laughed.

"You're like a camel," Sakura ground out, eyeing the blonde next to her with an envious look at odds with her previous comment. "Where does it all go? How do you not have to pee like crazy?"

Naruto finished off her twenty-third glass of the evening, dismayed to discover that Kurama either wasn't as attentive as he had been earlier that morning, or was purposefully being contrary and vindictive. Although, come to think about it, perhaps she hadn't been feeling tipsy this morning so much as an unbalancing mix of incredulous and horrified.
Ino laughed loudly, an odd flush to her cheeks as she sat across from the pair, sitting casually next to a visibly uncomfortable Hinata. "I think she's my new hero," she crowed, "just think of how much money we could make if we got people to challenge her to a drinking contest."

"Ummm….maybe we should stop," the dark haired heiress mumbled as Ino called out for another round of drinks.

"No way." The ringleader tossed her blonde ponytail over her shoulder. "We haven't even figured out what's wrong with the girl yet."

"The girl is right here, Ino, and nothing is wrong." Naruto's exasperated response slid off Ino's shoulders like oil meeting water.

"Pffshhh," scoffed Ino. "If nothing was wrong, we wouldn't be here. Girls' Nights aren't successful unless you come away with at least some juicy tidbit and my experienced gossip-sniffing nose says that you, my dear, are more valuable than dirt on the Daimyo tonight."

"Ino," scolded Sakura, "If she doesn't want to talk—"

The Yamanaka leaned across the table and locked eyes with Naruto. "It's a boy, isn't it?"

Naruto's blush and subsequent stuttering denial did nothing to deter the determined girl.

"I knew I was right!" Ino slumped back to her chair victoriously and Hinata regarded the jinchūriki curiously.

Sakura stopped mid eye-roll and turned to face her teammate. "There's a boy?" Sakura frowned. "Why didn't you tell me there was a boy?"

"There is no boy!"

"Liar!" cried Ino. "You're redder than Hinata when Kiba flirts with her in public!"

"Am not," retorted Naruto, face burning. "There's not a boy!" She turned to Sakura pleadingly, "There's not a boy, Sakura-chan."

Sakura hmmed thoughtfully, but didn't look like she believed her teammate's refutations.

"Oh," Ino chuckled darkly, "there is definitely a boy. Now who is he? Come, come now, 'fess up. Auntie Ino will tell you exactly what to do to satisfy your crush."

Naruto blushed even more and Hinata, sympathetic to Ino's newest prey, began to encourage the others to cease the inquisition, but to no avail.

Sakura drummed her fingers anxiously on the table top. "It's not Sasuke is it?" The girl's tone was filled with dread.

"No!" exclaimed Naruto, struggling to refrain from choking on her drink. "It is definitely, definitely, not the Bastard."

Sakura's shoulders relaxed in relief. "Good. I mean, not that I still like him that way, but I don't think that you'd be good for one another."

"Right," drawled Ino.

"No, really," Sakura said defensively, "I just don't think he's in a good place right now…he needs
some more time to get his head on his shoulders right before he tries to be emotionally involved with someone."

"Hmm….since Daddy is violently opposed to the idea of me canoodling with Village traitors, I'll have to trust your word on that one." The haughty blonde fixed her gaze on Naruto. "But adorable pet names aside, Miss Unpredictable Kunoichi here isn't lying when she says her crush isn't the guy with, indisputably, the nicest abs in the Konoha." Ino tapped a manicured fingernail against her chin and eyed her target with an intelligent, speculative gaze. "So then, let's play a game."

Naruto braced herself. Shikamaru might be the smartest of her peers in strategy, but no one their age could best Ino's abilities in psychology. Ino would know the source of Naruto's anxiety regardless of the newest chūnin's verbal response. She was like a living lie detector.

Maybe this wasn't the best idea, thought Naruto nervously. Hinata bit her lip but was apparently curious enough not to protest the turn of events and Sakura, satisfied that Sasuke was out of the running, seemed content to lean back and watch Ino work.

"Sai?" asked the intelligence specialist.

Naruto's face wrinkled in distaste.

"Kiba?"

Hinata shrunk a little, but relaxed when Ino rapidly continued, "No, it's not him."

Ino began to count on her fingers as she listed names. "Shino? Chouji? Oh, please not Shikamaru… no, good? Lee? You're not cradle-robbing are you, I know he's vocal but Konohamaru is still a bit too young for you for at least two more years."

"No!" sputtered Naruto indignantly. Sakura directed a flat look at her best friend/rival/thing.

"What?" shrugged Ino. "He shows promise, give him two more years and you'll be reconsidering that opinion when he grows into Asuma-sensei's shoulders." Hinata's blush was ignored by Ino, who bit her lip in concentration until an odd look crossed her face.

"It's not Iruka-sensei, it it?"

"Ino!"

"No, not him then." Ino defended herself, "Had to check, sometimes sibling relationships evolve into other things if there is no biological connection."

Naruto downed another drink and desperately wished Kurama would stop intervening with her biological processes.

"Someone outside the village then? You know as much as the Kazekage adores you, long distance relationships like that are a pill…" Ino trailed off, intently studying Naruto's face for hints.

"No," she finally said with finality. "It's definitely someone in the village and it's someone we know or you wouldn't be so guarded about it all."

Sakura finally decided to give the pig-tailed blonde a break. "There are people in this village that you don't know Ino. And there are plenty of ninja our own age who we don't regularly interact with, she could just be nervous about the possibility of us knowing the guy."

Ino's pout temporarily fled as an idea hit her. "Is it a girl?" She settled back down into a sulk at
Naruto's subsequent flail of arms. "No, it's a guy, I knew I couldn't have read you wrong on that
one…" Ino trailed off, wracking her brain for ideas about the identity of Naruto's supposed love
interest.

Sakura stood with a sigh. "I'm going home. I'll be in surgery in the morning and I need to be well-
rested."

Hinata rose. "I, too, need to return to my house at a reasonable hour." She bowed slightly to the
group. "Thank you for a pleasant evening." She blushed slightly as she rose. "It is nice to be able to
spend time with friends." She headed for the door, where an unfamiliar Hyūga rose from his stool to
accompany her out into the night.

"That girl…" Ino shook her head as she rose, pulling some money out of her purse and contributing
to the pile in the center of the table already started by the other three girls.

Sakura gave a grunt of agreement. "Come on Naruto, I'll walk you home." She grabbed Naruto's
hand and tugged her sharply out of the booth. She ignored the girl's protests and pulled her outside.
"See you tomorrow, Ino-pig!"

Once they'd left the restaurant, Sakura released her teammate and they walked companionably down
the relatively empty, moon-lit roads of the village.

Naruto rubbed her wrist. "I can walk home by myself, you know."

Sakura snorted. "Forgive me if I don't test that theory after watching you imbibe twenty-seven
glasses of different alcoholic beverages over the past two hours."

"I was testing a hypothesis," Naruto said with a grin.

"And the results?"

"Classified."

"Right." Sakura shook her head and playfully pushed her companion. "Next time you feel like
testing the same hypothesis, let me know. Ino was right about one thing, we can make a killing if we
play our cards right in a bar and start a drinking contest."

Sakura stopped as they reached Naruto's apartment. It wasn't that far from Sakura's residence and
only required that she go a few blocks out of her way. Sakura didn't mind at all, especially
considering the mood that Naruto had been in that day. "Will you be alright?"

"Yeah." Naruto flashed her friend a reassuring smile. "Really, Sakura-chan, don't worry about me,
I'll be right as rain in a day or so."

"You know you can talk to me—"

"I do," said Naruto soberly. "And I will when I can, promise of a lifetime."

Sakura's lips twitched at the familiar phrase. "Fine, then. Sleep well, Naru-chan."

Naruto spent all night staring at the ceiling of her apartment, stomach churning with unresolved fear
and tension. What have I gotten myself into?

She looked at the clock: 2 A.M. She rolled over and fluffed her pillow. "It's too hot," she mumbled,
kicking off her blankets and stumbling over to crack open the window. She pushed her head against
the cool window pane, looking out at the dark, sleepy houses. Stretching her senses, she could feel the light glow of chakra as a few ninja patrolled the village from the rooftops; she knew every single one and found their attention reassuring, but it didn't offer her enough comfort to get some sleep tonight.

She took a deep breath and returned to bed, but instead of climbing under the covers she sat atop them. She settled herself down to meditate and closed her eyes. Forcing herself to relax, she measured her breathing and reached for the familiar presence of her bijū.

**What do you think of this whole mess, Kurama?**

She didn't receive an answer at first, but she felt movement within her, almost like a large cat unfurling itself after a long nap in its favorite patch of sunshine.

*I was sleeping, Brat.* The voice was deeper than any sound that a human could produce and she felt it echo in her bones despite the fact that it existed only in her mind.

*I thought that if I couldn't sleep I could at least share the gift of my insomnia.*

Kurama took his time responding. Naruto imagined him licking his claws. (Not that she would ever admit that to him, he hated being compared to a cat…those inferior upstarts).

The only reason you won't be waking up feeling like the drums of war are sounding in your head tomorrow is because of my intervention. I would be more grateful, if I were you.

*I'm groveling at your feet, Oh Great One.*

As well you should, it's only right. Kyūbi sniffed and settled himself as if he was a king lounging on his throne, hearing the mundane complaints of his subjects.

Naruto barely stopped herself from laughing, but sobered quickly when she remembered why she had reached out to her old companion.

*I care not,* said the fox, unprompted, *for your ordinary, boring affairs. Mate with the male, spread your legs and have so many kits that they eat you out of den and forest. It matters not to me.*

Gee, that was polite. Sarcasm bled into her thoughts but did little to rile the Kyūbi. *Somebody woke up on the wrong side of the cage today.*

*May all your spawn have nine tails from birth.*

Naruto was fairly certain that was some type of curse in fox-speech, but as she didn't understand it she shrugged it off and prodded the reluctant creature to participate in the conversation.

*I know you pay more attention to my surroundings than you let on,* she began carefully, *and I know that you have more experience observing human relationships than any human can claim to have themselves. A little bit of flattery never hurt when dealing with an ornery bijū. Can I...will this work?*

For a long time, there was silence and Naruto resigned herself to the fact that Kurama wouldn't be weighing in anymore on this issue. Technically, he'd given her his blessing to go forth and multiply, as it were. She was just going to have to be content with the comments that he'd shared.

*That particular talking monkey is better than he believes himself to be,* Kurama's words rang forth reluctantly. *He will be a fine mate. He will give you strong kits, and he will ensure that they are protected and provided for until they leave your den.*
It was comments like these that reminded Naruto just how different Kurama's perspective on life was from her own. The bijū was a chakra monster, but had been given the form of a fox and still tended to approach life as a fox might on most occasions. Naruto restructured her question. Yes, but will he even want to be my mate?

The response was given with a mixture of surprise and arrogance. Why would he refuse? There is no talking monkey stronger than you and the pair of you are young and healthy. Your kits will be powerful. He should be honored that I would consider allowing you to invite him to your den. His choice of company leaves much to be desired (Naruto could only assume that he was referring to Kakashi's dogs), but no talking monkey can be perfect.

Naruto could feel the Kyūbi pondering the issue a bit more, trying to understand the source of Naruto's anxiety. Eventually, the fox settled for offering, If he refuses, I can eat him.

You can't eat him, Kurama. Naruto could feel the Kyūbi's disagreement with her words, but the chakra creature held his tongue rather than restart an old and frequent argument. I suppose I should thank you for your blessing—

Blessing? You have my reluctantly won tolerance for the situation, don't fool yourself, mortal. Kyūbi began to curl himself up within the seal, settling in for a deep sleep. And mind you, one of those kits better be taught to treat me properly, I won't give up my current way of living just because my next jailer is a bit skittish with my company.

Naruto half-heartedly listened to the fox's irritated mumblings about preparing the next jinchūrikki. She didn't really want to deal with that at the moment. She dropped back to the bed with a groan and resolved to count ceiling cracks until dawn.

At a reasonable hour the next morning, Naruto donned some rarely used civilian attire (orange shirt, loose pants and sandals). She wasn't sure who she was going to see and she didn't want to come across as too intimidating. Running a barely bristled brush that had seen better days through her hair, she tied the messy locks up with familiar movements and strapped a small shuriken pouch to her thigh. She bounced out the door, whistling cheerfully as she headed for a more upscale part of the village.

She had memorized the address, as well as the sparse contents of the scroll (which really boiled down to seduce Hatake, have his kid, we'll pay you well) and then promptly destroyed both as instructed.

She knew of the apartment complex she was headed for but had never been there personally. It was a nicer area of the village that ninja didn't tend to occupy. It had quaint civilian homes and apartments with balconies that held carefully tended potted plants. Everything about the area was non-threatening and friendly with civilians loudly holding market stalls in the streets and bustling about in dense shopping crowds. Shinobi tended to like living in more secluded areas with fewer civilians in which they could set up personal protections. Apartments in sections of the village like this tended to frown on such practices. Naruto's landlord, on the other hand, just rolled his eyes and told her that when she moved out she'd be paying for every hole she put in the wall and every kunai gouge in the floor.

Naruto arrived at the complex and ignored the curious glances of the civilians, feeling a bit self-conscious and out-of-place as she walked up the stairs, carefully tiled with bright colors and complex pretty patterns. At least nobody looks at me like they hate me anymore.

On the fourth and top floor, she veered down a hallway and stopped in front of the unassuming door
of the last corner unit. Taking a deep breath, she pushed her shoulders back and knocked, two quick, three slow, a pattern only used by the ninja of Konoha when knocking on the doors of someone who might not recognize their chakra signature. It was an act of courtesy and really didn't do anything for safety, as it would be simple enough for a spy to pick up, but Sakura had told her that it was a polite tradition and to just shut up and do the knock because, really, did it cost Naruto anything to just follow custom for five seconds?

A light voice called for her to wait a moment and Naruto fidgeted nervously on the doorstep. She was rocking back and forth on her heels and contemplating coming back later when she heard some latches click and she stepped back in shock as the green wooden door opened, revealing a pretty woman with dark hair and striking eyes.

"Kurenai-sensei?" Naruto squeaked.

Chapter End Notes

Beta: Eurwen de Vrill
Tea Time

Chapter Summary

Naruto and Kurenai have a nice chat and Naruto sells out the Hokage, who stole the last sandwich. It was a big deal. Believe it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kurenai blinked her deep red eyes in surprise. "Naruto-san, can I help you with something?" The awkward tension was broken by a loud crash coming from the apartment.

"We're okay!" Yelled a familiar, energetic voice.

Kurenai closed her eyes, and held up a hand, obviously suppressing an impulse to turn around and check on the situation behind her. She took a deep breath and gathered herself, before opening her eyes and addressing her guest with a small smile. "I'm sorry about that Naruto-san, what can I do for you?"

Naruto felt her cheeks grow hot. "Uh, well, Tsunade-sama sent me here," the blonde grew nervous looking into Kurenai's curious face, "to see you?"

Kurenai looked blankly at the younger girl without comprehension.

Naruto rushed and fumbled with her words anxiously. "I mean, I was given this address and told that the person here would be my mentor for this mission and that she would be expecting me and" It occurred to Naruto that perhaps, as was usually the case in her reality, she'd gotten something wrong. Reduced to a flushed babbling she continued, "Oh no, maybe I messed up and I'll just be going—"

"No, no," Kurenai cut her off, understanding finally dawning on her face. "I just didn't expect-" She shook her head and gave her visitor a bigger smile. "Why don't you go ahead and come in." She stepped back into the apartment and Naruto followed her cautiously. "You can put your shoes by the door."

"Oh," Naruto said, slightly embarrassed, not used to visiting others' homes. Kurenai just kept smiling and slipped around a countertop and into a kitchen area as Naruto fumbled with her sandals.

Kurenai's apartment was a cheerful, open place with the front door opening directly into a living area with comfy looking couches. The kitchen was to the right, doors leading to bedrooms were on the left, and behind the living room was a kitchen table with four chairs centered in front of a large wall consisting mostly of windows, which filled the home with sunshine. A glass door between the windows led to what looked like one of the nice balconies that Naruto had noticed on the street. It was homey, and clean, and warm. Naruto liked it instantly and began to relax a bit, until she found herself roughly tackled from the left and skidded a few feet into the wall.

Naruto looked down into an untidy mop of brown hair, bewildered.

"Hi-ya, Boss-nee-san!" The boy grinned up at her from his hug.
"Konohamaru!" Kurenai's scolding voice could be heard from the kitchen. "You shouldn't tackle people like that. She could have put your eye out."

Naruto felt flustered. She'd always seen Konohamaru as a younger brother, but Ino's comments from last night were running through her head. The tackle hugs had been cute when Konohamaru and his crew had been little, but with age had come height. Naruto barely hit 5'3 with her hair pulled back in a high ponytail and Konohamaru had hit a rapid growth spurt last summer, which meant that the location of Konohamaru's head currently put her in an awkward predicament. No wonder Ino misinterpreted the kid's actions.

Clever little talking monkey, came a dark chuckle.

Blushing a bit, Naruto patted the boy's head and quickly shrugged out of the embrace.

Shut up, Kurama! He's not trying to-Naruto could feel Kyūbi's snort of disbelief as his abrupt attention faded. She hadn't noticed him listening in, but as their relationship improved over the years, so had the ease of their communication and Kurama's ability to actively participate in her life without invitation.

"Come see my cousin!" The younger teenager grabbed her hand and dragged her to the living room, where a toddler watched them both curiously from amidst a large pile of abused wooden blocks. "This is Matsu-chan," cooed Konohamaru, leaning over the child. "Say hello, Matsu!"

Matsu twisted shyly to hide behind the more familiar party and clutched at Konohamaru's pants.

Naruto wiggled her fingers at the kid with a big grin and sat down with the duo to rebuild "The Block City of Awesome!" which had recently been destroyed by the evil Tobidara.

Kurenai approached the group with a tray of tea and crackers, laughing softly at the silly display. "Konohamaru-kun, I need you to take Matsu-chan to the park for a little while."

"What, why?" the teenager whined and eyed the two suspiciously. "You're going to talk about secret mission stuff, aren't you? I'm old enough to listen, Matsu won't remember anything!"

"Konohamaru-kun," Kurenai gently admonished, "this is a private conversation by order of the Hokage. I'm not asking you as family, I'm telling you this as a superior."

"Fine." A huff and a pout and the boy rolled to his feet. He hefted a squealing Matsu into the air and placed the child on his shoulders. "How long do you need?"

Kurenai held up two fingers and the boy saluted with the hand not securing his cousin to shoulders. "See you later then Aunt Kurenai! Come on Matsu, let's go exploring!" Konohamaru's friendly rambling faded as the door closed behind him.

Kurenai adjusted the tray of tea on the coffee table and patted the couch cushion next to her. "Come sit with me, Naruto-san." She poured two cups of tea as Naruto sat hesitantly next to her. The older woman smiled reassuringly. "I won't bite, I promise. Help yourself to some crackers, I'm afraid I wasn't truly prepared for company or I would offer you something more substantial."

The blonde shook her head. "That's fine, I'm a little too nervous to be hungry, really." She bit her lip and looked down at her tea.

Kurenai's voice was soothing and sympathetic. "That's understandable. I have to admit when Tsunade asked me to mentor a young girl for a mission...you were probably the last person I was expecting to show up on my doorstep."
Kurenai paused for a few seconds, sipping her own tea. "As you know, I'm a genjutsu specialist and that requires a lot of creativity. My mind is running away with me at the moment. The only reason that I can imagine you are here is if someone asked you to seduce your recently returned teammate… which I have to confess I think is a terrible idea, or maybe someone up in the council has finally completely fallen to senility and decided to send you to seduce the Kazekage. Please put my mind at ease and tell me the village leadership hasn't entirely lost their grip on reality yet."

Naruto blinked dumbly. "Wow. No. That's not what I'm here for, but you might not like the real mission either."

Kurenai regarded the younger woman carefully. "Who is your target then?"

Naruto grimaced and pulled her feet up onto the couch, curling her legs under her. Kurenai waited patiently for her response. "It's Sensei," she finally admitted quietly.

Kurenai tapped her teacup, but her face remained expressionless. "Kakashi-san?"

Naruto nodded and picked at the fringe of what seemed to be a well-loved throw blanket dangling on the back of the sofa.

"Well," said Kurenai diplomatically, "that is unexpected." She sat quietly in thought for a few moments. "Upon reflection, I can see where the council is coming from," she finally said, setting down her cup on the coffee table. "What do you think about the situation?"

Naruto threw her a helpless look and twitched.

Kurenai laughed. "I'm sorry," she apologized, "But I don't think I've ever seen you look so out of your depth. I know we haven't spent much time together, but you've always seemed so confident!"

"Usually I am!" Naruto blurted out, "I just…" She trailed off in frustration.

"Not anymore," scowled Naruto.

"No," agreed Kurenai amiably, "not any more. Asuma learned that lesson eventually too, and as we grew he became quite charming. He was a bit enamored with me and while I publicly… discouraged…his efforts, I think I secretly liked him too. Eventually our flirtation became a… something. Not quite a relationship, but we were more than just friends."

Kurenai's eyes grew distant as she continued her story. "Then, after the Kyūbi attack, he left the Village for a few years. When he came back he was different. He was older, more mature, he had different opinions about things. I wasn't sure I liked the 'new' him that much actually. We started-I heard Ino-chan call it an 'on-again-off-again romance' and I think that is probably the best way to describe it. While we both cared for each other it never really solidified into a committed, long-term romantic partnership."

Kurenai sighed, thoughtfully considering the younger girl. "I think, looking back, that we were both a little too proud to agree to compromise on the unimportant things. We wasted a lot of time because of that. Tsunade-sama called me in to offer me my mission barely two months after taking office."
Naruto blinked, startled.

Kurenai smiled, "I refused at first. And I told Tsunade-sama exactly what I thought about the idea of the Village paying other women to attempt to seduce my boyfriend." Kurenai's voice was laced with humor, "I'm lucky she thought it was funny. She was a little more serious when she called me in a year later, and I was a little more ready to listen."

Kurenai smiled. "I don't regret it at all you know. I actually regret that I didn't do it on my own sooner."

The chūnin hugged her knees tightly. "What do you mean?"

Kurenai chuckled, "I was a one-man woman, but I wasn't a nun you know. The only reason I didn't have a child earlier was because I religiously took my birth control tablets. I used the mission as an excuse to throw them out the window. When I was your age, I was all about the job and wanting to advance and becoming a superb, well-respected kunoichi. It took me a while to realize that being a mother wouldn't be the death knell to my career, and that it was something I very much wanted. You don't really see many active kunoichi who are also mothers, do you?"

Naruto shook her head and frowned. "Will they expect me to retire if I have a kid?"

"No," Kurenai assured her, "I had that conversation with Tsunade-sama myself. If you want to return to active duty after the baby, if there's a baby, you'll have Tsunade-sama's full support. I intended to myself, but then Asuma died and...well, I just couldn't stomach the idea of potentially depriving my child of both parents. I didn't retire, though. I still take missions, but nothing that takes me away from the village for more than a week or that is higher than a B Class. But I like teaching, and I'm thinking of taking it up full-time at the Academy once Matsu-chan is old enough to attend." Kurenai smoothed out the wrinkles of her kimono. "Enough about me for a little while, tell me a bit about your situation."

The blonde straightened. "What do you mean?"

"Well, how do you feel about the situation? What do you feel for Kakashi-san? Have you thought about how to accomplish this? Were you given a time frame?" Kurenai paused to allow Naruto the chance to answer, noting that the girl was beginning to look a bit overwhelmed.

"Time frame? I...a year? The scroll said I had a year in which to conceive, if not I can abort the mission if I feel like it."

Kurenai nodded, "My mission had a similar time limit. Of course, I really didn't pay much attention to it."

"As far as my feelings go," Naruto scrunched her face, "I'm a little confused I think. And scared. And nervous. And I have no plan. Or ideas. Don't know where to start—"

"Calm down, Naruto-san." The jōnin put a hand on her companion's shoulder and adopted a soothing tone. "It's not a race, and there is no right or wrong answer." Silence ensued as Naruto struggled to follow her new mentor's advice.

"Let me think," Kurenai squeezed the younger girl's shoulder reassuringly, "why don't you tell me why you agreed to the mission in the first place. I think that will help me understand you a bit better."

Naruto wiggled. "Well, it was me or someone else, you know? And the others would be people that didn't know Sensei so well and weren't...close to him. I just...if everything was reversed, I would want it to be someone that cared about me. I wouldn't want it to be some strange person who I later
found out was just doing this because it was a mission…that would be awful. I would want it to be someone that genuinely liked me and wanted,” Naruto struggled for the right words, ”wanted what was in my best interests. I couldn't say no and let Sensei be treated that way by some stranger.”

"But," Kurenai asked gently after she was sure that Naruto had finished, "it's ok for you to treat your sensei this way? To seduce him on orders and have his child?"

"No! I'm not, I mean, it's different." Naruto blew her bangs out of her eyes with a frustrated puff of air. "I'm not lying-trying to lie? Oh brother," Naruto muttered, slapping a hand to her face in exasperation. "I mean, the kid will be mine and I'm not going to give it up, but Sensei can be there as much or as little as he wants and at least I'll know that Sensei's kid is taken care of by someone who cares for it and--" Naruto trailed off apologetically. "I don't think I'm explaining this very well."

"Oh, you're communicating well enough." A faint glimmer appeared in Kurenai's eyes, implying Naruto had revealed something important.

Naruto wished that she knew what is was she had revealed in her disjointed babble, but she wasn't quite brave enough to ask her new mentor.

Kurenai cleared her throat. "I imagine you'll be able to better express your feelings as time goes on. I know that Tsunade-sama told you that you could tell me as much or as little about ongoing events as you desire, but in your case, I think it'd best for you to be as honest with me as possible about what is going on, can you agree to do that?"

"Yes," Naruto replied without hesitation.

"Good. Answer me honestly, do you want to go through with this?"

Naruto looked surprised. "If I can?"

The jōnin frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well," the blonde shrugged, "the Psych department apparently wasn't very sure that I would be successful. They think I have the best chance of completing the mission successfully, but they aren't completely sure that Kakashi will be, ah, helpful. Or, you know, that he likes girls. At all."

Kurenai barked a laugh. "Well then, that may make things a bit harder, but we can work with it. Are you still taking birth control?"

Naruto felt heat rise to her cheeks. "Not really."

Kurenai gave the girl a flat look and the younger woman rushed to explain.

"The fox gives me a boosted healing factor, right? Well, part of that is clearing anything my body determines to be a foreign substance out of my system at like, record rates. It could be poison from an enemy's weapon, but it also could be something simple like a shot of alcohol, an overdose of sugar, or, well, whatever is in the birth control tablets apparently. See, Sakura-chan thought it might be a problem so when it came time to take them she ran some tests on me and found out they really are only effective for a day or two."

Naruto paused for a breath. "Sakura-chan says it's not cost-effective to use them like that, so I don't take them regularly, you know, since the tablet is supposed to last weeks, not just a day or two. I have some in case I ever needed them for a night," she explained. "And if I'm going on a long-term mission with expected hostile powers, I get a shot, which she says is a high-concentrated dose of the stuff. It lasts about a week. Then I have to re-administer the stuff myself, which is totally not fun."
But, I've only had to do that twice. Since I was fifteen."

Kurenai gave the girl a curious look. "This may be a bit personal, but how do you regulate your
cycle to keep it from affecting missions?"

"I just ask Kurama to stop it."

The genjutsu specialist looked at her in disbelief. "You ask the Kyūbi to stop it."

"Yup."

"And he does?"

"Yup."

Kurenai looked thoughtful. "Could Kyūbi start it then?"

The chūnin hmmed and played with one of her pigtails. "I don't know... he can start or stop most of
the organs in my body nowadays if he really wants to. Kind of scary when you think about it, but I
trust him not to. He's in a lot better mood nowadays. But when he messes with that it's probably
more accurate to say he 'pauses' things rather than stops them. Does that matter?"

Kurenai shook her head. "Maybe not. It's just something to keep in mind. It means that it might be
harder to keep track of when you are most fertile, or it might be that the Kyūbi can help you
accomplish this sooner."

Naruto gave an embarrassed squeak. "People can do that? I have to do that?"

The older woman looked amused, "Generally women do that when they are trying to have a child,
yes."

Naruto groaned. "Fine, I'll start keeping track of things."

"Good, now how are you planning on getting into your sensei's pants?"

"Kurenai-sensei!"

Naruto walked past the Academy with her hands tucked in the pockets of her pants. She was lucky
that she'd actually been able to give an accurate account of Sensei's-Kakashi's daily schedule to
Kurenai-sensei. Kurenai-sensei had said that Naruto needed to stop thinking of Kakashi as Sensei in
her head. He needed to be a person and not a position. Naruto didn't entirely understand but she was
so out-of-sorts with this whole mission that she was willing to try any advice at the moment. She
turned the corner of the academy training field and entered the administrative side of the building,
heading for the Hokage's office. Kakashi was out on a mission this week, which Kurenai-sensei said
was a good thing. Naruto was supposed to use this week to prepare—

"Naruto!"

She turned at the sound of her name, and noticed the cheerfully waving chūnin manning the mission
desk. Smiling she trotted obediently toward him. "Hey, Iruka-sensei!"

"How are you doing? Are you here for an assignment?" The scarred man smiled at her and she
couldn't help but mirror his happiness at seeing her.

"Nah, I need to see the Hokage actually."
Iruka's mood changed immediately. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything, honest!" The girl gawked at him. "Why do you always think I've done something bad when I come to see her?"

Iruka's eyes narrowed. "Well, maybe it's because the last time you came to see her, it was because you were trying out experimental justu without supervision and cut down a dozen power lines by the Hyuuga compound, or the time before that when you tried to see how good your sense of smell was compared to an Inuzuka's and dared Kiba to—"

Naruto slapped her hand over the chūnin's mouth. "You promised not to tell people about that one!"

Iruka's eyes glittered dangerously. "So, what's it this time then?"

Naruto pouted. "It's private. And I'm not in trouble, I'm actually working on something she asked me to do, I promise."

Iruka rolled his eyes. "I suppose I can take you to her then. She's hiding out in the break room because Koharu-sama has been waiting to ambush her in her office since lunch." He came out from around the desk and caught Naruto in a headlock, ruffling her hair.

"Stop it! I'm not a baby anymore, Sensei! It's been a long time since I've been your little kid." Naruto whined as she wriggled from his playful grasp. It just wasn't fair that she never grew out of the perfect height for most people to give her a noogie.

"Ha! I'm your teacher, Naruto…it's been my job to keep an eye on you before you were tall enough to reach the blackboard." Iruka chattered as he escorted her down the halls, occasionally stopping to check in with various administrative assistants. Fortunately, because of her escort, no one blocked her from reaching the Hokage. He winked at her cheekily. "You'll always be one of my kids."

Naruto sighed. This is what I'm afraid of…

Iruka noticed her gloomy mood change and lightly punched her shoulder. "Now go apologize to the Hokage for whatever you've destroyed. Maybe if you turn on the puppy-dog eyes she'll only make you stand in the corner for an hour."

Naruto scowled and stuck out her tongue at her sensei's retreating back. Ebisu chose that moment to walk by, munching on a bagel, and raised an eyebrow at her antics. Flustered, she ducked into the lounge.

"Granny!"

"Shut up!" Tsunade hissed from the break-room table, bent over some paperwork. "I'm hiding," she said, glaring sternly with honey-colored eyes.

Naruto grinned in relief that at least she wouldn't be the only immature one who would ever wear that fancy hat.

Naruto pulled out a chair across from the woman, taking a seat as the Hokage eyed her warily while she munched on a cucumber sandwich. "Whad'ya blow up this time?"

"Seriously?" Naruto gaped, "I haven't done anything in months—"

"I know," said Tsunade gravely. "You're overdue and it worries me."

Naruto scowled and crossed her arms. "I had the meeting this morning."
Tsunade nodded. "It went well then."

The younger girl sighed and collapsed in her seat as if her strings had been cut. "It made me feel a bit better," she admitted.

Tsunade waited patiently for the chūnin to get to the point.

"She thinks I need to do some planning this week."

"That's probably a good idea," Tsunade said carefully, eyeing the last cucumber sandwich lying temptingly on the table, wondering if she could finish her own quickly enough to claim it before her companion.

Fortunately, it wasn't ramen and Tsunade snatched it up as Naruto thought on how to word what she wanted to say vaguely enough that only the Hokage would understand the request. There were no privacy seals in the break room, after all, and Tsunade liked using these moments as 'tests' for Naruto to work through ("So you actually think for a change, you silly girl"). "I need some scheduled time. Something that's regular…can't be shrugged off, and I saw that by the way." She gestured to the stolen sandwich. "--And that was rude."

"Hokage," her companion retorted, and then swallowed a chip and appeared to change subjects. "I'm thinking of asking your old team to apply for the jōnin exam next year."

Naruto was thrown off guard for a moment but caught on to the game when Tsunade continued.

"All three of you are more than capable of taking the exam this year, but I want to be very sure that you all pass and with Sakura's schedule and the Uchiha's current limitations…" Even Naruto didn't need for Tsunade to finish the sentence to understand her reasoning. "A year won't hurt you and it will be a good time to hone some of your more specialized skills. It will be mostly self-study of course, but the three of you are training together anyway…" Tsunade trailed off and Naruto picked up the conversation.

"Some of our moves are pretty dangerous, are you sure you want Sasuke-bastard and I practicing that stuff? Technically, you've told him not to use A or S rank techniques an without authorized jōnin present to supervise."

Tsunade rocked back in her chair thoughtfully. "You're right, and I really don't want to amend that. I suppose I could schedule you for one day a week of supervised training."

"Only one measly day a week?" Naruto said crossly, "We're never going to accomplish anything like that."

The Hokage rolled her eyes. "Fine, you can have two. But only two days, and I can't guarantee you'll have the same jōnin all the time. I'll put in a request for Hatake, I know you all are most comfortable with him, but if he's out on a mission you may have to put up with Gai. Or the Nara boy. I want someone there who I know can stop things if they get out of hand."

Naruto squirmed in her seat. "I'm excited."

Tsunade frowned, "Don't be too excited, you have to have a clean bill of health for the exams you know, no complications…so don't go breaking anything that Sakura can't fix. Otherwise you'll have to postpone taking the exam until you're in fighting shape again."

Naruto smiled and stood from her chair. "I understand, but I'll make jōnin by the time I'm twenty, believe it!"
"I don't doubt you," drawled the older woman. "Now get out, and don't tell people you saw me."

Naruto laughed and made her way cheerfully toward the exit.

She had Kakashi's time booked for regular "training sessions" as well as she could. He'd be a captive audience for a known period of time. Sure she'd have to share the time with Sakura and Sasuke, but Kurenai assured her that this wouldn't matter in the long run. These meetings would serve as a springboard for bigger events in Kurenai's scheme…of which Naruto really didn't know all the details yet.

It was a bit disappointing to realize that she would have to put off the jōnin exam until the primary mission was complete, but she was only obligated for a year. Kids took nine months, right? She could get this wrapped up in time, believe it.

Shizune accosted her near the main exit, looking harried.

"She's in the break room," Naruto said with a sweet smile and a wave.

"Thank you," bit out the Godaime's assistant, stalking down the hall with all the righteous fury of one forced to bear the consequences of another's misdeeds.

Tsunade might be the Hokage, but Naruto knew on whose good side she really needed to stay.

Chapter End Notes

Beta: Eurwen de Vrill and CrystallineX
Naruto shifted her weight as she stood outside the hospital. She took in the large building before her and considered Kurenai-sensei's next piece of advice.

Naruto needed a crash-course in seduction.

Naruto had listed off what she remembered from the Academy lectures and Kurenai-sensei had frowned and muttered something about this being problematic.

This was Kurenai's solution…and punishment for failing to pay attention as a child.

A familiar chakra brushed against the edge of her awareness and Naruto took a deep breath, gathering her courage and steeling herself for an evening the likes of which she had hoped never to experience. I'd rather spend a week of training with Gai's team than do this, she thought earnestly.

"Naruto?"

The blonde pushed back her mental complaints, took a deep breath, and walked forward to meet the questioning emerald gaze of her teammate.

"I need your help Sakura-chan."

Sakura adjusted the book bag she was wearing. "Of course, what's wrong?" She looked tired and Naruto felt a bit bad about stealing her away from what was sure to be a relaxing evening. If she didn't already know how much the other girl would enjoy the next few words out of Naruto's mouth, she'd have postponed her request.

"I lied. There is a boy," Naruto let the anxiety of the past two days (had it really only been a little over twenty four hours since she'd accepted this mission?) flood her and bring tears to her large blue eyes. "There is a boy and I don't know the first thing about what I'm supposed to do about it." Go ahead and laugh at my puppy-dog eyes Iruka-sensei, it's not stupid if it works! Naruto gave a slight sniff to emphasize her distress. "I need help Sakura-chan."

"Oh, Naru-chan," Sakura reached out her hands to clutch Naruto's tightly. "Don't worry, I know exactly what to do," she cooed.

Naruto mentally flinched in recognition of the fanatical gleam appearing in her teammate's eyes. Save me, Kurama!

Hell no! Go die, Monkey! A hint of fangs bared in amusement and Naruto could only gulp as Sakura dragged her toward the market district, chattering away about seasons and colors and something to do with highlighters.
"No."

Naruto's head spun dizzily and she wobbled a bit as the shirt was yanked out of her hands in the midst of putting it on and another was pulled impatiently over her arms.

"Try this one," snapped Ino, looking over the other blonde with a critical eye.

"God, Ino, let her breathe." Sakura took the offending shirt and replaced it on the hanger, adding it to the growing pile of rejected clothes haphazardly thrown in the corner.

The three had been holed up in a dressing room for the past two hours and Naruto was beginning to fear that she would never again see the light of day. So far, the acceptable clothes pile consisted of a yukata, which Naruto was told that she wasn't allowed to wear until it was officially summer, but needed to purchase just in case, as well as two flimsy sundresses that she had reluctantly agreed to only after Ino showed Naruto how to secure weapons underneath the garment so others couldn't tell that the wearer was armed.

Naruto had also agreed, practically at kunai point, to purchase two pairs of heels (complementary to the dresses) which she was convinced were actually torture devices. Ino had nodded and told her how great they were for keeping men in line on dates as Naruto looked oddly at the girl. Naruto herself had meant that they would be torture to wear, not devices which could inflict torture upon others.

Naruto was also told that she needed a kimono, but those tended to be more expensive and Ino thought she had one shoved in her closet at home that she had outgrown which would fit Naruto nicely.

Now, Ino was trying to revamp Naruto's everyday kunoichi attire. They'd fought bitterly over the outfit. Ultimately, it was only Kurenai-sensei's advice to trust Ino's instincts and Ino's grudging agreement to compromise on color which parted a tearful Naruto from her beloved, baggy black and orange ensemble.

"Look," said Ino, tapping her foot impatiently, "I've got a lot of work to do and a limited amount of time to do it in, let me practice my art."

Naruto wasn't certain what Ino's 'art' was, but it seemed to involve introducing Naruto to a new level of hell known as 'assembling a wardrobe.'

"Better," Ino's pale eyes shone as she grabbed Naruto's shoulders and spun her around to look at her reflection in the mirror.

Naruto, resigned to her fate as the Yamanka's new favorite paper doll, regarded her reflection warily. "How is this better?" Naruto wiggled her shoulders and grimaced. "How do you even stay in this thing?"

Ino sniffed, "It has a hybrid pushup-sports bra built in, I promise you, you aren't going anywhere." She flipped her ponytail over her shoulder and eyed Naruto with an air of expertise. "Get down, do some kata and see if you can move in it."

Naruto stepped off the pedestal in the large dressing room. Ino was a frequent customer and got special perks—like kicking whoever was in the big dressing room out in favor of her party. The black tank top had a low neckline and didn't completely cover her stomach. Naruto kept trying to pull it down, but it kept riding up and eventually Ino noticed and snapped at that the girl was supposed to be showing a little stomach for a 'peek-a-boo' effect. Naruto really, really didn't want to
know. Naruto supposed that she should be thankful that while it revealed some skin, it in no way resembled Sai's preferred attire. She took the cropped black and orange jacket from Sakura and felt a bit better with the extra cloth on her shoulders.

She attempted to zip it close, to no avail. "Too tight! Can't breathe!"

Ino batted Naruto's hands away from the garment and unzipped it again. "You aren't supposed to zip it! Leave it open; if you get a bigger size it won't be as flattering. You choose a smaller jacket and leave it open so that it hugs your form a bit better and draws attention here," Ino poked a finger at Naruto's cleavage, "right where you want it to be."

Naruto swatted at Ino, squawking in protest. "Stop that!" She returned her attention to the mirror, dismally eyeing the orange miniskirt. "Does it have to be a skirt?"

"It's that or the shorts," Ino replied frostily, "and honestly, I'd get both so you could switch them out when you feel like a change of clothes. The shorts show off your ass and your legs, but the skirt is a bit more feminine. If you want to pull the 'I'm a girl! Protect me!' card, go with the skirt."

Naruto scowled at her friend, her blush a permanent fixture on her face by this point.

Ino didn't quail, having the advantage of fighting on home turf.

It didn't help that Sakura-chan was snickering behind them.

Naruto crossed her arms, "If I fight in this skirt, I'll be flashing my opponent every time I execute a kick, I'm not that desperate for attention."

Ino rolled her eyes, "Fine, we'll get you a pair of black spandex shorts to go under the skirt, but you're getting the other shorts too."

Ino turned to gather up the acceptable pile of clothes. Over her shoulder she called out, "Now, what shape is your lingerie drawer in?"

Naruto paused as she fought a losing battle to get out of her skirt, struggling to find the zipper and escape the evil skirt-contraption, wondering if this could possibly get any worse. Ino's words eventually registered and the jinchūriki turned confused blue eyes to meet Ino's matter-of-fact expression. "Huh? What does my laundry have to do with anything?"

Sakura and Ino shared a horrified look.

"Guys?"

Sakura swallowed and patted Naruto's shoulder pityingly. "We'll work on that tomorrow."

"Guys," Naruto cried, hurriedly hopping back into her original attire and trailing the pair as they headed toward a clerk eagerly awaiting their large purchase, "Why do you need to know about my laundry? Guys!"

"Too small, I told you she was a 34 C," Ino snapped and flung the offending piece of cloth across the room, replacing it with one of her own choosing, much to Naruto's increasing mortification. I was so wrong, this can totally get worse, thought Naruto remorsefully.

The afternoon began with Ino and Sakura ambushing the chūnin at her apartment, emptying the drawers of Naruto's battered old dresser onto her unmade bed and sorting through its upended contents with contempuous grimaces. They claimed that the attack was to better understand how to
help her and to know what they had to work with. ("Nothing, cried Ino, hands thrown dramatically into the air, "She's given me nothing!").

Since then, Naruto had been shown and demonstrated (and forced to recite back, to prove she understood) the differences between sports bras, pushup bras, demi bras, strapless bras, convertible bras, bras with and without underwire, bras that were worn only under t-shirts, as well as flimsy lacy things that were apparently only used because they turned men's minds to mush. Most embarrassingly she'd gotten a lecture on sleep wear and how the hole-y, oversized shirts that she was used to wearing to bed were a big no-no now that she was grown and especially if she was considering entertaining at night.

"T-shirts are only cute to sleep in if they are his and even then they have to be long enough to cover your butt and no longer than mid-thigh," instructed Ino, illustrating the acceptable lengths with her hands. "Any shorter and you come across as slutty and any longer he'll think you're prudish," Ino elaborated. Naruto was certain that they had never covered this in any of the Academy lectures and didn't entirely understand the whole thing about the length requirements, but since Sakura-chan was nodding her agreement to Ino's commentary in the background Naruto could only nod along as well, bewildered.

Currently, Naruto was exhaustedly standing in yet another dressing room, having caved to Ino's attempts to treat her like a child's doll about five-minutes into figuring out how to work a convertible bra which had straps that could apparently be worn ten different ways. "And it can double as a garrote in a pinch," Ino had added cheerfully.

"I can't believe you've made it this far in life without knowing the value of a good pushup bra," growled the testy blonde, "Stand up straight!"

Naruto adjusted her posture at the poke and looked to Sakura for help, who was sitting on a stool in the corner with an odd expression on her face.

Curious, Naruto called out to her teammate. "Hey, Sakura-chan, what's wrong?"

Sakura just shook her head with a smile, "Nothing."

Ino snorted, "Don't be stupid, she's just jealous of your boobs."

"Ino!" screeched Sakura, "I am not jealous of her boobs!"

"Ah…" said Naruto nervously, "I thought you liked boys, Sakura-chan?" She was reconsidering how easily she'd disregarded the whole 'changing' thing in front of the other two…I just thought girls did this when they went shopping together… they acted like it was normal, maybe I was wrong?

Sakura's jaw dropped as she spluttered to an accompaniment of Ino's laughter.

"No," said Ino, "Sakura-chan's exclusively into men, but that doesn't mean that a girl can't acknowledge a pair of great boobs when she sees them. You've got great boobs, not as good as mine, of course, but they are admirable. And now you know how to use lingerie to make them work for you even more," she said with a saucy wink. "Put your clothes on, this is the last of what you need."

Naruto pulled her top on, relieved, for the moment ignoring Sakura's lecture about how these items were what a girl minimally required and that Naruto would be expected to build on the wardrobe in the future.

Ino gave Naruto a knowing look and mumbled something about how Naruto ought to be glad that
she hadn't made the girl try on a corset.

By the time she was done, Ino and Sakura were examining themselves in the mirror.

"My forehead is huge," Sakura moaned.

"I'm in desperate need of a mission where I can get a tan," sighed Ino.

"My bangs are so oily," muttered Sakura.

"I need to pluck my eyebrows again," added Ino.

They both looked at Naruto expectantly.

Awkwardly, Naruto sought for something to say. "My hair is…?" She trailed off, gesturing helplessly at her head.

"Yes," Ino nodded gravely, "Yes it is."

Naruto was only a little surprised when Ino and Sakura mobbed her on the way home from visiting Iruka-sensei the next day, spiriting their victim to a hair and nail salon, where women with heavy make-up wailed about the state of Naruto's split-ends and cuticles.

Originally, the duo tried to get Naruto to shorten the length of her blonde locks ("such lovely, golden tresses," cooed the woman overseeing the event). Once Naruto explained that she wore her hair long because of her mother's hair, the two backed off and contented themselves to explaining the importance of routine trims and the other ins-and-outs of basic hair care as a strange woman massaged funny smelling potions into Naruto's scalp.

Afterward, the hair stylist was beaming at another happy customer and Naruto was stroking the shiny strands in wonder.

"Wow," she breathed, eyes big, "It's so soft…"

"I know, right," Ino nodded with authority and tossed a jar at the dazed girl. "This is called conditioner. You use it. Regularly."

"Which means every time you wash your hair," added Sakura.

"Which should be roughly every other day," clarified Ino, as if she was speaking to a small child. "Your hair isn't oily enough to warrant washing every day."

"How in the world do you guys know all this stuff?" Naruto was baffled, which Ino and Sakura actually thought was an adorable look for the girl and probably why they got so much joy out of sharing the maintenance skills they'd carefully hoarded over a lifetime of reading gossip magazines.

"Trade secret," Ino replied haughtily, flipping her ponytail over her shoulder. "Now as far as your nails go, we're ninja, and we aren't expected to keep them in as great shape as civilian women do. However," Ino pinned her pupil with disapproving eyes, "That doesn't mean you're allowed to get away with letting dirt accumulate under your nails or wear them away by biting."

Naruto shrank guiltily in her chair.

Sakura contributed her thoughts from the chair next to Naruto, where she was getting her own manicure. "Biting your nails is a bad habit, Naruto. You don't have to do a lot to take good care of them, but you should make sure to thoroughly wash the dirt off your hands after training practices."
The girls went on to explain the necessities of lotions for softening and rehydrating skin. They discussed the best places to buy these items, as kunoichi often preferred to use scentless lotions that wouldn't give unnecessary aide to those wished to track them.

From there, Naruto was bustled away until she was sneezing testily outside a busy perfume shop.

"Oh, no way," sniffed Naruto, eyes watering, "it smells so much!"

Ino tsked. "Do you even know why women use perfume, Naruto?"

Naruto just crinkled her nose and waited for an explanation, correctly assuming that this was a rhetorical question.

"It's psychology," drawled the Yamanaka heiress. "It smells overwhelming right now because people test out the scents in the shops all the time, and some women do overdo perfume it's true. In reality, less is more when it comes to this stuff, but the little that we do use is invaluable."

Naruto blinked, not quite sure where Ino was headed with this.

"You see," continued her companion, undaunted by Naruto's incomprehension, "Every girl finds a scent they like, and there are so many varieties of perfume that almost every girl winds up with a different scent. I even make my own. Now, you don't use it much, and as kunoichi, we never use it on missions and hardly ever when training, but you use it to attract attention. To attract attention from guys especially."

"I still don't get it," Naruto said flatly.

Sakura jumped in, "It's like this. When there is a guy that you like, you stay around him a lot and try to spend more time with him. Eventually, if he likes you too, he gets a little closer and winds up in your personal space and will smell the perfume. It's supposed to be a subtle smell, but as the guy spends more time with you and you spend more time him, the smell lingers wherever you are and eventually, the guy begins to associate the smell with your presence."

Sakura giggled, "You can even go as far as to spray a little on his pillows or clothes if the two of you are really close. So, when he registers the smell, even subconsciously, he starts thinking of you…and soon he is thinking of you even when you aren't there because your perfume is lingering in the places you visit."

"Right," agreed Ino, "It's a conditioning technique."

It's marking your territory, added the Kyūbi, voicing his appreciation of a concept that he understood.

Naruto looked to the sky in exasperation. "Fine. I'm not going in that shop though, just pick me something you think would be good that isn't too strong."

Sakura and Ino advanced on the shop like cats cornering a particularly tasty mouse as Naruto stood outside, sneezing occasionally. They returned victoriously with a pretty little bottle containing a clear liquid that smelled subtly of oranges and something else that made Naruto want to perk up and play. She accepted the bottle, but slipped it into her pocket, doubting that she'd ever use it.

Naruto wasn't even halfheartedly surprised when the next day she was trapped in Ino's bedroom, sitting poised on a stool in front of the bossy girl's vanity as Sakura sprawled comfortably across the bed, kicking her feet in the air and absently flipping through a magazine.

"So are you sure you won't tell us who the guy is?" wheedled Ino in between trying to explain the
difference between cream and powder foundation. She and Sakura had just finished a heated debate over whether Naruto would be better served by using liquid or pencil eyeliner. Naruto privately thought she'd be best off without either, seeing as she kept poking the stuff in her eye instead of elegantly applying it right above her eyelashes.

"Yes," responded Naruto, without hesitation. Ino had lost her back when explaining the varieties of mascara. Naruto just latched onto the information about the waterproof version and decided to stick with that if she ever had to use it all.

Naruto elaborated, "You might know him and he is in the village and that's all I'm saying. I'll tell you more if anything comes of it. I don't want you two to scare him away."

Ino sighed, setting down her blush brush amongst the dozens of other brushes for which Naruto had already forgotten the purposes.

"Fine then." Ino didn't draw out the questioning. She and Sakura were notorious for stalking new people that caught their attention. It probably would be awkward for the poor boy, whoever he was, once the girls learned his identity. Besides, everyone knew that Naruto was horrible at keeping secrets; inevitably, she'd slip up and say something that gave away the game. And with Ino on the case, the information would come out sooner rather than later.

Ino handed the girl a washcloth to clean her face and a bottle of oil that would help remove all of the face paint. Ino had shown Naruto how to use eye shadow and some other small tricks for a "natural, neutral everyday look." Then, Naruto had allowed the eager teenager to give her a much more complicated makeover. The results were very pretty, but they both knew that Naruto would never replicate it on her own.

"You're so lucky that you have one of those faces that doesn't need a lot of makeup," said Ino, enviously.

Sakura hummed her distracted agreement from the bed, and Naruto joined her teammate after cleaning up in Ino's adjoining bathroom.

"Now that we've covered the basics of accessorizing and body maintenance," Professor Ino strode around the room, commanding the attention of her troops, who listened intently. "What do you know about getting a guy's attention?"

Naruto nervously rubbed at the back of her head.

"Oh come on now, you have to know something," Ino stated impatiently. "You were taught by that Sannin for years!"

"It's not like he took me with him for company when he went to brothels or spied on hot springs," scowled Naruto. "He pretty much dumped me in a hotel room or a forest and let me work on my own when he was...away doin' his stuff."

"Doing his stuff?" Ino repeated with a drawl and arched eyebrows. "What about that sexy-jutsu thing you did a couple times back at the Academy, it was crude but effective."

Naruto blushed. "Hey! I haven't done that one in a long time." Her tone grew defensive as Sakura glared, remembering her own embarrassment whenever her teammate had used that technique in the past.

Naruto hastily continued, expounding with dramatic hand gestures, "Besides, that's not really me, you know...it was more, projecting a character, acting. I wasn't old enough to understand why it
actually worked back then, and now that I know why some women act that way…its not, I
couldn't…" she trailed off with an embarrassed stammer.

"I'm not saying you should do the exact same thing," Ino said. "I'm just pointing out that you had the
right ideas back then, that behavior could be classified as flirtatious. Eye contact is important, so is
posture, and touch, and the way you angle your body. I know you've seen me be flirty, and you've
seen how guys react when I push too far and they get uncomfortable. That's a good strategy
sometimes, fluster the guy and he'll be more likely to reveal something he shouldn't, or miss
something that he should be paying attention to. Just think about the way you acted back then and
tone it down a bit."

Ino tapped her lip thoughtfully, "I know! I'm going to assign you homework."

Naruto groaned and fell back against the pillows, jostling Sakura who elbowed her in retaliation.

Ino grinned deviously and plopped onto the edge of the bed. "Over the next few weeks, you need to
practice flirting with men. Start as subtle as you can be, and then up your aggressiveness each day."

Naruto gulped, "But isn't that mean, leading guys on like that?"

Ino ignored the question and promoted her own plan. "Who do you see when Sakura is with you? It
won't do you any good if she's not there to evaluate your behavior and the results."

"Well, we see Sasuke-bastard a lot, and Sensei occasionally…"

"That's perfect!" Ino beamed. "Those are what you can consider as 'safe' targets."

Naruto looked at her, doubtful.

Ino waived off the girl's concern, "No really, that's who I practiced on when I started flirting. It's kind
of expected, and they are your teammates so they are a captive audience that has to put up with it."

Naruto looked at Sakura for support, but Ino's words had made her friend unusually thoughtful, and
she wasn't paying attention to the reluctant blonde. Naruto turned back to Ino. "Won't they be
upset?"

"Nah," shrugged the taller blonde. "They might feel a little awkward…it can be funny actually.
Asuma-sensei got in the habit of ending practice early to get away from me, Shikamaru walked into
trees a couple times a day, Chouji kept trying to eat a chip and missing his mouth…In a couple of
weeks, it'll lose its novelty because you don't mean anything by it and it won't go anywhere. When
the guys wrap their minds around this fact they'll develop something akin to immunity to it. You're
practically doing them a service, without your behavior they'll never learn how to respond to flirty
kunoichi in a real fight."

Naruto could almost buy into that. Ino was a master at rationalization.

"Do you think it will have any effect on Sasuke and Sensei? They aren't exactly well-adjusted…."
Sakura's words surprised Naruto, as the girl had yet to speak up in the conversation.

"It probably makes it better to practice on them," said Ino practically, "See how far you have to go to
get a response from them. In fact," she clapped her hands in excitement as an idea occurred to her,
"let's spice things up by making a bet! I bet that you can't get Sasuke-kun to blush by the end of the
month."

Sakura looked at her suspiciously, "What do we get if we win?"
Ino smiled, "I'll buy your team dinner at the Shushuya."

"And if we lose?" asked Naruto, always cautious when it came to something that might empty her beloved Gama-chan.

Ino's smile turned mischievous, "You have to buy my teammates dinner."

Sakura stuck out her hand, a competitive gleam in her eye, "Fine, Deal."

"Fine!" Naruto cried, "No, not fine! Don't you know how much Chouji eats?"

"What's the matter, Naru-chan," teased Ino. "Don't you think you and Sakura-chan can work a little emotional response out of the Ice King?" Ino looked at her with sympathy, "Not woman enough for the challenge?"

"Fine." Naruto ground her teeth. "But, for the record, I thought this was a stupid idea from the start."

"How did you know that she would suggest that?" Naruto asked curiously, munching on an apple at Kurenai's kitchen table at the end of the week.

Kurenai gave her a wry smile, "Who did you think Asuma came to ask for advice when Ino decided to put her Academy lessons into practice?"

Naruto winced, twirling the apple by its stem on the tabletop. "Doesn't sound like she gave him an easy time of it."

"No," said Kurenai with a soft laugh, "She was eager to try every trick in the book short of full exposure and lip to lip contact. Fortunately, she was young enough at the time that it did little more than terrify Asuma and make him vow to never have daughters. If she was your age and acting the way she did back then, I would have taken her aside for a talk."

"So, you don't think Sensei is as safe a target as Ino claims?"

"At your age? No…If you were thirteen or fourteen, like Ino was when she started honing this particular skillset, I think Kakashi wouldn't have so much as glanced away from his Icha-Icha books. You wouldn't have been able to offer him something his novel didn't provide. Now, at eighteen…" Kurenai trailed off with a smile, "I think you'll be much more distracting, and hopefully he'll find reality more colorful and fulfilling than a book that he's re-reading for the fortieth time."

Naruto squirmed a little uncomfortably.

"Remember Naruto," cautioned Kurenai, "This is a long-term process, you're not going to complete the mission the first time you see Kakashi-san. The first step is just to get his attention, make him notice you, be distracting. I've been told that you have a reputation for being the most unpredictable kunoichi that Konoha has to offer. Surely you think that you can accomplish this first step."

Naruto grinned, gathering her confidence, "Believe it!"

Chapter End Notes

Beta: CrystallineX
Credit: I drew some inspiration from this chapter from Troubling New Developments, by SicTransitGloria (which, if you haven't read and would like to laugh, please check out) and the pop culture movie, Mean Girls, both of which are far cleverer than I could ever claim to be.
Task Masters

Chapter Summary

Enter Kakashi, Stage Right.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kakashi reluctantly admitted to himself, as he returned to the village through a seldom-used back gate, flaring his chakra as a courtesy to the ANBU prowling the sector, that maybe, just maybe, he was getting a little too old for this type of thing.

Pakkun trotted lightly by his side. "Good to be home," the pug muttered.

"Ah," agreed Kakashi.

"You smell tired," the dog stated.

Kakashi said nothing, slouched with his hands in his pockets.

"Well," said the dog with a snort, "I'm tired. And these paws aren't getting any younger. I expect bones and a belly rub when you get settled."

Kakashi merely nodded and kept walking, raising his hand in a slow wave as the summons poofed away.

Kakashi was tired. For every year that he gained, his respect for Jiraiya, the Sandaime, and the Godaime increased. To be able to operate as well as they could at their age…it was the little things that he was beginning to notice which were frustrating. He might still be faster than ninety percent of the ninja he encountered, but his speed with hand signs was just a few seconds slower than it was in his mid-twenties, no matter how hard that he tried to increase it. When he used his sharingan, it drained him of energy just the tiniest bit more quickly every year. When he received a hard strike to his left leg, his femur was just a little more likely to crack and a little slower to heal each time (as it had been since he shattered it on a bad mission when he was eighteen).

But this was his village.

This was his profession.

He fought alongside honorable colleagues and fought for his precious people. And if taking these missions meant that his kids didn't have to do so for another year or so, then that's what he would do. After all, this was the job that he had trained for since he'd taken his first steps toward his father. It was the job that he had accepted when he'd graduated from the academy at the age of five. It was the job that he'd completed, mostly successfully and certainly exceptionally well, for the past twenty-seven years.

He was a front-line, top-of-the-line shinobi, and he was damn good at this job.

He was also smart.
And practical.

He knew that ninja of his caliber, with reputations like his and with talents as in demand as his own...those ninja didn't live long. The Tsunades and Jiraiyas of the world were rare and lucky. The much more common tales belonged to those like Sakumo, and the young Hyūga boy. They were the tales of those who burned brightly and quickly, vanishing with barely a sputter. He was lucky to have made it to 32, and he would be even luckier to see 33.

He was a man who had resigned himself to the fact that his own story was coming to an end.

He'd made a certain peace with that.

After all, he didn't harbor any great, unfulfilled ambitions. While it was flattering to know that if something happened to the Hokage, the Village trusted him to pick up the role long enough for Naruto to grow into it, it was an obligation that he'd really, really, rather live without experiencing.

And at her current rate of progress, Kakashi believed that it wouldn't be much longer before his favorite blonde knuckle-head was ready to take on the role, and give Tsunade-sama a well-deserved break. The past few years had brought him unexpected brushes with death and glimpses of the people he had once loved. Though the encounters were brief, each additional one was yet another wound to his heart.

It was terrible when one realized that they had far more loved ones listed among the dead than the living and Kakashi had been unfortunate enough to count himself among that number at far too young of an age.

His most recent evaluation with the Psych. Division (after he'd successfully 'missed' it for two months) diagnosed him as depressed.

He didn't really believe that; in his opinion, he was reacting fairly logically to his situation. He certainly wasn't looking to die, or even to harm himself, and it wasn't like he would go as far as to say that he was looking forward to death. Death was just another event in life, one which no longer scared him the same way it did when he was a younger man. He just thought of it as something that might be, well, peaceful. That was the word he'd given to the Psych. ninja when Shizune had escorted him to the appointment with Tsunade's signed letter ordering the copy ninja to answer honestly.

He didn't think that was a bad thing at all.

His eyebrows twitched slightly as he recalled other details of the appointment.

His counselor had worried that the jōnin didn't find things in life enjoyable anymore.

Which was just ridiculous.

Kakashi found many things in life enjoyable.

He enjoyed reading Icha Icha, though there hadn't been any new novels in the series since Jiraiya had died (and wouldn't ever be, for the same reason). Kakashi had yet to find a worthy replacement for the series, but he was looking for one. That is, he was looking for a new series every couple of months when he had some time to relax in between missions.

He enjoyed his missions, although not the really risky ones that had been the bulk of his workload lately; nobody really liked those unless they actually did harbor a death wish.
He enjoyed spending time with his genin squad...who, admittedly, were chūnin now and had busy schedules which didn't allow for all of them to get together as often.

He enjoyed plenty of things.

He was not depressed.

Kakashi blinked, realizing that the chūnin taking in completed assignment reports at the mission desk was trembling slightly at the aura of irritation that Kakashi had been unintentionally radiating.

"Ah," said Kakashi apologetically, smiling with his visible eye. "I was thinking of how much I enjoyed life."

"R-right," stammered the chūnin, unconvinced.

Kakashi shrugged. "Jōnin 009720 reporting in from a solo mission, successful, no injuries, no need for immediate debriefing."

The professional address snapped the chūnin to attention. "Oh, good then." Checking his clipboard for notes, the chūnin pulled the appropriate paperwork from a pile and handed the forms to Kakashi. "The completed mission report is due in the next three days, as per routine. Upon delivery of the report to the mission desk, it will be reviewed by the attending supervisor to determine if it meets acceptable standards. Upon approval, you will be given your pay ticket, which may be redeemed at any time up to six months after its issue."

Kakashi nodded along absently, chūnin were required to give the same speech to every ninja returning from a village. The variations were few and often only changed if something went wrong during the mission that required a debriefing. Kakashi had this speech memorized by the time he was six, and by this point in his career had heard it over a thousand times.

"Also," added the twitchy young man, "My notes say that you've been assigned three months of furlough and that Hokage-sama has requested you report in to her personally within a reasonable time frame."

Kakashi narrowed his eyes. "I didn't request furlough."

The chūnin shrugged, "Well, it's been assigned to you. And the note has some handwritten additions," said the man with a straight face, "Tell that one-eyed hooligan that 'reasonable time' means I expect his lazy ass in my office within a day—barring loss of legs."

The chūnin stared blankly at the copy ninja, who let out a slightly aggravated, "I see."

Kakashi folded the forms and slipped them into the inner pocket of his vest as he turned and ambled toward the Hokage's office. Normally, he'd go home and sleep for a day or so, make some visits to a couple of well-known rocks and then get around to answering the summons when he felt like it. However, he rather thought that maybe this furlough thing was some new form of punishment. Hopefully Tsunade-sama would be off guard enough by his timely attendance that she'd repeal it, or at the very least, shorten it.

No one stopped him as he went further into the administration building, brushing shoulders with tense assistants, getting a distracted nod of acknowledgment from the jōnin commander, and taking an alternative route when he spotted Anko coming down the hall finishing up a stick of dango.

"Sensei!"
He didn't mind taking a few minutes to catch up with this particular person, and he slowed down accordingly.

"Sakura-chan, you look well." That was a lie, but he'd found that sometimes it was best to lie to women. Sakura's hair was half-pulled up in a sloppy ponytail, frizzy strands escaping showing that she'd been pulling at it anxiously recently. She was a bit paler than usual and had dark circles under her eyes. She'd obviously tried to cover it up with some powder, but she'd been rubbing at her face and undone her disguise. Her eyes had an odd shine to them that ninja only had after taking a soldier pill one too many... or drinking fifteen cups of coffee within the past twenty four hours, Kakashi thought wryly, noticing the steaming mug that she was trying to balance on top a pile of heavy medical text books.

Sakura ignored his comments and hefted the heavy tomes in her arms to rest a bit of the weight on her hips. "Are you back from your mission? You look well. How long have you been here? No injuries right, of course not you would tell me, right? I mean I could heal them, but I have a test tomorrow morning, it's a practical and I need a bit of chakra—"

Kakashi put up his hands, "Breathe, Sakura-chan."

"Oh," she said, "Right."

Kakashi held up his hand and started counting off on his fingers. "Fine, just now, uninjured, good luck on your test—it'll go well." Kakashi paused for a moment, reflecting. "Yes, that's it."

"Good," Sakura nodded, determined. "My test will go well. But I have to study. Gotta go now, see you Wednesday afternoon." Sakura's words echoed over the walls as she marched past him down the hall, "Looking forward to it!"

"Later!" Kakashi said, returning his hands to his pockets. He had no idea what she was talking about, but the pink haired teenager was already turning the corner, a muffled "move it" and the startled squawk and stumble of a career paper ninja dropping several pounds of paper coming from the opposite direction the only reminder of her presence.

A sigh came from behind him and Kakashi turned to look at the entryway of the Hokage's office, to which he had nearly managed to arrive unmolested.

Shizune leaned in the doorway with an amused, indulgent expression on her face. Catching Kakashi's eye, she said lightly, as if sharing an inside joke, "I don't think Tsunade-sama has ever had an apprentice more likely to expire from an overdose of caffeine. The girl already has more credentials than any medical ninja can claim in any of our eight bordering countries, and she still pushes herself to absurd lengths."

Shizune meant her words to be teasing, but Kakashi felt his heart constrict a bit with the unintended reminder that his 'kids' really weren't kids anymore. They were all grown up now, with their own fearsome reputations and awe-inspiring accomplishments.

"Did you need to see Tsunade-sama," asked Shizune, mildly concerned. "Nothing went wrong on your mission, did it?"

"No," Kakashi, "But I was informed that I needed to check in with her."

"Well, you've caught her at a good time, I'm heading out to get some lunch but she's only signing pay tickets at the moment, just go on in."

Kakashi strode past the woman quietly, knocking on the wooden frame to announce his entrance.
since the Hokage's bowed head and slouched posture indicated that she wasn't paying too much attention to the occupants of her office at the moment.

The Godaime flicked her eyes up briefly then looked back at her papers, only to snap her head up at him and stare at him intensely moments later.

Kakashi bore with her awkward glare until she broke it off, muttering under her breath and opening a drawer, pulling out what looked suspiciously like some betting score cards.

"No," she said roughly, "No. No. I didn't win anything today so what the hell is wrong with you?"

Kakashi remained nonchalantly slouched in the doorway. "I'm just reporting to your office, as requested Godaime-sama."

"No, seriously," said the Hokage, "Did you kill the wrong target or something? Are you going on strike?" She peered at him suspiciously. "You didn't run into an orphaned princess and abandon the mission objective to save her again did you?"

Kakashi smiled with single visible eye, "I believe that one turned out in our favor, eventually." The copy ninja shrugged, "nothing is wrong, Tsunade-sama, I'm just responding to your summons."

The blonde glared at him a bit more, then pulled a mission scroll out from a drawer on her desk. As she grumbled under her breath, "Fine. Whatever, just give a girl some warning," she waved Kakashi into the office.

"You responding in a timely fashion feels like a sign of the end of days." Tsunade tossed the scroll to the man. "Whatever," the woman casually relaxed back into her chair, settling in for a long conversation. "I have two assignments for you."

Kakashi nodded, catching the scroll midair, examining it in his hands and moving to open it.

"Wait on that one for a second." Tsunade irritably waved at him to stop opening the document before giving a put-upon sigh. She ran a hand over her face tiredly, "I need you to get your three favorite problems up to snuff for the jōnin exam."

Kakashi blinked in surprise. "Aren't they already…?"

"No," Tsunade said bluntly. "Yes. Kind of," she leaned back with another sigh. "There are issues," Tsunade grimaced, "issues with each one of them actually. I am thinking about asking them to take the exam early next year."

"That far off?" Kakashi frowned. "They're already capable—"

"It's a council issue," Tsunade said, cutting off the jōnin. "Among other things." Tsunade spared him a look which implied that 'other things' could not be completely articulated at this point in time, but elaborated to a certain extent upon her words. "The Uchiha isn't allowed to apply for jōnin until he's officially off of his probation."

Kakashi nodded knowingly, stepping closer to her desk to take a chair, realizing that this was going to be a longer conversation than he had originally anticipated.

"It was only because Naruto made herself a pain in the ass," Tsunade paused before thoughtfully amending, "a more significant pain in the ass than usual, that he was allowed to take the last chūnin exam. The Council is still worried about him advancing too quickly."
Kakashi just gazed lazily at the woman, eye half-lidded and looking like he wanted to do nothing more than to go take a nap.

Tsunade ignored the man's (probably) feigned nonchalance. "Of course, if Uchiha keeps behaving, he'll be off probation in a matter of months. I know the council is planning on dropping a shit ton of missions on the boy's shoulders, partially because he hasn't been taking any and he's fully rested but also because they think a busy Uchiha is not as dangerous as an Uchiha with time on his hands."

Kakashi privately thought this was a wise philosophy which should be applied to all the members of Team Seven, excluding himself, of course, and nodded along to the Godaime's words as she continued.

"There might be some truth to that line of thinking, but you and I both know that the boy does better with goals, if he is actively working toward an achievement of some kind. If the Uchiha thinks he's just being used as a workhorse, he's going to get frustrated." The Hokage gave the jōnin a level look, as if she was expecting him to protest her next words. "And he's going to get frustrated no matter what because I'm putting my foot down on assigning him work above his official rank. The earliest I can get the council to consider advancing him to jōnin is through the exams next spring. I want him to know that and be working toward that."

"I can understand the dilemma with Sasuke," said Kakashi slowly, "but how does his situation justify postponing Naruto's and Sakura's advancements?" After all, Kakashi thought, the next exams would be this fall, why make the girls wait another half a year for a well-deserved promotion?

Tsunade shook her head. "They're all tied together in a way," she narrowed honey-brown eyes at the copy ninja. "I blame you, you know. Currently the only people willing to spar with Uchiha are his former teammates and Gai's student. No one else will touch him, it's like he has a plague."

The woman sighed and pushed her hair out of her face. "He's finding it very hard to readjust to village life, or at least, he's finding it hard adjusting to socializing with his peers. I'm not sure the brat was ever well-adjusted to village life. The only time he interacts with others is when he trains by sparring with his former teammates. But with all of you busy on missions, that doesn't happen frequently. I'm hoping by encouraging you to work together he'll become more social."

Kakashi just hummed, expression veiling his personal opinions, which were along the lines that the four had been forced to work together for almost a decade now and Kakashi had seen no improvement.

Then again, it wasn't like Kakashi's social life was anything to write home about either.

"On the other hand," Tsunade continued, "there is my apprentice. Who is so busy working herself to the bone that the jōnin exams are literally the last thing she cares about. If she was left to her own devices, I'm not sure that she'd ever take them. She's working primarily at the hospital now, where being a jōnin won't get her any other privileges than a pay raise." Tsunade shook her head sadly, posture loudly saying 'what can you do?' in a very resigned sort-of way. "Her medical licenses give her access to most of the jōnin-rank classified medical texts. She doesn't want to take on a genin squad and if someone shows promise as a student she'll be able to take them on as an apprentice despite her rank of chūnin."

Kakashi suppressed a shiver as he envisioned a small army of Sakuras taking over the hospital. He'd rather not return wounded from missions to be cared for by creatures who knew almost all his exit plans and favorite places for hiding banned literature.

"Additionally," the Hokage continued reluctantly, "if a medic-nin of her caliber is needed on a
mission then she's going, no matter her rank. I just don't have enough highly capable medic-nin who are also jōnin that I can be picky in my assignments. But if I tell her that she's taking the exams next spring and give her a training schedule to adhere to, she'll take the damn thing."

"And Naruto," Kakashi drawled questioningly, wanting to hear his leader's analysis regarding the final member of his trio.

"She's kind of just got caught in the whole mess," admitted Tsunade. "But it's not like she's going to complain, in fact, I'd say she's excited about guaranteed training time with the other two. She could go ahead and take the upcoming exam this month if she wanted, but I'm afraid the council would fail to approve the assignment the first few times and I'd have to override their decision on her third exam."

The woman let out a scoff, "Their main concern is her youth, and what they view as a lack of maturity, despite how many times she's shown herself to be one of the strongest ninja of our village."

"The next spring exam is just a little under a year away and I'm hoping the council will have resigned themselves to the inevitable by then and pass her with her teammates."

Tsunade tapped the tabletop in irritation. "Or maybe they'll just finally die."

Kakashi bit back a snort. They wouldn't be that lucky.

"Sounds like you've thought this through then, but why have I been drafted into this mess and put on furlough for a month?" Kakashi inquired, tone bored despite the inquisitive nature of his words.

Tsunade rolled her eyes and started to sign the large stack of pay tickets in front of her as she talked. "Uchiha is still on probation for the next few months, he can't use most of his techniques unless he's being supervised by you or someone else that has volunteered to be on his approved list of babysitters." Tsunade shuffled some papers, dryly adding, "As you can imagine, it's a very small list."

"Just myself, then?" Kakashi asked.

"And Gai." Admitted the Hokage.

Kakashi wasn't completely surprised, but it was still a pleasant feeling to know that Gai was doing what he could to look out for his kids when Kakashi couldn't himself.

"If they are actually going to improve, they're going to need to experiment and use some of their more dangerous abilities. And no matter how smart they think that they are, you still have a couple things to teach them."

"I think you overestimate my capabilities as a teacher," the jōnin stated calmly.

Tsunade snorted, "Bullshit. Stop selling yourself short, I don't have time to soothe your ego today. I need you to work with Sakura on her affinity. She has one, but she's completely ignored honing it and doesn't know a single doton technique. Fix that, and make sure she's comfortable using it defensively in battle situations. Likewise, Sasuke and Naruto could use some elemental training. Sasuke relies heavily on chidori and derivatives of the attack. While its fancy and effective, I want you to teach him some more lightning release techniques to play with and see what he can come up with. Also," Tsunade sighed, "I hate to ask you this, but the boy's likely to wind up recruited to ANBU eventually, make sure he knows what he needs to know to get his missions done and keep sane."
"As for Naruto," Tsunade rubbed her temples, "where to start?"

"You aren't pleased with her rate of progress," Kakashi asked, slightly confused.

"I wouldn't say that," Tsunade paused, trying to gather her thoughts. "She just has so much to learn and I don't have enough time to teach it all to her. I'm handling training her in politics, but the council is being fussy and fighting my decision to announce that she's my successor. I don't intend to step down for a few years yet, but I think it would relieve some tension if there was a public acknowledgment regarding who will be following me. There were some close calls in the war that led to sticky situations, I don't want to leave the Village in that mess if something unexpected happens in the next few years before I officially retire."

"What would you like me to teach her?" Kakashi relaxed a little knowing the source of Tsunade's concerns.

"To start with, she needs advanced fūinjutsu training. She's only paid it absent-minded attention at best, and with her circumstances she just can't keep relying on others to master the field for her. Besides, I'd like to see if she has any of Minato's talent in the area. From what I remember of my conversations with Jiraiya, he intended to but never began teaching her about the subject. See what she knows and what you can do to bring her up to speed. You know more about the subject than the average shinobi, and if she shows true talent with it I can take up teaching her once she's exhausted your knowledge. If she ever does."

Kakashi nodded. "That will take more time to accomplish than what I can give in an afternoon group sparring session."

"Then give it to her," Tsunade stated, tone conveying that she wouldn't be accepting excuses regarding this matter. "There aren't enough fūinjutsu masters left, if she's got talent we teach her, even if its slow-going."

Tsunade pushed aside her paperwork and locked eyes with Kakashi. "Do you remember her mother's chakra chain technique?"

Kakashi blinked, "I saw it once or twice."

"Naruto is convinced she didn't inherit the ability, but I'm not so sure that she just hasn't figured out how to manifest it. Kushina's chakra control wasn't any better than Naruto's that I recall, I'm not even sure that Naruto has tried to use her chakra that way. The way she threw it around in the war though," the Hokage trailed off, mind lost in old memories. Blinking her eyes, she focused on the jōnin in front of her and pushed forward, "it just seems like she ought to be able to do it. See what you can try with her."

Kakashi narrowed his single eye. "Any other miracles you'd like me to pull out of my pockets?"

Tsunade gave him a sharp look, but only said, "Now that you mention it, she only uses wind attacks. See if she's got a second affinity, if she does, then tell her teammates to keep hush about it. Train her in it, but tell her not to reveal it on the exam. Its good for a Hokage to have a few trump cards to play when needed."

Kakashi stood, slouched easily before the Hokage's desk, but internally he felt like cringing. This was a long wish list and suddenly 'almost a year' didn't seem like a lot of time. "You mentioned a set schedule."

"Yes," said the Hokage, not looking up from the documents that she was signing. "Every
Wednesday and Saturday afternoon, one o'clock, Training Ground Three. I've gone ahead and taken the liberty of booking that field on those dates for a year's time. You'll be paid jōnin teaching wages for your hours and you can request a supply budget through the proper channels if you feel its needed for something. You'll still be receiving missions, and if you are out I'll assign someone else to supervise them at that time. Any questions?"

"Furlough." Kakashi said bitterly.

Tsunade smiled, "Not my fault. Your councilor over in Psych. demanded it, said you were working yourself too hard."

Kakashi scoffed, "I'm fine, Hokage-sama—"

"Good, because you don't have the time completely off. I expect you to get started with your team this week, and you'll have plenty of time to start working with Naruto separately on fūinjutsu. Also, I've got another job for you in that scroll."

Kakashi looked at the paper in his hands, almost having forgotten about it, preoccupied with the Hokage's previous announcement. "And it is?"

"Something you can do here, at home, while you're technically on furlough, since I know you wouldn't know what to do with three months of free-time if it jumped out of a box and bit you on the ass."

"What rank," asked the copy ninja, ignoring the Hokage's jibe.

"A," said Tsunade seriously, "but only because of how highly classified the information is. I don't expect anything too dangerous to occur on this assignment. I don't expect you to be involved in any physical confrontation at all, actually."

"Oh?" Kakashi turned over the scroll, intrigued. "What is it you need me to do?"

Tsunade set down her pen and rested her head against her intertwined fingers, watching the jōnin with serious, steady brown eyes. "I need you to track down the remnants of ROOT."

Kakashi stopped unfurling the scroll. "That hasn't been done yet?"

Tsunade grimaced. "Unfortunately, it's just not been a priority and we've been heavily overbooked since the end of the war. That, and I need someone with a certain level of intelligence to sort through the information I have and it needs to be someone I trust. You were my top choice and you've been busy."

Tsunade cleared her throat. "With the recent jōnin exams, we'll finally have enough ninja to support our regular mission load, and I can spare a few people to take on 'in-house' assignments like this one, which have been pushed to the backburner, so to speak."

"You couldn't assign it to ANBU?"

Tsunade shook her head, "I need someone who can think and has a certain awareness of history and intimacy with classified events. I don't have anyone currently in ANBU old enough to remember certain events that might be important, or who is capable of making the deductions you can make. I have boxes of information I need you to sort through. I want to know who is left alive from the organization and what they are doing. And I want to know where the old meeting places were and make sure that all experiments are ended and all equipment is confiscated. I'm terrified of missing someone like Kabuto, who could escape and carry out their own agenda due to a brainwashed loyalty to Danzo that didn't end with the man's death. Will you accept?"
"Of course," Kakashi agreed, any threat left behind by Root would eventually harm the people he cared about most, "I'm surprised you felt that you had to ask."

"I know I play the role of benevolent dictator well, but there is still some free-will in this Village," Tsunade said sarcastically. "I'm reminded that I need to remedy that every time you or your crew of misfits enters my office."

"My crew of misfits?" asked Kakashi, amused as Tsunade dismissed him from her office with a wave of her hands.

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I take back all the times that I've previously said this statement, This is the stupidest thing that I've ever seen you doing.

Shut up, Naruto hissed at the overgrown mammal sealed inside of her, This flirting stuff is harder than it looks.

Naruto had already given up on the face paints, which had been tossed unceremoniously into a box under her bathroom sink. Currently, she was eying herself in the mirror, trying to get used to her new sleeping clothes and practicing some of the poses that Ino claimed were "practically magic."

"I feel ridiculous," she said, deflating and watching as her reflection mirrored her slumped posture of defeat. "How the hell is this supposed to be sexy? I just feel cold and awkward." Naruto trounced to her bed, knocking the target doll that she had made in the likeness of her sensei long ago off the bed in a huff.

I don't understand why you are under the impression that clothes are at all necessary to the mating process.

"Oh my God," cried Naruto, bolting upright in the bed, "Please tell me you aren't going to be 'aware' of anything that happens between me and…well, any guy ever?"

Silence greeted Naruto's surprised cry.

Kurama! Naruto thought loudly and frantically.

Eventually she could feel his rumbling response. I will endeavor to turn my attention elsewhere when certain situations arise, but you must know that anything which...excites your chakra, pulls me to awareness of your circumstances.

Naruto's jaw dropped in horror as she fell back onto her pillows and covered her eyes with her arm. "I hate my life."

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Chapter End Notes

Betas: CrystallineX and LadyWinterFic
Chapter Summary

Sasuke always knew his teammates were insane.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sakura arrived purposefully early to their weekly meeting at Training Ground Three with her lunch and a textbook to enjoy a nice, private picnic.

The peaceful atmosphere was spoiled when Naruto came crashing into the clearing barely thirty minutes later, tripping as she jumped down from a tree, catching herself from making intimate acquaintance with the grass at the last second. The blonde wobbled awkwardly in the new heeled boots that Ino insisted the girl pair with her recently revamped wardrobe.

Sakura paused, apple halfway to her mouth. "Those heels are only an inch and a half thick, they aren't even stilettos, please tell me that something else almost caused you to make a meal of the ground today."

Naruto scowled at her friend. "I can handle them fine for the most part, it's just when I come down from a jump. It's not flat all the way like a sandal and it's messing me up."

"Really, Naruto," Sakura said flatly, "We're ninja, you're going to stand there and tell me that your balance isn't good enough to adjust to something as simple as heels?"

Naruto blushed, "It's just different! That's all!"

Sakura sighed and proceeded to put the jinchūriki through a crash course in how to fight in heeled boots. At the end of it, Naruto was far from experienced, but she was at least accomplished enough that the boys probably wouldn't notice the difference and Naruto hopefully wouldn't trip and twist an ankle. If we're lucky, Sakura thought, as Naruto collapsed next to her in a huff and investigated the remains of Sakura's packed lunch.

"You're here early," Naruto noted, claiming Sakura's last rice ball as her own.

Sakura's eyebrow twitched. "I needed a quiet place to study, why are you here early?"

Naruto shrugged, taking a large bite from the rice ball, "Lookin' for you."

"Ughh," said Sakura, "Don't talk with your mouth full, Naruto, it's not ladylike. Have you thought about how to implement Ino's advice today?"

The blonde chūnin swallowed her food. "Well, I thought today I'd just start by wearing this stuff." She gestured to her outfit, which included her skirt and low-cut tank top.

"Flirting isn't just about what you wear, Naruto," snapped Sakura. "How are you going to act?"

"Look," Naruto glared back, uncharacteristically moody, "I've been thinking about it, but I don't
know what I'm supposed to do. I mean, what do you want from me? To coo and bat my eyes and
fondle his triceps?"

Sakura knocked the girl lightly upside the head. "Flirting isn't about being a mindless ditz, Naruto.
Don't you remember anything they taught us at the Academy?"

Naruto clutched her head and muttered a negative response.

Sakura sighed and began to lecture. "It's an information game, it's about finding out what another
person likes and dislikes. Once you find out what someone finds physically attractive, you use that
knowledge to draw their attention to what you want them to see, and distract them from what you
want to hide."

"Well, it's not like either of us knows what's going to work on these guys," said Naruto with a pout.

"Exactly," said Sakura, all confidence, "That's why Ino thinks this is a good challenge. She thinks
that it will take us a while to figure out what will fluster Sasuke or Sensei. Once we find out, we can
distract them and win the battle." Sakura's chakra flared on the last statement and Naruto quailed
slightly in the face of the other girl's fanaticism.

"So," said the pink-haired chūnin, addressing her reluctant accomplice, "what are you going to try
first? Changing the way you dress helps, but you have to add physical action to your appearance to
get a result."

"I dunno," Naruto looked at her helplessly. "Any ideas you wanna share?"

Sakura studied her teammate carefully for a moment. "One thing that can work for you is your low-
cut top. The jacket makes it seem more conservative, but think about how many times we fall onto
each other in a misstep in an exercise. If you take advantage of the right moment, a face full of
cleavage can be very distracting."

Naruto blushed and tried to pull the too-small jacket a bit more tightly around her, "That may be a
move to save for later. If ever, she added silently to herself.

Sakura shrugged. "And then there are your legs, which are a lot easier to use. The nice thing about a
skirt is that it can rise up and catch a guy's attention." Sakura paused, eyes narrowing, "but that trick
works better if a guy can't tell that you are wearing shorts underneath." She flipped out a kunai from
the equipment pouch on her hip and advanced on the other chūnin.

Naruto scuttled backward, crablike. "What are you doing?"

"Those spandex shorts are about two inches too long, I'm going to trim them," Sakura said matter-of-
factly, blowing her bangs out of her eyes.

Naruto squawked indignantly as Sakura grabbed at her and began tearing away at the offending
garment. Naruto fidgeted and complained and kneed her in the face at one point. Sakura snarled at
her to hold still and evened out the hemline of the spandex under the skirt.

This is of course, how Sasuke found them, with Sakura's hands under Naruto's skirt and Naruto red-
faced as a tomato and yelling bloody murder.

"What are you two doing?" the words came slowly from the deep familiar voice, tone suggesting that
the answer might not be something he actually wanted to know.

Both girls froze, and then Sakura spun around, face the same rosy shade as Naruto's. "Wardrobe
malfun**ction,** she squeaked, "I fixed it, don't worry."

The Uchiha leveled a glare at her that implied he questioned her IQ for ever thinking that he was worried and gave a clipped grunt. Then he moved to a log a dozen feet away from the girls, where he sat, hands folded, adopting his familiar angsty, brooding posture.

Sakura busied herself packing away the remains of her lunch and textbook as Naruto twiddled her thumbs in the awkward silence, too embarrassed to begin the conversation.

Once Sakura had taken a few moments to compose herself, she cleared her throat and tried to remedy the tense atmosphere. "So, Sasuke-kun. Naruto-chan and I went shopping last week, do you like her new outfit?"

Sasuke's look was slightly incredulous, but as he opened his mouth to emit a scathing remark, he stopped, truly taking note of Naruto for the first time that day.

"What's wrong with you, Moron?" He snorted. "You look like a girl."

Naruto's eyes narrowed and her face turned blotchy with anger as she launched herself at the boy with an indignant yell, knocking him off his log with one sweeping kick and rolling them both to the dirt floor as she attempted to throttle him.

He snarled at her, calling her names and grappling with her hands, trying to pry them from his neck. Sakura jumped to her feet and railed at them both, loudly berating them to "act your age" and "are you ninja are not, someone's going to get their eye poked out and I'm so not putting it back in!"

The brawl was interrupted with a fake cough.

The three stilled and turned sullen heads toward the intruder.

"Ah," said Kakashi, smiling with his one eye, "It's so nice to see you all getting along for once."

"You're late, Sensei," growled Sakura, looking much more intimidating at eighteen than she had at twelve, tightening the glove on her fist in a threatening fashion before resting her hands indignantly on her hips.

"My watch is two hours fast," said Kakashi, apologetically.

Sakura blinked, "That doesn't even make sense!" Her antagonism dissipated at the absurdity as the two on the ground uncurled awkwardly from the dog pile in which they'd tangled themselves.

"Watch your hands, Sasuke-bastard," snapped Naruto with a scowl.

Flustered (although he'd never admit it), Sasuke jumped away as if burned, and hissed, "My hands aren't anywhere near—"

"No flirting during training, Sasuke," said Sakura with a straight face.

Sasuke looked perturbed.

Kakashi paused and took in the group, not sure what to make of the odd exchange. "Ok, ducklings," he finally said, ignoring the circumstances for the time being. "Time to get down to business."

Fortunately, this put a halt to the strange tension in the air and the three students focused on the jōnin. "Here is the plan…"
The plan, evidently, was for them all to take on Kakashi in a spar, three against one. The only rules were to refrain from using attacks that would undoubtedly cause permanent, irreparable damage to a target or the environment, such as Naruto's rasenshuriken or any of Sasuke's mangekyo abilities.

Apparently, Kakashi had been holding back on the group, because even with the three of them working fairly well together (meaning that no one had yet to snap and seriously try to injure another team member), it had taken them an hour to realize that they were tracking an earth clone and another two hours to pin Kakashi in a position from which he had no choice but to surrender.

When it was done, they gathered together and debriefed from the fight, something new that they hadn't done in the past. When asked, Kakashi pointed out that the jōnin exam would have a heavy emphasis on strategy, and that he wanted them to get comfortable forming and explaining strategies taking into account different variables such as the number of teammates, the number of opponents, the importance of the mission objective and whether it had already or had yet to be achieved, the weather, the condition of those involved, the inevitable rampaging of a bijū and century old shinobi thought to be dead, etc…

Sasuke privately thought that Kakashi was just trying to hide the fact that he was old and needed a moment to catch his breath before he continued. But Naruto and Sakura were listening intently and so he kept his thoughts to himself and kept his hands clearly visible in his lap just in case Naruto decided to make any more outrageous allegations.

Eventually, Kakashi tossed Sasuke two scrolls, one containing basic C-rank raiton jutsu and the other containing B-rank raiton jutsu.

Sasuke raised an eyebrow at the older man.

"I expect you to have all those mastered by the end of this month, be prepared to demonstrate them," said the copy ninja.

Sasuke grunted in acknowledgement.

Kakshi then tossed Sakura one scroll, giving her the same instructions.

The pink-headed chūnin wrinkled her nose, "Why do I only get one scroll?"

"Because you are expected to be a good, contributing member of society and work at the hospital a significant amount of the time while Sasuke-kun has nothing better to do," said Kakashi, patiently.

Sasuke scowled.

"Now, now," cooed the jōnin, "Don't be mad at Sakura-chan because you made bad life choices."

Sakura beamed smugly.

Sasuke's scowl deepened and Naruto grinned, jumping up and down and waving her hand in the air enthusiastically.

Sasuke diverted his eyes with a weird tightening of his chest, fighting back an irrational desire to let a flush come over his face. What a moron, who chooses to wear that type of top as a ninja. Could she not tell that she was about to fall out of that thing? It was worse than Karin. And why was Sakura looking at him like that?

"Me next! I want a scroll," cried Naruto eagerly.
"Ah, not today Naru-chan."

She stuck out her lower lip and pouted cutely.

Kakashi checked a sudden and bizarre urge to reach out and pat her on the head by quickly stuffing his hands into his pockets.

"I'm going to work with you on elemental jutsu later, but first, Tsunade-sama wants me to start testing you for fūinjutsu and see if you have an aptitude for some unique chakra techniques."

Naruto paused, "Fūin…that's sealing right? Huh, I guess that could be fun," she rocked back onto her heels, blinking.

Kakashi nodded, "I'll need to work with you one-on-one for those lessons, but I'd like for us to all be involved in the group sessions. Do you have any missions right now?"

Naruto shrugged, "Not really," she hesitated before adding, "at least, nothing that's going to take me away from the Village."

Naruto cursed her inability to lie, but Kakashi and the others didn't make much of the comment, knowing that lately the blonde was often closeted with the Hokage and assuming that the village leader was handing out assignments of her own.

"Then we'll meet tomorrow, here, same time, and start with the basics."

Sakura chipped in, "I have some medical texts that describe fūinjutsu basics."

Kakashi smiled at her, "Those won't be particularly helpful, I'm afraid. Tsunade-sama wants to see if Naruto can use fūinjutsu in battle. Medical fūinjutsu operate on different principles. It can be hard to mesh the two, especially for beginners."

Sakura hummed thoughtfully as the jōnin departed, Sasuke seemingly dissolving into the forest shortly afterward. She and Naruto fell into pace with one another as they took a familiar route to the more crowded civilian district, in the habit of getting dinner together after practice unless one had a prior commitment.

"So, how did it go?" asked Naruto lazily, crossing her arms behind her head.

They walked down the empty path in silence for a moment until Sakura bluntly admitted, "Sensei's a sucker for your eyes and Sasuke's a boob man."

Naruto's eyes bulged and she sputtered, "W-what?"

Sakura didn't pause and Naruto had to quicken her steps to catch up to her. "Hey you, explain!"

The medic-nin shrugged her shoulders. "I watched their non-verbal gestures, their body language, when they had to respond to you. Sasuke was embarrassed by his proximity to you, which he never has been before, and kept looking away when you made movements that drew attention to your breasts. Sensei, on the other hand, didn't seem to notice your new outfit, maybe he's desensitized himself with that dumb book, but when you pouted at him your eyes got big and they made him uncomfortable."

Sakura stopped and seemed to be considering the situation. "Not in a bad way though, I think," she frowned, trying to come up with the underlying reasons for the behavior she'd observed. "Just, whatever he was feeling it was something he was trying not to act on?"
Naruto chewed on the ends of her hair thoughtfully until Sakura noticed and swatted at her.

"So," said the blonde, "Try the skirt trick with Sasuke next time and then build up to the cleavage thing and," she glanced to the side, watching Sakura out of the corner of her eyes, "Umm, what should I do about Sensei, then?"

Sakura hooked arms with her as they entered the village, "Try to get into his personal space, like this, and then when he notices you try to make and hold eye contact. See what he does with that and we'll go from there."

"Ok," agreed Naruto happy enough to let someone else make the plans for the moment.

Kakashi wasn't surprised to find Naruto already waiting for him by the time he arrived at the training field the next day. Being waited on was quite normal for him, but what did surprise him was that Naruto was, if one could call it this, *patiently* waiting. She was sitting in the middle of the clearing in a cross-legged position, hands placed gently on her knees with her eyes closed.

He slouched forward, hands in his pockets, and came to a stop a few inches from her kneecaps, nudging her gently with a foot when he realized she wasn't going to come out of her trance on her own anytime soon.

Familiar cobalt-colored eyes opened slowly and blinked, darker and more distant than he was used to seeing from a person who he'd come to see as synonymous with open and friendly.

"Ah, Naruto, where did you go?" Kakashi asked curiously as the girl yawned and stretched.

"Was thinkin'," she mumbled. "With Kurama." Her voice gained energy as her world came into focus and she looked in alarm up at her teacher, gesturing distractedly. "We had stuff to talk about," she flailed a bit with her arms, "and things..." she trailed off lamely.

Kakashi found the way she floundered for words oddly endearing. She obviously did not want to tell him whatever her thoughts had been, so he decided to put her out of her misery and change the subject. The last thing he needed to do was to put pressure on the girl and find out what village gossip had her fretting.

"Are you back now?" He asked with a teasing tone as she jumped up and resumed her usual energetic attitude.

"Yes! Seals, Sensei! What am I supposed to know?"

He chuckled. "This isn't going to be easy, and I wanted to teach you separately because, quite frankly, I won't be too surprised if you don't succeed at this," Kakashi quickly supplemented his last comment, "at least I'm not sure that you'll succeed at this in the way which Tsunade-sama hopes that you will."

"Hey!" Naruto's cheeks puffed out indignantly and her hair bristled as she shouted various warranties about her intelligence and work ethic.

Kakashi took the opportunity to find a relatively flat spot in the training field and she followed, continuing her exclamations, in his footsteps. He pulled some scrolls out of his pockets and dropped to the ground gracefully, tugging on his companion's wrist to bring her crashing to the ground next to him and effectively stopping her diatribe.

"Now that I have your attention," Kakashi smiled with his visible eye and Naruto blushed slightly,
which Kakashi chalked up to as embarrassment. "As I was saying, this is difficult, it's a field that my Sensei, your father, was a master of to a certain degree. Jiraiya-sama was also considered a master of this field, but he would have told you himself that Minato far outstripped his own talent in fūinjutsu. Tsunade-sama has an impressive theoretical understanding of fūinjutsu, and while she can apply it quite successfully in the medical sense, she wouldn't attempt the types of seals that Sensei and Jiraiya-sama studied. And, in another vein, your mother was very good at fūinjutsu. She was not as innovative as Sensei with the skillset, and she didn't employ it as an active battle technique, but she was very intuitive and helped Sensei break through some of the blocks he encountered in his projects. I learned about fūinjutsu, to a certain extent, because they studied it so thoroughly."

Kakashi paused and tapped one finger meaningfully against his covered eye. "What I saw them do, I can replicate, in a sense, but I can't always use it as effectively. I've tried to master fūinjutsu, but my mind just isn't wired the right way to approach the subject."

Kakashi looked meaningfully at the blonde, "You aren't your father, or your mother, or even Jiraiya. And you have a different learning style that doesn't always mesh with the way I teach. However, we're currently experiencing a shortage of seal masters, which is why Tsunade is willing to spend the time securing someone to test you and see if you have any ability in the area. If you do, we'll hone that ability, whatever it might be."

Naruto nodded attentively, palms gripping her knees.

"So let's start with the basics, then, shall we? What do you know about seals? What seals can you think of off the top of your head?"

Naruto cocked her head, blue eyes thoughtful. "Well, I know they can be used to store things, like weapons for missions or even things as big as bijū, when necessary. I know we use them to make things explode sometimes. I've seen people make them with ink or blood. I know they require chakra to activate." Naruto shrugged, "That's it really."

Kakashi prodded her on, gently. "Do you know how Tsunade-sama uses seals? Can you think of how the seals you described are all different?"

The blonde sighed, "Granny uses the seals to heal people." Naruto was silent for a few moments, thinking. "And the seals she uses are all the same, I mean, anybody can copy the medical seals that she uses and make it work themselves with the right kind of application of chakra. Explosive seals are all the same, anybody can use them by applying the right amount of chakra. But, the seals for the jinchūriki are different, they are all different, and they require different amounts of chakra." Naruto's brow scrunched as she thought, hand absentely reaching up to pull on a pig-tail. "Those kinds are a lot more complicated and technical. And storage seals can be a lot more complicated to use too, especially if they are the kind that will only release for specific people."

"Then you've noticed some of the most important aspects of fūinjutsu: it's adaptable and can be personalized." Kakashi removed a basic exploding tag and set it on the ground between them. "Basic seals, like this one, are easy to make and can replicated by using another seal. They require barely any chakra to create, mass produce, and activate. Do you remember being taught to make these at the Academy?"

"Yes," Naruto said with a grimace.

"Why the face?" Kakashi asked.

The chūnin ran an aggravated hand through her bangs. "It was one of those things I never seemed to be able to get the hang of," she huffed, frustrated, "I just couldn't make it work right." Naruto tapped
"That's very possible," the man agreed, taking a moment to draw out some blank paper squares from his vest along with an inkpot. "Today, we'll start with trying to replicate this seal, since it is so basic. You may remember this from the Academy," Kakashi paused as Naruto laughed sheepishly, tugging nervously at a pigtail. "You may remember this, but your design doesn't have to perfectly mimic this one, part of the art of fūjinjutsu is that you have to do what feels naturally to you. It's why not everyone can master this field. The best masters become so familiar with the seals that they've created that they can apply them with a mere touch of their fingertips. It becomes instinctual, and a matter of intent and concentrated chakra application. Many never master this, even I can only apply a few seals this way."

Kakashi pushed the materials toward the younger girl. "Why don't you try to make your own, here."

Naruto picked up the exploding tag and looked at it. "Aren't you supposed to tell me what these symbols and numbers mean? Isn't that supposed to help you learn to do this stuff?"

The jōnin shook his head. "Not necessarily. In medical fūjinjutsu, where the seals are standardized it certainly helps to approach learning seals as if one is learning a language. But the types of seals your parents did…Your mother always said that she was born knowing how to speak in seals. She said that the people who truly mastered fūjinjutsu each had their own way to 'speak' the language, and that it wasn't something that could really be taught from one person to another…that everyone had their own language for creating seals and it was best that they learned how to use it."

Naruto eyed the blank tags speculatively and Kakashi could only shrug his shoulders. "I never really understood what she was saying. I've always approached seals as if they were based on a concrete language and have repeated what I've seen and copied with the sharingan. But, then again, the seals that I've 'copied' have never worked as well for me as they did for their original creators, and I've been entirely unsuccessful creating new seals based on what I believe I know of the language. Why don't you just give your mother's advice a try and see what happens."

The jinchūriki looked anxiously at the older man, "But what if it doesn't do what we want it to? What if it does something really bad?"

"Well," Kakashi drawled, "I doubt that you are going to wind up creating a space time seal if you're only trying to create an exploding tag. Remember, seals are limited, to a certain extent, by the intent of their creator. I'm not sure really how it works. I've never understood it because none of the explanations Jiraiya-san gave me ever made sense in my own mind. Just remember, regulate your intent and regulate your chakra." Kakashi tried to radiate his usual calm and collected demeanor, "I think you'll be able to control any unforeseen consequences if you keep that in mind."

Naruto looked unconvinced.

Kakashi sighed, slouching a little before admitting, "When I first tried this, I did it behind Sensei's back and without supervision. I hid for two days before Kushina-san, your mother, found me and dragged me back to Sensei to explain what I'd done to burn off my eyebrows and why the Laundromat owner was out for my blood." He looked at his student, "I doubt whatever you manage to do, with supervision no less, will be any more traumatic."

The blonde grinned and repositioned herself so that she was sitting next to Kakashi and he could watch what she designed over her shoulders. After about fifteen minutes of creating something that somewhat resembled the original tag, Naruto leaned back, bumping shoulders with the jōnin before announcing, "Done."
Kakashi raised an eyebrow, "Are you sure?"

"Yes," said the girl confidently.

"Let's see it then," instructed the copy ninja.

Naruto placed a palm on the tag, channeling, what for her, was a small amount of chakra into the instrument.

Kakashi's eyes widened as he felt a swell of power coming from the paper, the inked lines extending from the paper in a circle about two feet in diameter, glowing in the telltale sign of activated fūinjutsu. In seconds, he'd grabbed Naruto around the waist and used a shunshin to haul them both to the safety of the trees forty feet away from the field. They were still roughly thrown against the tree trunk from the force of the blast. Dirt and other debris littered the air and Naruto coughed into Kakashi's chest, dimly realizing that she'd thrown her arms around his neck in surprise and trying to relax her grip, which most certainly was cutting off his air supply.

As the dust settled, the pair in the tree surveyed the damage done to the clearing, where a twenty-foot crater of indeterminable depth now marked their previous location.

"Ahh," said Kakashi weakly, taking in the destruction and avoiding Naruto's startled blue gaze, "at least you still have eyebrows."

"You've only been at this for a few weeks Naruto-chan, you can't expect this whole thing to just be resolved overnight," scolded Kurenai as she trimmed a plant that she'd brought in off her porch with deft hands.

Th...
"I dunno," said the blonde, drilling her fingers on the tabletop. "I think maybe it's because Sasuke-ass — err, Sasuke, I mean, did notice, and I thought it would have been the other way around, you know, that Kakashi would notice and Sasuke wouldn't."

"Well," the kunoichi set down her tools and took a seat across from Naruto. "I imagine he did notice. After all, very little escapes a jōnin of Kakashi's caliber. It's more likely that he didn't find the change worth commenting on."

The chūnin flinched and scowled a bit. Kurenai reached out to grab the younger girl's arm and keep her from pulling away.

"Don't mistake me, Naruto-chan. That doesn't mean that he doesn't find your new look, or you yourself, pretty. It's just, remember when I told you that you needed to stop thinking of Kakashi as Sensei? That you needed to think of him as a man and not a teacher?"

Naruto reluctantly nodded to Kurenai's imploring gaze.

"We need to find a way to get Kakashi to do the same for you," said the jōnin, trying to explain her analysis of the situation. "Kakashi is notorious for being all business on missions, and I imagine that he sees teaching the three of you much the same as a mission. We need to break him from the business mindset, shake him up a bit."

The two paused as Matsu let out a noisy sigh and then relaxed when the toddler's breathing evened out to the steady rhythm of one deeply asleep.

Kurenai regarded her newest student critically as she considered their dilemma. "Kakashi-san probably sees your outfit and starts cataloging it for weaknesses, analyzing how many weapons it can hide, that sort of thing. It's most likely been a very long time since he's looked at a kunoichi and thought that her outfit made her look attractive. It's just not a mindset he indulges in on the job, or at least, outside of reading that book on the job," Kurenai stopped and seemed to second-guess herself a bit, "maybe."

The woman gave an aggravated sigh and sat back, crossing her arms. "Honestly, it's very hard to read the man sometimes. He's an incredibly private person and I've never intruded on his personal life. Asuma would have been able to get something out of him, but..." Kurenai trailed off, closing her eyes in a moment of reflection before taking a deep breath and gathering herself, continuing on in a lighter tone. "On the other hand, while Sasuke-san has been, from what I understand, hounded by village girls for his attention over the years, he doesn't appear to have had much experience with keeping focused on a mission mindset when a grown woman is determined to distract him with the methods you are using."

Kurenai's eyes glittered, amused, "And I'm certain that you are one of the last people that Sasuke-san expects this kind of behavior from, which is probably why you are getting more of a reaction from him."

Naruto blinked. "Yeah, but how is that supposed to help me get Kakashi's attention?"

Kurenai smiled, "Slow and steady wins the race, Naruto-chan. Keep up what you are doing, eventually, Kakashi will notice something is amiss with the group dynamics and snap to it. But also," Kurenai watched the blonde carefully, "if I run into him, do I have your permission to tell him some things?"

The chūnin's eyes widened in fright.
"Not about your mission specifics of course, I promise I won't tell him that, but I," the jōnin grimaced, "I don't want to spoil your honest reaction to any future circumstances or lock myself into a specific course of action when I'm going to have to interact with him based on instinct, so I can't really tell you what I'm thinking." Kurenai's brow creased in frustration. "I just," she sighed, "could you trust me on this? I won't go seeking him out, but if I run into him, and see an opportunity, do I have your permission to take it?"

Naruto thought hard and bit her lip.

*It's not like she can make matters worse, monkey.*

*Shut up, Kurama!*

The blonde let out an aggravated huff, "Yeah, I guess. But, be careful please?" Realizing that Kurenai might think the huff was toward her, she quickly added, "And I'm sorry about my mood, I'm not upset with you, honest, this whole thing just makes me-" Naruto spasmed a bit, shoulders twitching.

"I know," Kurenai's voice soothed away some of the younger girl's fears. "Just take it a day at a time and see what happens. And remember, if at any time you decide you don't want to go through with this, that's ok. It's your life, your body, and it is your decision."

Naruto laughed. "You make it sound so serious! All I'm trying to do is get attention, I used to be a master at that when I was a kid, I'll figure it out. Believe it."

"Stop touching me," hissed Sasuke tersely through clenched teeth, kunai blocked from slicing through Naruto's throat at the last minute by the metal guard on the back of Naruto's glove.

Naruto rolled her eyes as the two jumped apart just in time to avoid a punch thrown by Sakura.

Naruto huffed, sweat trickling down her face. "I don't know what you're talking about, you dumbass. Stop being such a pansy and start fighting like you actually own a pair."

She couldn't see where Sasuke had gotten to with all the dirt that'd been kicked up by Sakura's intervention, but felt satisfied just imagining his eye twitch in response to her jabs.

"Both of you, shut up!" Sakura snapped from the middle of the field in aggravation. "Sasuke, you're supposed to be using your new raiton jutsu, stop throwing kunai around and get to work!" Sakura ducked instinctively at the hum of electricity that followed her words, spears of lightning haphazardly flying through the newly created forest clearing.

Naruto watched intently from her perch in the top of a nearby tree, hands drawing together to substitute herself with some conveniently placed kage-bunshin at a moment's notice if needed. She couldn't catch Sakura's hand signs, but her teammate melded into the earth as if she was made of clay, disappearing from her line of sight. Naruto grumbled discontentedly, not able to tell if the move was due to the execution of genjutsu or ninjutsu.

"I know what you're up to," came a low murmur from right behind the jinchūriki's ear, "It won't work."

Naruto shrieked and leapt from the tree, twisting midair and pulling out a chakra blade which met Sasuke's own weapon with the shrill twang of metal on metal. She pushed some wind chakra into it and repelled her attacker. "You're such a creep, honestly, stop doing that!"
Sasuke scowled. "You're trying to use seduction techniques to throw me off guard and win our spars, it won't work."

Naruto's eyes widened. "Oh God, it's finally happened, I mean, I already knew you thought you were the center of the universe, but news flash: Your Ego doesn't have its own gravitational pull, the rest of the world doesn't think you're the center of the universe too!"

Red-eyes whirled bright as a blade cackling with electric currents carved an arc through the air, slicing through Naruto, only for the 'Naruto' to burst away, dispelling in a far-too familiar fashion.

Sasuke grunted, but was unable to stop the downward sweep of his sword quickly enough to counter a combo attack from Naruto and Sakura which left him weaponless and buried up to his neck in the dirt, reminiscent of his first failed test with Kakashi.

Sakura cheered, fists tossed in the air accompanied by triumphant cries as Naruto bent down to lock eyes with the sulking boy. "Just so you know Sasuke, I don't need this," Naruto gestured to her cleavage, "to win a fight with you," she flicked him on the nose and straightened.

Sasuke's face darkened and he snarled, but Naruto cut off anything he might say. "And by the way, I make it a rule not to sleep with people who've genuinely tried to kill me. So keep your dirty dreams to yourself, because that's all they'll ever be."

Naruto brushed the dirt off her outfit and stalked away into the surrounding forest, ignoring Sasuke's cruel shouts at her back as Sakura taunted their captured target.

Sakura, unperturbed by her teammate's dramatic exit, continued her victory dance around Sasuke's head. "Girls-3, Sasuke-kun-0," she crowed.

Fierce black eyes glared at her. "You can't base your success rate in battle off two weeks' worth of sparring."

"Oh, but she can, my little duckling," Kakashi's smooth chuckle cut short Sakura's retaliatory rant before it had a chance to gather momentum. "Envision a mission where you can't afford to let the enemy know you're an Uchiha, or affiliated with Konoha, barring the use of your dōjutsu and katon. On that type of mission, you've just died, for the third time in two weeks."

"That's a ridiculous scenario," hissed Sasuke, twisting his neck to look up at Kakashi as the boy was still trapped in the ground. "It doesn't matter what my enemy sees if they're dead at the end of the battle."

"Hmm, I suppose that's true," said Kakashi amiably. "But of course, with the quality of ninja that you'll inevitably face on ANBU missions, when you can't be sure of your opponents' techniques," Kakashi looked thoughtful, "that's a very dangerous gamble to rely upon. Why if you guess wrong just once, if you overestimate your own abilities and underestimate your enemy's abilities just once, you may very well have sent your entire village to war." Kakashi paused and regarded his student innocently, "Are you telling me that's the kind of ninja you are, Sasuke-chan?"

"…No," came the reluctant, bitter response.

"I thought not," Kakashi stated with cheer, ruffling Sasuke's hair with his foot and congratulating Sakura on another well-fought victory.

Sasuke's jaw locked in anger and he began to struggle violently, trying to squirm his way out of Sakura's well-executed earth prison.
"I should probably go find your teammate, we have things to discuss" Kakashi looked around, extending his senses and noting the bright presence not too far away. "Have fun digging him out," he clasped Sakura's shoulder fondly, patting her once on the back and heading out to track down the missing member of their party.

His ears caught Sakura's words, barely audible over Sasuke's snarls, as he made his way through the trees, "You know, I'm already late for a date, I'd hate to tell him that I'm even later because some other boy was demanding my time… I'll come back after dinner and finish this up…don't worry, I'll bring you some leftovers."

Kakashi smiled to himself and stuck his hands in his pockets. Life was good when everyone was happy. Well, most everyone, anyway, he amended his thoughts as Naruto came into view. She was sitting by a tree, cross-legged, clearly meditating.

Any civilian would say that the girl looked calm and serene.

This was, of course, how Kakashi immediately knew that something quite serious was bothering her.

Kakashi tilted his head, observing his student for a moment and debating the likelihood of whether this was a matter that he could actually help resolve or some type of emotional/social issue, in which case he should just cut his losses and go toss Iruka at the problem.

The decision was taken out of his hands when the blonde's shoulders heaved, and with a large sigh, familiar eyes reluctantly opened and regarded him warily. "What do you want, Kakashi?"

And since when had she stopped calling him Sensei? In all honesty, he felt a bit put out. He expected this kind of greeting from Sasuke, not Naruto. She was supposed to be, well, not the good one, but the easy one. He wasn't sure that he could put up with two broody teenagers, as he was fairly certain that he'd never handled the first successfully, anyway.

Kakashi sank into a sitting position next to the blonde before throwing out a cautious inquiry. "Bad day?"

Naruto snorted. "Try bad month."

Naruto shifted and Kakashi tensed for a moment, relaxing only as he realized that Naruto was just repositioning herself to lean her head against his shoulder. Or, well, he was trying to relax, but really, he knew he should have gone and made Iruka deal with this shit. What were the words that one was supposed to use in situations like this again? He struggled to remember the right phrase before settling on a hesitant, "Do you want to talk about it?"

The chūnin choked on a laugh. "Do you really want to listen?"

Kakashi stopped himself from reflexively saying no, realizing at the last minute that answer was neither socially acceptable nor entirely honest. Instead, he chose his words carefully. "It's not that I don't want to listen, it's just that I'm not very good at reacting how people are supposed to react to whatever it is that I hear."

Naruto gave another sigh, head resting on his shoulder, eyes closed. "Probably just as well, I can't talk about it anyway."

Kakashi glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "This is a trick, isn't it?"

"No," Naruto laughed, lifting her head away and shuffling to sit in front of him. She gave him a smile. "It's just me being gloomy, but it's nothing you need to worry about, promise. It'll all get better
with time. Now, weren't you supposed to teach me something new today?"

"Ah," Kakashi relaxed a bit more against the tree trunk now that his student had relocated. Naruto was a bad liar, but she also wasn't really a kid anymore, he reluctantly acknowledged. If she was back to normal in a few days he would assume that she had whatever it was under control. "I think I remember saying something like that."

"Are you teaching me more sealing stuff?" The chūnin leaned forward, excited. "I've got the explosive ones down, believe it. I mean, they do what I want them to most of the time but I still can't get them to make a crater smaller than about six feet, diameter-wise—"

Kakashi held up a hand, "No, no, I think we'll leave these alone for today." Everyone had worked very hard to rebuild Konoha after the last war, the kind of lecture Kakashi would have to endure if he let a distracted Naruto blow it up again in a fit of pique wasn't something Kakashi wanted to experience. The easiest course of action was to change the lesson to something less likely to cause irreparable damage. "I wanted to work on something new with you."

Naruto settled back against her heels, blinking. "Ok. What, then?"

Kakashi reached into his vest, bringing out a rather large pouch. "Remember back to the war with Madara, when you trained with Killer B," Kakashi untied the strings of the pouch as Naruto watched curiously.

"Yeah, sure. I remember all that." Naruto didn't have a clue as to what that had to do with the three fist-size stones that Kakashi took from the bag, though.

"What I remember," Kakashi continued, "Is that Killer B taught you how to work with the Kyūbi and use his chakra like an extra limb. I saw you use his chakra and place boulders on top of one another, just like this," Kakashi demonstrated with the three stones, stacking them with his hands.

Naruto nodded. "Yeah. I can do that, do you want me to get him to do it again?"

"Not quite. But keep in mind how that felt, and now I want you to try and do the same thing with these stones, except without Kyūbi's chakra."

Naruto gave the man a dubious look. "I don't remember a lot from the Academy, but I'm pretty sure Sakura or Iruka have told me chakra doesn't work this way at least once."

Kakashi just shrugged. "Well, we do seemingly impossible and much more bizarre things with chakra every day."

Naruto blew her bangs out of her eyes.

"It won't hurt you to try, will it?"

The blonde squinted at him suspiciously, "That's what you said about the sealing stuff."

"Ahh," Kakashi hummed to himself, leaning back against the tree. "I don't think I used those exact words, but I do mean it this time, if that's any consolation."

"I suppose I could try it," said the blonde with a grumble, squaring her shoulders and preparing to tackle her newest assignment with the same thick-skinned determination which she applied to every task.

Kakashi's visible eye crinkled in a smile above his mask. "That's my girl."
Sakura poked at her shiritama anmitsu, looking oddly despondent for someone eating what was supposedly a favorite dessert. "I don't think this is working," she muttered.

Naruto glanced at her from her seat across the table, poking at the jelly in her bowl carefully, having already received a half-hearted swat to the head for asking Sakura's mother if the stuff was alive and could crawl away. Bravely, she took a bite. "Was' no' workin'?" She asked from around the chopsticks in her mouth, deciding the sweet stuff wasn't half bad.

Sakura huffed as she swallowed a mouthful of peach and pineapple slices. "This whole getting Sasuke to blush thing. We need a new strategy." She set down her eating utensils and pursed her lips. "I mean, we know that we're making him uncomfortable, but the rules of the bet are to make him blush."

The pink-haired girl leaned back, crossing her arms. "To do that we need to do something that puts him so out of his element, something so completely bizarre that he loses his grip on that self-control that he values so much."

Naruto eyed the cherries in Sakura's abandoned dish, and deeming it safe, quickly speared one with a chopstick and ate it while her friend brooded.

"Hey!" Sakura cried, "that's mine!" She reached forward across the table and plucked one of Naruto's jelly cubes as the other girl squawked indignantly.

"Now, now, girls," interrupted Mebuki, "Don't fight over dessert; you can both have some more if you're really that hungry."

The older chūnin set down two more bowls amidst a chorus of "Thank you Mother" and "Thank you Sakura's-mother-san."

Sakura and Naruto each ate their food in silence and deep thought as they valiantly tried to come up with more successful ideas on how to harass their male teammate.

Mebuki breezed through the room with some recently cleaned linens, folding them and periodically asking them questions about their week while Sakura or Naruto would give distracted answers.

"Oh, Sakura," sighed Mebuki, "You two just seem so stressed. I don't know what your team is working on, but if it's really that hard, why don't you invite some of your friends to help you. What about that nice boy Sai? I'm sure he'd lend a hand."

Naruto started choking on her anko and Sakura scowled, hitting her across the back with a heavy hand, dislodging the item stuck in the blonde girl's throat. "Honestly Naruto, chew—" the medic-nin froze as her mother's words finally registered, green eyes widening.

"Mother, I love you, you're brilliant!" gushed the girl enthusiastically, jumping up from the table to develop her mother in a bone-crushing hug, lifting her off of the floor. "Come on, Naruto!" The medic-nin dragged her friend from her chair by her pigtails and through the door, ignoring the blonde's loud protests about not being able to finish her treat.

"Don't worry dear, you can come back any time to finish it!" Mebuki, called out after the two, bemused by their behavior. Almost grown and they still act like little girls, she laughed to herself and returned to the table to pick up the discarded dishes, knowing Sakura wouldn't be back any time soon to clean up after herself.
"What's he doing here?" Sasuke bit out, eyes narrowing as he sized up the person accompanying Naruto and Sakura to Training Ground Three.

"Hello again, Traitor." Sai's grin was familiar and fake, and to Sasuke it felt like nails raking down a chalkboard.

"I invited him." Sakura's stated with a matter-of-fact tone, "You know, because you were having such trouble with Naru-chan and I. I thought that you might need a little help."

Sasuke sent her a sharp look, and Sakura gazed back, nonplussed.

"I do not need help."

Naruto gave an unlady-like snort.

"Of course not, Traitor," Sai said, still smiling. "I would be embarrassed if I was losing to Ugly and Bimbo, too."

A tick was starting to develop in Sasuke's eye as he and Sai continued to eye each other like two alley cats preparing to battle to the death over the last piece of fish.

Naruto broke the tension by punching their guest in the shoulder, sending him stumbling a few inches. "I swear, if you keep calling me Bimbo—"

"I could call you Dickless?" Sai offered sincerely.

Naruto gaped at him, then ruffled her hair in aggravation. "Shit, where do you even come up with these names?"

"Good afternoon boys and girls." Kakashi strolled into the clearing, hands in his pockets. "I see we have a guest today?"

"Yes," agreed Sai pleasantly. "Good afternoon again, Senpai."

"Again," Naruto looked suspiciously between the two. "Why again?"

"Ah," Kakashi smiled with his visible eye, "Sai has been helping me with some gardening."

"Gardening?" Sakura frowned, Sasuke giving a disparaging grunt in the background.

"Yes," Kakashi nodded, "That'd be why I'm late, lots of weeding to do lately."

Sakura looked like she was about to launch into an inquisition when Sai interrupted.

"Ugly asked me to come help Traitor improve his battle strategy," said the pale boy, somehow managing to come across as both apathetic and belligerent at the same time.

"My strategy is fine," Sasuke stated testily.

Sai's response was calm and collected. "Failing to prevail in the same battle scenario for several weeks suggests otherwise."

The Uchiha frowned, hand reaching for his katana.

"Ahh, don't be too hasty Sasuke-kun. I haven't called start yet. But you have the right idea, why don't you and Sai take on Naruto and Sakura. Naruto, Sakura, head east, you get thirty minutes to
choose your field, plan, and prep the area. Move out."

The girls nodded in acquiescence to their commander's brisk orders, sprinting into the forest.

Kakashi regarded the two remaining. "Sasuke, Sai, wait here and discuss your own strategy for thirty minutes before heading into the enemy territory. Scenario is that you've retrieved time sensitive, classified information and have no choice but to cross through hostile territory to get home. We have a no-contact agreement with this country and the political climate is tense. You are travelling unaffiliated and can't be connected to Konoha. You do not know who your attackers are, whether they are ninja of the country you are travelling through or bounty hunters. How you carry out the mission is up to your discretion. I'll be observing and we'll debrief afterward. Begin."

"Hai, Hatake-senpai," Sai gave a bow and turned to face his stoic, unmoving teammate for the day.

Kakashi vanished into the surrounding forest, presumably to check on the girls, or, more likely, to read his porn.

The dark-headed young men stared at each other in a contemplative, hostile silence.

"You know," Sai gazed at the Uchiha contemplatively and trailed off into thoughtful silence.

"Know what?" Sasuke bit out testily.

"Oh, nothing," said Sai, smiling his odd smile.

Sasuke huffed and sat down to meditate.

Sai remained standing for a few moments, then sat down as well, pulling out a pad of paper and a paintbrush.

Thirty minutes passed with only the soft, scratchy sounds of the brush running over paper breaking the atmosphere.

"Do you have a plan of action, Traitor?"

Sasuke rose to his feet and scowled at Sai, who was putting away his drawing materials.

"Just follow my lead."

The artist shrugged, and the two melted into the surrounding forest.

A quarter of an hour later, Sasuke continued to glare heatedly at his partner. Once the two had reached the midway point in the forest, the 'mission' had become something like a game of whack-a-mole, with kage bunshin popping up from the earth and edging Sasuke and Sai back into traps no matter to which direction they turned.

"You are completely inept," hissed Sasuke in anger, some of Sai's creations getting in the way of one of Sasuke's chakra-wire attacks, shredding the paper creatures and keeping the attack from reaching its intended target, blonde hair disappearing into a hole in the earth.

Sai looked nonplussed, "You know…"

"No. I don't know." Sasuke seethed. "So why don't you go ahead and tell me since you've trailed off after starting a sentence that way four times today." Sasuke ran up a tree, Sai close behind, hoping he could get a glimpse of the girls from a higher viewpoint. They needed to get away from the ground, where the girls had an edge with Sakura cleverly wielding her new elemental affinity to her
advantage.

Sai just smiled. "Oh, don't be offended. I just wanted to say that if I was losing to two little girls on a regular basis, I'd be defensive too. Especially with the size of your penis. It's understandable."

Sasuke choked. "The size of my…" Distracted, Sasuke turned whirling red eyes on the artist in disbelief. "That has nothing to do with anything."

"Oh yes it does. Ugly told me she thought that was why you were so defensive about these battles. All you have to fight with is your sword," Sai's grin had teeth. "And you just can't manage to plunge it in. It's perfectly understandable why you're so upset."

"Just. Stop. Talking." Sasuke turned his attention back to the ground, determined to ignore the burden he'd been saddled with this fight, making a mental note to think of a more creative way to kill Sakura and hide her body. At the same time, he was identifying faint traces of chakra which indicated genjutsu traps and trying to find Naruto's distinctive signature, which was usually so hard to hide.

Sai continued his useless babble. "Of course, she thinks since you obviously aren't resolving the issue yourself, you know, taking matters into your own hands, that you might just be interested in something other than the female physique. I just wanted to let you know, I sketched an outline of your body type while we were waiting, and I agree with her that if you wanted attention from the other gender, I could find a few men who'd be interested—"

Sasuke was beginning to develop a rather violent eye twitch, but as he turned to hit his temporary partner (not teammate), Sakura's voice came sounded from behind the boys and the two were forced to separate and leap away.

"Don't even try to deny it Sasuke, you've been complaining about Naruto's boobs for weeks. Straight men don't do that unless there are some underlying issues." Sakura pursued Sasuke as a blonde blur chased Sai in the opposite direction.

Or at least, Sasuke thought that Naruto had gone after Sai, but as he dropped down to the forest floor, ducking Sakura's punch and angling his katana to go back up for what would be a gutting wound, he found the weapon ripped from his grip by a violent gust of wind and a well-aimed chakra blade.

Sasuke grimaced, twisting around to meet the blonde's predictable uppercut, but suddenly, Sakura, who shouldn't have had time to dislodge from her earlier punch to the tree trunk, had a firm hand on the back of his neck.

"Honestly, even Ino says Naruto has very nice boobs, see."

And then, Sasuke still missed connecting with Naruto's fists, as Sakura's firm push sent both he and Naruto toppling to the forest floor, Sasuke's face abruptly planted between two rather firm breasts.

Silence and shock froze the couple for three seconds…until Naruto shrieked and jumped away, face burning as she began to scream obscenities at everyone in the general vicinity and their as of yet unborn future offspring.

Sasuke's body was locked in shock, and Sakura maneuvered herself so that she could grip his shoulders and straighten him upright with a grip reinforced from years of training under the Hokage.

"It's ok, you know, you can tell us that those do nothing for you," Sakura said with a placid expression on her face.
Sasuke snapped out of whatever trance he'd been stuck in, sharingan eyes fading to black as he came back to himself. He started, looked at Sakura, opened his mouth, looked at the still frothing Naruto, snapped it shut, turned red as a tomato, and fled.

Sai dropped down in Sasuke's absence. "So, success then?"

Sakura began to laugh so hard that tears started to gather in the corner of her eyes.

"It's not funny, Sakura," cried Naruto, stomping her feet.

Sakura just snorted mid laugh and gasped for air.

Naruto protectively crossed her arms over her chest as she hissed at her giggling teammate. "I can't believe you did that—and what are you drawing?" Naruto roared, turning her ire onto Sai.

"You look rather like an enraged cat when you do that," Sai pointed his brush at her, "It's such a strange look, I wanted to capture it. I think I'm going to call it 'Introductions between a Bimbo and Homicidal Loser with Superiority Complex'."

Naruto's angry stalk forward was halted as Kakashi appeared in their midst, hands held out in front of him. "Now, Naruto, no killing your comrades."

"Where were you?" The angry girl rounded on her teacher, drawing herself up to her full height (which meant she still didn't even graze Kakashi's chin) and preparing to launch into a lecture motivated by righteous indignation.

"No, nobody is going to kill anyone. We're all going to dinner." Sakura straightened up from where she had been hunched over, shaking with laughter. She wiped some tears away from her eyes and hooked arms with the blonde. "We're going to dinner, Sensei. Would you like to come? It's Ino's treat."

"Ah, yes, I'm looking forward to this." Sai's paints had mysteriously vanished and he stood at attention before the jōnin, ready for orders.

Kakashi watched the trio suspiciously, not really sure what it was that he'd just witnessed. "No," he finally drawled, sliding his hands into his pockets. "I need to go find a little bird. You go on and have a good time."

Sakura shrugged, "Suit yourself." She spun around and used her free arm to hook elbows with Sai and pull him along in the same fashion as the sulking Naruto.

"I still can't believe you did that," Naruto muttered, flushed and embarrassed from the incident.

"Well, we agreed that something drastic was needed," Sakura's eyes danced with laughter. "I just needed Sai to push Sasuke to the breaking point and then something unexpected to push him over the edge. Short of accidentally destroying your shirt, I didn't have any other ideas."

"I did try to accomplish that during the spar," Sai said, nonchalant.

Naruto twisted her head to better see him on the other side of Sakura. "Is that why you practically mauled that one clone? Totally creepy, dude."

"My apologies," Sai soothed. "Ugly assured me you would believe the social embarrassment worth the ultimate victory."
"Never mind that now," Sakura said as they entered the village. "Look, there's Ino! I told her to come meet us tonight."

Naruto clicked her tongue, she and Sakura were not finished with this conversation, but Ino was approaching them, along with Ino's teammates and Hinata's team as well. Ino hurried forward upon seeing them, pulling away from the rest, who trailed behind at a pace favored by Shikamaru.

Sakura frowned briefly, "What's with the entourage?"

Ino waved her hand dismissively, "They just wanted to join our group for dinner. I told them the location was set since you'd be paying for my team's dinner." Her teeth flashed dangerously. "They're just along to witness your humiliating defeat."

Sakura put her hands on her hips and smiled in an equally threatening manner. "I'm afraid you're treating us, tonight, Ino-pig, we've met the terms of the bet."

Ino gaped. "Nuh-uh!"

Sakura preened in the face of Ino's disbelief.

"I don't believe you." Ino snapped, "And what's he got to do with it? I'm not paying for him!"

"He's our witness." Sakura bullied back, "And he's part of the team too, don't you back out now, we did our part fair and square."

Ino crossed her arms and huffed for a minute, before suffering an abrupt mood change, dropping her arms, and reaching forward to clasp Sakura's hands and squeal. "Oh my goodness, how'd you do it?"

Sakura's aggressive posture faded just as quickly and she giggled conspiratorially, "I kind of called him gay and arranged for him to accidentally wind up in an intimate position with Naruto."

The two continued to snicker and giggle as they walked forward arm in arm to the main group.

Naruto exchanged a helpless look with Sai, who only shrugged in a manner implying that he was equally as lost when trying to interpret the intricacies of girl-world friendships.

Naruto trudged after them, perking up a bit when Hinata came forward to greet her. "Hiya, Hinata-chan! Are you having dinner with us tonight?"

Hinata smiled and nodded affirmatively as Naruto made her rounds greeting her other friends.

Naruto paused when she came to Kiba, fully expecting him to come up and slap her on the back as he always did. She fluffed out Akamaru's fur, who gave her her normal enthusiastic greeting as Kiba stood stiffly watching her, face scrunched in confusion.

"What's wrong Dog-breath?"

"I just," Kiba eyed her oddly, "when did you grow those, Whisker-face?"

"Kiba!" Hinata flushed next to him, hand over her mouth.

Naruto turned red and slapped him upside the head. "Hey! I get enough of that from the Bastard, not you too! And what do you mean, when? I've always had them you oblivious turd!" Naruto yanked him down the street by the ear, trading insults with the boy amidst Akamaru's yaps and trailed by the timid Hyūga heiress as they tried to catch up with their friends who had gone on ahead to the Shushuya.
They disappeared further into the Village, leaving behind an empty street. After a few moments of eerie stillness, Kakashi stepped out from the shadows, a thoughtful expression on his face. He stood in the dimming evening light for a few moments, and then he strode purposefully to an overgrown row of hedges embracing a nearby fence. Reaching in, he fished around for a few moments before pulling back his fist, now clutching the back of a teenager's chūnin vest.

"What are you doing, put me down!" Konohamaru glared at Kakashi, indignant. "This is so rude, I wasn't doing anything to you."

Kakashi ignored the brash youth's blustering protests, instead choosing to smile in that strange way with his good eye. "Why don't we have a chat, Stalker-san?"

Konohamaru blushed and found the ground suddenly to be very fascinating. He kicked his feet through the dirt. "I don't know nothin'."

"Right." Kakashi said patiently. "You tell me what's wrong with my lovely, darling children or I'll tell the pink one that you've taken to studying at the bathhouse to improve that Sexy-jutsu of yours, again."

"I have not!" Konohamaru squawked, looking at the older ninja in horror.

Kakashi gazed back, face expressionless.

"Ok, ok, I really don't know much." Konohamaru decided it was better to cave than test the jōnin. If the man carried through on his threat, it really wouldn't matter whether Konohomaru was guilty of the accusations. "It's just, she's got some mission and she's been meeting with Aunt Kurenai about it and they won't tell me anything but they're meeting all the time and she acts all funny and it makes me worried and that's why I'm watching her and please don't tell—"

"That's nice." Kakashi turned on his heel and strolled away, pondering recent developments as Konohamaru spluttered in the background.

Kakashi had always thought Konoha was most pleasant in the evenings, when everyone was through with their work days and laughing, hurrying home to their offspring and lovers, light-hearted in the streets. The children running past him playing tag in the streets and the families enjoying dinners on patios made a soothing backdrop to his troubled thoughts.

Kakashi was concerned about Naruto.

Which was actually very unusual, at least, the way in which he was concerned about Naruto was unusual. Kakashi had always been concerned for Naruto's safety. The blonde was a prime target for many reasons, some of which had Kakashi a little too deeply invested in her welfare for the sake of his sanity.

His own Sensei had pulled Kakashi's ass out of the fire innumerable times; he felt obligated to return the favor, and looking out for the girl was the only way he knew how to fulfill that obligation. But, eventually, all his students had grown to be more than obligations, as students are prone to do. Which was why he was taking the time to recall all these odd little details over the past few weeks which didn't quite add up.

It didn't help that these little details were affecting the team's interpersonal relationships rather than their fighting abilities. The jōnin could teach the kids seven different ways to hide from Mist assassins any day of the week, but whatever this was, it was effecting how they dealt with people on a social level. Kakashi's brand of genius just didn't lend itself to those situations very well.
However, Naruto had said that she'd be fine in a few days.

And she wasn't.

Which meant that Kakashi was going to dwell on it until he could figure it out and return things to the status quo.

He wasn't even sure what was wrong.

But now he knew who probably did.

Kakashi took to the roofs, picking up speed as he hopped from one rooftop to another, sliding to a stop on an unassuming building and dropping down onto one of top story balconies.

The curtains were drawn, obscuring the apartment's occupants from view, but he could see light seeping out the corners of the windows and hear the banging of pots and pans and the rush of running water coming from inside. *Just missed dinner,* he thought, slightly regretful. He rapped his knuckles in a familiar pattern on the back door and waited patiently.

The locks clicked and a familiar kunoichi opened the door.

"Kakashi." Kurenai said in exasperation. "I have a front door, you know."

Kakashi hummed softly, "A little birdy told me that you know something about one of my students."

Kurenai smiled wryly. "Let me guess, this little birdy has spiky brown hair, two loyal minions, and an unfortunate habit of following a pretty blonde girl around the village like a love sick-puppy?"

"That might be the one," Kakashi acknowledged.

Kurenai rolled her eyes and stepped back to pull the door open. "Come on in."

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Chapter End Notes

Betas: CrystallineX and LadyWinterFic
Chapter Summary

In which Kiba learns that one of the worst positions to be in is that of owing Naruto a favor. He will never accidentally sneeze down her house of cards again. He swears this by Akamaru's puppies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Kakashi sat stiffly on Kurenai's couch, eyeing the babbling toddler being bounced on Kurenai's lap warily.

"It's been a while since you've seen Matsu-chan, hasn't it?" Kurenai peered curiously at her guest.

The copy ninja nodded uncomfortably, delicately holding the teacup and saucer that he'd been handed as if he wasn't quite sure what to do with them and mildly afraid he would break them.

In Kurenai's mind, it was to her advantage to have the upcoming conversation with Kakashi as off-balance as possible. She wanted to see Kakashi's honest reactions on his face, not the collected mask he presented to the world on a daily basis. Well, she wanted as honest an expression one could get from Kakashi, considering the man maintained a figurative mask on top of a literal mask.

This meant, of course, that all Kurenai had to do was be domestic.

It was amazing how awkward Kakashi could be when offered tea, asked to sit, and forced to endure the presence of a small child.

"I'll just put Matsu down to play with the blocks so we can talk," Kurenai said as she unwound the child's grabby fingers from her hair and tried to turn the child's attentions to an activity that would allow the grown-ups to converse.

Kakashi made a small noise in his throat, focus pulled away from the baby by Kurenai's comments.

"I imagine you'd like to talk about Naruto-san."

A single, steady gray eye locked onto the kunoichi.

"I don't know how much help I can be," Kurenai said with a shrug, "I'm afraid I can't tell you anything specific."

Kakashi huffed lightly. "You wouldn't have invited me in if all you had to say was that you couldn't talk."

"Is it so hard to believe that I'd just like to catch-up with a friend? You never come over to chat, you know." She cleared her throat, "My lifestyle has changed a bit and our schedules don't cross anymore, but I also know that Shikamaru-kun and Chouji-kun pass along my invitations to visit."

"Ahh," It was Kakashi's turn to shrug. "I'm not a very good conversationalist."
"No," Kurenai said softly, gazing at her hands. That had been Asuma. But she had fond memories of evenings spent visiting with Asuma and Gai and Kakashi, closing down the bar, as some might call it. She looked back at Kakashi calmly, "But even Gai finds time to visit Matsu-chan and I. I wouldn't say that I enjoy his visits for his excellent conversation skills either. I'm not looking for witty banter or deep philosophical dialogue, you know."

Kakashi shifted his weight a bit. "My apologies," he said, not sounding entirely certain as for what he was apologizing.

Kurenai truly didn't hold Kakashi's absences against him, but the man did worry her. Asuma and Gai were the closest things that Kakashi had to friends, and she hoped she wasn't being presumptuous if she counted herself in that small number. Gai came to visit every other week or so, the man loved children. And Gai had been mentioning Kakashi with an increased frequency as of late. With Gai, that generally meant that the spandex clad man was concerned about the subject but too afraid to come right out and ask for advice about it.

"Don't be a stranger Kakashi," Kurenai teased lightly, "my child needs to know that some remember Asuma fondly and not as the hot-headed black sheep of the family."

The visible portion of the man's face crinkled in mild amusement, a touch of nostalgia shading his expression.

"And if you come around more often," added Kurenai gently, "we can trade stories about our students."

Understanding sparked in Kakashi's eye and he leaned back, mirroring Kurenai's relaxed posture. "I suppose I could make a more conscious effort to visit."

"I'll hold you to that." Kurenai's dry tone was accompanied by a twitch of her lips. She did not feel one ounce of guilt that she was technically bribing Kakashi to visit her family. As far as she was concerned, she was killing two birds with one stone. She did want a way to check up on her old friend, and tricky as he was to track down, it was far easier if she could make him come to her. At the same time, she'd be able to work on resolving the whole Naruto-situation as well. Now that she'd laid out the rules of the game, though, it was time to lay the bait that would keep him coming back.

Kurenai turned to observe her distracted toddler. "It's funny how fast they grow isn't it?"

Kakashi hummed, his focus sharp enough to unnerve a lesser experienced ninja.

"They're not really children anymore, and while perhaps, they will always look to us with respect, they aren't really our students. At least," Kurenai amended, "not in the way they once were." Kurenai's tone was a bit wistful, but she could tell from her guest's flat expression that he wasn't following her train of thought.

"I'm still teaching mine. For a little while more, anyway."

"Yes," the kunoichi said, keeping half her attention on Matsu, who'd grown bored of blocks and was now pulling down the couch pillows. "Naru-chan told me about that." Kurenai switched to a more familiar form of address, letting Kakashi know just how closely she'd been working with the girl that he considered his student. "But it's not the same is it? In a way, every ninja is always learning."

Kurenai gestured toward the copy-ninja's covered face. "You of all people should know that, after all, do you ever plan to stop looking for and studying new jutsu?"

The copy ninja inclined his head, acknowledging the truth in her words as Matsu crossed the room to
Kurenai laid a gentle hand on top of her child's head, smoothing down dark, ruffled hair. "It's strange that our former students are beginning to learn new things without us, be given assignments that we can't help them with, which they must complete on their own without our supervision."

The kunoichi looked up to address her visitor. "It's especially strange now that they've grown enough to receive the kind of assignments we worked hard to protect them from as children."

"But you're training Naruto?" Kakashi asked, eyes glittering darkly, mind racing through the information he'd been given. Kurenai was well known for her expertise in genjutsu, but, saying that Naruto didn't have an aptitude for genjutsu was an understatement. His thoughts veered away from that possibility, cataloguing the various types of assignments that only adults would receive, that only a female ninja might be given and which said ninja would complete entirely on her own. Kakashi could think of only one other reason for which Kurenai would be 'training' Naruto without his own involvement or approval.

Kurenai's reply was disconcertingly casual, "All I can tell you is that I have experience which Naruto can benefit from, and it's a form of experience that you wouldn't be able to share with her."

Kakashi, who was normally still to begin with, seemed to be frozen in place. "I can't imagine that you are having much success teaching her genjutsu."

The female jōnin clasped her hands in her lap. "I can honestly say genjutsu hasn't come up in our conversations."

An awkward silence settled over the room, broken only by Matsu's occasional childish jabbering. Kurenai would swear that the temperature was dropping, even though she knew that Kakashi couldn't, and wouldn't, use a jutsu to such effect. It made the hair rise on the back of her neck and Matsu's babble took on a nervous edge.

"You can't be serious." Kakashi said flatly, leaning forward and setting down his cup, before he tightened his grip too much around the china and shattered it. "She's not, she hasn't got the skillset for the type of mission you're implying."

There was no threat in the copy ninja's voice, just an intensity in his posture, a deadly stillness which accompanied his sharp, flat words.

Having known the man for years, Kurenai knew that he was uncharacteristically upset. Even more so than she would have predicted him to be upon learning of the situation.

Kurenai rose from her chair, scooping up her toddler who was beginning to fuss, sensing and responding to the strained atmosphere. "I'm not implying anything Kakashi, and watch your tone, you have no right to be upset with me."

"You think this is a good idea?" Kakashi looked at the woman blankly. "You're just going to go along with this?"

Kurenai frowned. "It's not my decision to make, Kakashi."

"But you're," Kakashi struggled for the right word, gesturing inarticulately, "involved, in all this?"

The way Kakashi said 'involved' came across as 'complicit,' and Kurenai allowed herself to convey an appropriate amount of justified indignation. "I'm not the one calling the shots here Kakashi, and forgive me if I'm doing my best to make sure that your student has all the skills she requires to get
through any scenario successfully. This is happening whether you like it or not, the least I can do is make sure she is able to get through it in one piece."

"She's too young for this!" The copy ninja all butgrowled.

Kurenai raised an eyebrow. "She's the same age I was when I was first asked to do a mission which involved seducing an enemy." Kurenai conveniently left out the fact that the mission to which she was referring was easily accomplished without any physical contact due to Kurenai's talents with genjutsu.

Kurenai was fairly certain that if Kakashi hadn't been wearing that thrice-damned mask, he'd be gaping.

"She doesn't have the right mindset for that type of thing," Kakashi argued, keeping his voice low and even. "She takes everything personally; this mission has already been affecting her performance in training. She'll never be able to carry it out with the level of deception it requires."

"It's not our call to make, Kakashi," repeated Kurenai sternly.

Kakashi let out a frustrated noise. "Then whose is it, Tsunade's? The council's? Who is pulling the strings, Kurenai?"

Kurenai leaned back into her chair; pulling Matsu into her arms and watching her peer come undone as much as a man of his mettle came undone on the other side of the living room.

Kakashi tensely rose to his feet. "We're not done…" he trailed off, shaking his head at his loss for words and his increasing aggravation with his peer. He knew that Kurenai didn't have the answers he sought or the ability to change Naruto's orders, but it didn't stop him from being angry that the woman had failed to protect his student, or absent that, come to Kakashi and given him the professional courtesy of apprising him of the situation.

He exited through Kurenai's balcony to find someone who could provide more adequate answers.

Tsunade was never so grateful that Kurenai was intelligent enough to keep the Hokage in the loop regarding certain plans than she was the evening that Hatake Kakashi melted into her office with alarming poise, placed both palms on her desk, leaned forward, and, smooth as a blade, whispered, "I'd like to know who the hell had the audacity to send my student on a seduction mission without consulting me."

Tsunade spared a moment to appreciate, objectively, what a capable Hokage that Kakashi would have made, and then scowled and rose to her feet, slamming her hands down on her desk and meeting Kakashi's angry glare with a fearsome one of her own.

"Back down, Hatake," she bit out with authority, leaking a bit of killing intent to emphasize her words.

Kakashi held his ground, battling the projected chakra with a bit of his own, locked in a non-verbal battle of dominance with the Hokage.

Tsunade's eyes narrowed as she slowly enunciated her words "Are you challenging me?"

Kakashi kept her gaze for a tense few minutes, before slowly relaxing his shoulders and standing to his full height, "Your position, no."
The jōnin crossed his arms rather than return his hands to their customary positions in his pockets, eye still intent on the Hokage and posture radiating aggression, "Your decision, yes."

"Careful, Hatake," Tsunade said seriously, standing to her full height as well, folding her arms over her ample chest. "You are dangerously close to insubordination."

"Yes," Kakashi acknowledged in a calm, bored, and, for Kakashi, deadly tone, "But there are things worth living dangerously for."

Tsunade snorted. "And there are things that aren't." Tsunade motioned to the chair in front of her desk. "Take a seat. This is one of those occasions where you won't be helping anyone if you're tossed into a holding cell to cool down for throwing a temper tantrum."

Kakashi hesitated, looking like he was mulling over remaining standing just to make a point.

"You're thirty, not three," snarled Tsunade, pointing at the chair, "Sit down like an adult before I tie you down like a child."

Kakashi sat, mulishly, "Thirty-two."

Tsunade gave him a look, "I imagine you've been talking to Kurenai."

Kakashi didn't respond, and the Hokage took his silence to be an affirmation of her statement.

She leaned back in her own chair, making herself comfortable. "I also imagine you're not a fan of the arrangement," she said dryly.

Kakashi twitched so subtly that Tsunade would have missed it, had she not been concentrating on noting the man's signs of discomfort.

"I'm trying to decide why you are so upset by this," Tsunade chose her words carefully. "The girl is fully grown. She is more than capable of accepting or declining any mission offered to her without your veto. She was out of your hands the moment she took that green vest."

Kakashi's good eye narrowed. In pain or anger, Tsunade wasn't familiar enough with the man to tell.

The Hokage ignored him and continued. "You should be proud. You've trained her well. She is a formidable ninja capable of holding her own against formidable opponents and odds. Well done."

The office was quiet this time of night, and Tsunade wasn't afraid to out wait her companion until he aired his grievances.

Eventually, Kakashi caved to her tactic, bitterly pointing out, "She would never say no to you if you asked her to do something."

Tsunade remained unmoved by the man's words. "I made her perfectly aware that this assignment was optional and that she could turn it down without any negative effect on her career. She chose to accept it, and she has full control over its execution. She is the one who decided it would be best completed by this avenue of action."

Tsunade allowed her words to soak through the stubborn jōnin's skull as he crafted his anger into articulate speech.

"I can't believe" Kakashi let the words slip out slowly, "that you think this is an intelligent endeavor."
Tsunade ignored the dig at her decision making capabilities. "I trust Naruto, Hatake. I trust her to be able to evaluate her own skillset, to know whether or not she is capable of taking on a mission, to complete it successfully, and to act accordingly. I trust her to let me know, or to ask for help, when she can not."

The Hokage paused, voice gentle, "Can you not do the same?"

Kakashi looked absolutely miserable. "She's too young, she's not ready for this."

Tsunade sighed, steepling her fingers and gazing at the ceiling for a few moments. "I seem to recall," she trailed off, "Well, I wasn't here for this personally, but I have heard the story repeated every so often—you know how aides love to gossip," she waved her hand absently.

"There's a story about how, once upon a time, a new jōnin sensei, who had barely had his students for a month, nominated his three green, wet-behind-the-ears genin for a chūnin exam. Are you following, Hatake?"

The copy ninja nodded, stiff and cautious.

"Good." Tsunade continued, "Of course, as the genin were so recently graduated from the Academy, their Academy sensei, who was present, vehemently objected to their nominations with the same words that just came out of your mouth, protesting that they were too young, too inexperienced, that this exam, this assignment, was dangerous and could only hurt them."

Tsunade grew silent, leveling her gaze at her companion. "Can you remember what you told that man, Kakashi-kun," Tsunade softened her tone, "when he gave you those words?"

The jōnin closed his eye, shoulders tense, voice soft. "Yes."

"What did you tell him Kakashi-kun?" prodded the Hokage.

Tsunade let an uncomfortable silence fill the room.

"I believe I told him that it was none of his business," Kakashi finally said.

"Oh, no," replied Tsunade, "I was hoping you could recall the exact words, Kakashi-kun."

Kakashi opened his eye, anger drained and replaced with a stubborn, achy sort of sorrow, which almost made Tsunade regret just how much fun she was having breaking down the man.

"The words, Hatake," Tsunade said, voice calm but authoritative.

"They are no longer your students." Kakashi's voice was quiet and dull. "They are my soldiers."

"Ahh, that's right," Tsunade nodded. "And if I gave you those words in response to your earlier protests?"

Kakashi sat, silent, for a good thirty seconds, before straightening. "Then I would say that I still have things to teach her Hokage-sama, she is still my student."

Tsunade rose, walking around her desk and patting him on his shoulder as she left the room. "Then do your job, Hatake. Make sure she succeeds."

She left the boy to dwell on his own demons in her office and to interpret her words as he saw fit. She would check in on him later, to make sure he wasn't beating himself up too much. She might go
out of her way to break her jōnin occasionally, but it was only so that they could be built up stronger afterward. They were no good to her if they stayed broken, after all.

Hinata giggled, a pretty blush to her cheeks visibly in the lamplight as she sat across from Naruto and Kiba in their booth at the Shushuya. Akamaru whined and butted his head under her arm for a scratch behind the ears, warming Sai’s empty seat and watching the proceedings intently.

Naruto's brow was furrowed in concentration and Kiba watched her skeptically.

"I'm telling you, Blondie," drawled Kiba loudly, interrupting himself with an ill-timed hiccup. "Chakra just don't work that way."

"Shut up, ya' flea-bitten mutt," Naruto insulted her fellow chūnin absently as she concentrated on the task at hand.

Somewhere in between Kiba's third and fifth drinks, a well-worn deck of cards had been produced. Originally, they'd all been playing a game, but it had dissolved into laughter after they'd figured out how everyone was cheating in the fourth round. Sai had abandoned them for another table, painting something to the delight of Ino and the horrified squeals of Sakura. Akamaru had taken over his seat and made a go for some of Sai's left-overs, a few cards becoming casualties of war in the process. By the time Kiba finished reprimanding the dog and lecturing him about how sick he was going to be that night and how there was no way Kiba was going to clean up that shit, Naruto had found a new way to distract herself.

Naruto confiscated the remaining cards and began to work on the chakra exercise that Kakashi had started her on the other day. She couldn't quite pick up the cards with her chakra, but once she placed them on top of one another, she shakily extended her chakra to hold them together.

It seemed to be working so far, in that Naruto had built a card tower three stories high which seemed to defy several of the known laws of physics. She was starting on the fourth level and, despite the odd structure’s precarious design, it seemed stable and solid.

Until Kiba sneezed, that is.

"Arrggh!" Naruto wailed and punched her booth-mate in the arm. Hard. "I had it, you Dumbass, what did you go and do that for."

"Sorry, sorry!" Kiba held up his hands defensively. He was in the unfortunate position of being between Naruto and the wall, with no easy route of escape. "You can't have had it together that well if one sneeze tore it apart, you're just structurally challenged."

Akamaru barked. Whether in agreement or disapproval, Kiba wasn't sober enough to interpret.

"It wasn't supposed to be structural!" Naruto yelled, continuing to pound the boy. "I'll give you structurally challenged!"

"That doesn't even make sen—Oww, stop that!" Kiba attempted to unsuccessfullyly defend himself as Naruto screeched and Hinata laughed, and for one evening, all was right in the world.

Naruto was pretty sure that Team Seven had been in more than their fair share of awkward spots over the years, but for the life of her, somehow today made it to the top of the list.
"They've been like this for two hours straight now," Konohamaru stage-whispered from her left.

"I know," Naruto nodded, "It's awful."

Moegi sniffed, petulantly kicking her feet against the log, sitting on the other side of Konohamaru, "Well I think this is super boring."

"I don't know," said Udon, adjusting his glasses, "If we could find a way to measure——"

Naruto gave a loud sigh and reached into the bag of popcorn that Konohamaru had thoughtfully brought along as an afternoon snack. "I'm telling you, they'll get over it eventually." She hoped. "They just need an opportunity to work it out of their systems."

The jinchūriki had run into her infamous gaggle of groupies on the way to her scheduled group training session. She had no idea why the trio thought that today might be a good day to observe her training, but she didn't have the heart to blow them off after some well-placed pleading from Konohamaru and of course, the promised bribe of really buttery popcorn.

Sasuke stood at one edge of the clearing, leaning against what seemed to be a favored sycamore. He hadn't budged an inch since the group had arrived, content to close his eyes and radiate a hostile aura.

His audience had not been brave enough to try and coax him from his silence.

Naruto wasn't feeling particularly social today after the events of the last training session. Besides, she had enough company on her log.

Sakura arrived about twenty minutes after the others had assembled. Sasuke immediately opened his eyes, and while he otherwise remained unmoving, he seemed to be trying to figure out if his eyes could kill without his sharingan activated.

Sakura, to her credit, had mastered tuning out homicidal teenagers and gave a polite greeting to everyone present (minus the person desiring her imminent destruction). She spent a few minutes chatting with Moegi and Udon about the various uses of a certain salve when applied to rope burns and then pulled out a book to read in the shade of a tree a few yards away, on the side of the clearing completely opposite Sasuke.

Since then, neither of Naruto's teammates had uttered a word.

Sasuke continued to put off enough killing intent to terrify a crowd of academy children into wetting their pants from three blocks away (had any chosen to come so close) and Sakura appeared to be content to read her medical text.

Except, Sakura hadn't turned a page in her book for the past forty-five minutes.

Naruto fondly referred to Sakura's texts as bug swatters, as that would be the only time one would find Naruto touching the things. Naruto knew that it took Sakura a long time to read the bug swatters, but if it really took Sakura forty-five minutes per page, the medic nin would still be stuck on mending sprained wrists.

Naruto nodded along absently to whatever Konohamaru was saying, something about wind-chakra and trying to add a fire-element technique to it, and reached for another handful of popcorn, only to scrape her fingers against the bottom of the bag.

"Seriously?" Naruto slouched with a pout, but before she could work herself up to manipulating one
of her tag-alongs into making a snack-run, she felt a well-known chakra flicker into existence behind her.

She craned her neck back to look into a familiar gray eye. "I would have saved some for you, but, you know, you're late."

"I got caught on the wrong end of a parent-teacher conference," Kakashi said, voice unusually grim.

Naruto blinked, caught off guard by the odd tone.

Kakashi quickly took in the seating arrangements. "Sakura, Sasuke, you're one-on-one today, I need to work with Naruto on her fūinjutsu."

"Fine," said Sasuke confidently, taking a step forward from the shade of his tree.

"Fine," said Sakura, sweet but strong, snapping her text shut and tossing it aside with a heavy thump, jumping to her feet eagerly.

Kakashi paused, eyeing the two critically. "If you seriously maim each other, the responsible party will be cleaning the Academy toilets with toothbrushes while Gai and Lee supervise. Understood?"

Sasuke scowled and tossed a scornful look at the jōnin.

Sakura paled a bit and muttered a queasy "yes, Sensei," before her face tightened with determination and she adjusted the gloves on her wrists, cracking her knuckles in anticipation.

Naruto bit her lip, tugging on a pigtail anxiously.

"Naruto," came Kakashi's impatient voice.

She turned and saw Kakashi watching her expectantly about ten yards into the woods.

"Do we really have to go?" Naruto was aware she was whining, but she couldn't believe Kakashi was actually going to make her miss this, it practically screamed epic battle of the sexes.

"Naruto," Kakashi repeated in a tone that Naruto knew meant Kakashi was going to be stubbornly no-nonsense; he was serious about something.

She threw one last longing look at her teammates and scrambled off her log. She glanced at Konohamaru, "You coming?"

"Heck no," said the kid, not taking his eyes off the scene in front of him. "This is going to be some epic shit."

Naruto puffed her cheeks out in irritation, "Hey! I'll have you know I'm gonna being doing 'epic shit' with fūinjutsu!"

"Yeah, yeah," Konohamaru waved her off, still riveted to the promise of a decade overdo beat down between a genetically inherited superiority complex and a woman scorned, like which fury hell hath no.

Naruto stalked off in a huff, muttering under breath as she followed Kakashi to the edge of the training grounds, far away from the faint bursts of chakra expended in battle techniques which fluttered on the edge of her awareness.

Kakashi stopped suddenly, causing Naruto to squawk as she stumbled into his back.
"We need to talk," Kakashi said flatly, turning around as Naruto struggled to catch her balance and avoid falling flat on her face.

"About fūinjutsu?" asked the blonde, confused.

"No." Kakashi frowned, "Yes. I mean, we will, later on," Kakashi waved his hands at her in a motion indicating she should sit. He settled himself on the ground across from her.

Kakashi started to sketch some symbols in the dirt and stopped himself. "Have you been practicing the privacy seal I gave you?"

"Yes," Naruto said, eyes lighting up as she recognized the pattern Kakashi had begun to draw. "But I have to apply it to paper and activate it, I haven't been able to figure out how to apply it directly to another type of surface and activate it yet."

"Let's see it then," said the jōnin, sounding bored.

Naruto pulled out a pile of paper scraps she'd stuffed into her kunai pouch strapped across one of her thighs. "Hang on," she said, trying to sort through the mess of seals.

"Got it, it's this one!" She stuffed the remaining scraps back into her pouch and smoothed the selected paper flat on the ground, eventually using both hands to force chakra into her creation. The inky lines spread wider into the ground and a subtle glow later Kakashi and Naruto were the epicenter of a rather large circle.

Naruto frowned. "It's still too big."

"That may just be a limitation you have to work with," Kakashi said blandly. "No matter, its good that you're learning to do what you can with the techniques." He inspected the lines in the dirt, slightly different from the original design with which he'd given her to work.

"Effective." He finally decreed, settling down across from the girl.

Naruto beamed.

Kakashi rubbed at his head with a sigh. "We need to talk."

Naruto's beaming face dimmed a bit. "I know. You've said that already."

Kakashi nodded, closing his eye and resting his hands on his knees.

The chūnin scowled, quickly growing impatient with the jōnin's unusual behavior. "What's wrong? What do we need to talk about?" Her face grew concerned, "You're not sick or anything are you?"

"No." Kakashi said, maintaining his meditative stance.

Naruto, not quite sure what else to do, mirrored the man, deciding that he'd talk to her when he was ready.

The two sat in an awkward quiet, broken only by the soft calls of birds in the distance and the vague awareness of Sakura and Sasuke still fighting it out on the edge of their senses. Naruto tried to blot them out entirely, but it was difficult, especially since she was so interested in trying to figure out what was happening in their fight.

It couldn't be because you have the attention span of a thrice-damned squirrel, growled Kurama.
Not helping, sent Naruto, the words not echoing as forcefully as she’d hoped.

Not trying to, mortal.

Naruto gave the equivalent of a mental huff. Any idea what's gotten Kakashi worked up?

Other than trying to teach one of the most complex aspects of the ninja-arts to a squirrel?

If you keep calling me that—

"I talked with Kurenai-san last night," Kakashi's voice pierced through Naruto's mental conversation, pulling her to an abrupt awareness of her surroundings and pushing Kurama to the background.

Thrice. Damned. Squirrel.

"You did?" asked Naruto, hoping she sounded nonchalant as she sent a rude Shove It toward her unwelcome conversation partner.

"And Tsunade-sama," Kakashi added.

Naruto's eyes grew large and round. "Really?" The sound came out a bit higher than planned.

Kakashi's eyes were still closed, posture relaxed. "They told me about your mission."

"Oh?" Naruto said, knowing her voice wasn't doing anything to hide her nerves anymore. "What'd they say?" She pulled her knees to her chest and rested her chin on top of them, fighting hard to push down the nauseous feeling rising up from her belly.

Kakashi took his time responding, and when he did, there was the barest hint of aggravation in his tone.

"That you had the option to refuse and you didn't." He opened his good eye to observe the chūnin, who looked incredibly young at the moment, watching him with impossibly big blue eyes. "That you're determined to carry this out," he said, his normal dry humor returning as he noted how still and wary Naruto had become, looking like a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar. "That you've been working with Kurenai preparing for it, and" his voice trailed off as he turned his face to the sky, wishing a few more clouds were scattered across it so that he could shut out the world and claim to have taken up the Nara brat's favored hobby, "That I'm supposed to help you."

"Really?" Naruto's voice was still high and squeaky, but it was rich with disbelief. "You just," Naruto fumbled for words, "agreed to this?"

Kakashi had a pinched look to his face. "Not at first," he said, sounding tired and a bit bitter. "But I understand that the decision has been taken out of my hands."

He still thought that Naruto was too young for a mission like this. She needed a couple more years under her belt and bit more confidence with sexual scenarios to be sent out in the field, expected to seduce a target and come back successfully. Of his three students, she may have been the most boisterous, but he would wager his entire collection of Icha-Icha that she was also the least sexually experienced.

He'd known that Sakura was obsessed with the opposite sex from her first introduction. She also hadn't been shy about parading around a string of boyfriends in a passive-aggressive attempt to get attention since Naruto'd returned from training with Jiraiya. Although, he had to give the girl credit, it was probably a successful method of curbing some of Gai's student's more enthusiastic efforts at
courtship.

Sasuke—well, Sasuke kept things like that private, but he also wasn't lacking in confidence or an ability to take what he wanted, when he wanted it. Sasuke would probably find it all too easy to satisfy himself with a string of forgettable one night stands. It would be getting the kid to commit and acknowledge that women were worth something as individuals that would be a problem.

He was almost too perfect a choice for this type of mission.

At least, Kakashi had thought so until the last training session. Upon reflection, he wasn't sure if Sasuke had reacted with embarrassment because it was Naruto, or if, perhaps, Sasuke wasn't as emotionally stunted as Kakashi believed and the boy actually did struggle with normal things like hormones and age-appropriate brain shortages around cute girls.

Naruto, on the other hand, tended to be a bit insecure when it came to intimate interactions with people, and she had a deeply rooted fear of rejection and need for physical affection. Of his three students, it would be hardest for her to accomplish the type of mission that she'd been assigned and disengage successfully. This was one of the reasons that Kakashi was upset about the issue.

It was almost cruel of Tsunade to assign the girl a mission like this.

And Kakashi's missions in ANBU had been heavy on the assassination or search and rescue side, he had taken very few missions where the sole objective had been information gathering. He'd had to flirt with a few servant girls a time or two, but they tended to be more than pliable with well-placed flattery and compliments. After all, every good ninja knew to seek information from the weakest link. He'd never had to pull out all the stops for a weak link. Combine that with his naturally awkward social skills, which normally didn't bother him, and this meant that he wasn't in the best person to advise Naruto for this mission.

Which did bother him.

Quite a bit.

"I'm not going to be very good at this," he finally admitted, tilting his chin down and taking in Naruto's gob smacked expression.

She gave an unintelligible squeak which he couldn't interpret.

Maybe she didn't understand what he meant. He elaborated, "I don't know what they expect me to offer you, and" here he took a breath and tried to soften his words so she wouldn't take offense, or heaven forbid, see his admission as a challenge, "I honestly don't know why you agreed to this in the first place."

Naruto sat in the dirt, thinking that she'd never been more shocked in her life. She'd known that Kakashi was laid back, but this was a bit absurd. Who took being ordered to have a kid with someone fourteen years their junior this calmly? It made her own reaction to the whole situation seem like one of those poorly acted soap operas the orphanage caretakers had swooned over when she was a kid.

Her mouth opened and closed a few times. "It's important," she wished she didn't sound so tentative, "Don't you think?"

Kakashi just shrugged.

*Our kid is going to be so messed up.* Naruto struggled to keep her eye from twitching. She took a
deep breath, "So you're going to help me?"

"Right," said Kakashi, as if it had been the easiest decision in the world to make.

"You don't mind," said the chūnin flatly.

Kakashi gave the girl an odd look. He understood that she might be uncomfortable discussing this type of mission with him, but was it really that far-fetched to expect him to be willing to advise her on any mission she took, no matter its nature?

"Really," Naruto continued to prod, "you really don't mind?"

Kakashi closed his eyes and thought for a moment, searching for his honest answer. "I mind a little," he finally settled for saying. "What I mind most is that I don't think this is a good use of you in a mission."

"Wait," said Naruto, confused. The only thing that upsets him about this mess is that it's not a good use of me? What does that even mean?

The Kyūbi rumbled his approval for the jōnin's words, scratching at his ear with a hind leg. It's a nice sentiment. Carrying kits will take you out of the battle field for a good time. He's a soldier, he understands the importance of needing his subordinates in fighting shape.

So what? Naruto's thoughts bubbled angrily. I'm no good pregnant? I'm no good with a baby? What the hell is that supposed to mean?

She flushed, a pretty red color growing in her cheeks and glowing against her tan skin as she tossed her words out angrily, "You don't think I can do it!"

Kakashi flinched mentally, Here we go, exactly what he'd been trying to avoid.

He held up his hands, trying to soothe the girl before she wound herself up too much, "I can understand why you think you need to," which, according to the very, very large blue eyes which were now glittery and hard and liquid all at once, was exactly the wrong thing to say.

"Right," said Naruto, scrambling to her feet, the energy she exerted prompting Kakashi to instinctively stand as well, on the defensive.

Naruto puffed her cheeks out in that peculiar, slightly adorable, angry kitten fashion that Kakashi secretly found so endearing that he sometimes purposefully orchestrated events to provoke that particular response.

Sometimes.

Not that you'd ever find him confessing that in public, and certainly not today.

"Well," Naruto accused with a huff, "You're the one who agreed to help me, so let's hear the plan."

"Yes..." said Kakashi cautiously, not quite sure why she'd switched from spitting anger to asking for advice in a matter of seconds.

Naruto crossed her arms aggressively. "You could start by telling me how you expect this thing to go."

Kakashi's brain ground to a halt. "How I expect it to go," he parroted, not quite following the passionate blonde.
"Yeah—you know," said Naruto, face red, from a combination of anger and embarrassment, "what do you—what types of things do you like?" She wouldn't meet his eyes, her face was even redder, and she was studying the swirls of the seal in the dirt with an intensity that meant Naruto wasn't really interested in them because Naruto never actually focused on something that hard.

"What do I—" Kakashi wasn't sure when his life had turned on its head, but he blamed Naruto; it was usually her fault when he felt like this anyway. "I'm really not—you should probably go asks someone closer to your own age, maybe you should have this conversation with Sakura, or that blonde friend of hers."

Naruto looked at him blankly.

"The one she calls a pig," Kakashi added helpfully.

"What are Ino and Sakura going to know about what you like?" Naruto asked, hands on her hips and words dripping with scorn as she advanced on the jōnin, a raised eyebrow implying that if he didn't answer carefully she might resort to making old-pervert accusations.

Kakashi dimly realized that she'd backed him into a tree and put a hand out, halting her progress. He tried to banish the idea that Naruto thought he'd somehow had a threesome with two of her peers, surely that was not what she'd meant to imply. "Ahh, you're asking for a man's perspective then?"

Kakashi was thankful his mask covered any blushing that he was definitely not doing. Yes, he'd agreed to help, but it rapidly was becoming apparent that he really hadn't thought this plan through very well. He'd never imagined Naruto to be bold enough to immediately jump to 'tell me what guys expect in sex.'

"I'm really not," Kakashi trailed off, his brain firing rapidly, flying through the data he'd collected on his students' peers. Which one was flirty, who would be best to...Sai? No. Bad idea. He didn't even need Kurenai to swat him upside the head for that one—Oh, Kurenai's student, "The dog."

Naruto's face scrunched up, "What?"

"The one with the dog," Kakashi continued, words slowing now that he'd latched onto a plan of action. "Kurenai's student."

"Kiba?" Asked Naruto, sounding baffled.

"That's the one." Kakashi nodded. "He's probably a better person to ask about this type of thing," he finished lamely, the tree against his back preventing him from stepping back further from the blonde.

She crossed her arms under her breasts, which, in her new low-cut outfit, combined with the height difference between the two and her proximity, gave Kakashi quite the view. And, really, when had that happened? Not that it wasn't a nice view—Oh God, Oh God, stop there brain, but he'd much rather have continued living in ignorance, believing his cute little students had never actually developed their secondary sex characteristics.

Naruto was still looking at him as if he'd announced that Sasuke was publicly coming out as a pacifist and laying aside his katana to take up ikebana.

"You want me to go ask Kiba." Naruto said slowly, as if she was weighing Kakashi's intelligence and finding it wanting.

Kakashi stuck his hands in his pockets and kept his eyes firmly fixed on her face. "I could lend you one of my books."
Naruto's gaze implied that she hadn't thought it possible, but he'd actually said something stupider than his previous comment. Which was just a little unfair, because if that was the kind of information she was after, the books would be excellent visual aids.

"I'll go talk with Kiba," the chūnin spun on her heel and left the clearing, a gentle wave of chakra expelling as she broke the boundary of the privacy seal. She stalked away, ignoring the fleeting flashes of energy indicating that Sakura and Sasuke were still going strong and oh, that was a nasty jutsu and the flare of power which told her Kakashi had fled for the hills, so to speak.

She let herself work out her frustration with the world as she stomped through the forest, kicking up dirt and leaves.

You know what's worse than squirrels? came Kurama's voice, deep and expectant.

Naruto could almost feel all nine tails twitching in amusement as she tiredly went along with him, trudging through the forest toward the Inuzuka compound, No, I don't, Fox. What's worse than squirrels?

Thrice damned squirrel babies.

Naruto recalled the sensation of being doused in cold water and focused on conveying the sensation to her captive, taking deep pleasure in the resulting disgruntled yowls.

"When I told you I owed you one, I didn't mean this." Kiba's hand paused in the act of scooping a large pile of dog food from a foul-smelling bucket.

They were in the Inuzuka kennels, alone except for the two dozen or so yapping dogs complaining that their visitor had interrupted a much anticipated dinner. Kiba was in the middle of the large barn, working at an old, wide wooden table stained with years of use as a cutting board.

Naruto steeled herself, both to get her answers and against the overwhelming smell of raw meat and whatever else that was in that bucket into which Kiba was plunging his bare hands.

Akamaru wound figure eights around and in between them, whining his distress at the odd tension flickering between the two.

"I told you," Naruto said, grinding her teeth, "Kakashi told me to ask you what men like from women, in" Naruto fought down her blush, she was eighteen dammit, it shouldn't be this hard to talk about sex. She coughed a bit. "In bed," She finished, trying to appear like she asked these sorts of questions every day.

"Shit." Kiba blinked, seemed to remember what he was originally supposed to be doing and continued measuring out the dog food into bowls on the table. "I j-just," he stuttered a bit and slammed down the bucket, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. "Shit."

Naruto followed him as he made his way over to a sink, pushing his hands into the water and splashing his face. Akamaru giving an odd growl-whine, pawing at his legs.

"Shit." He said again when done. He looked at Naruto critically for a few seconds and then strode forward with purpose, opening cabinet doors and looking out the windows suspiciously.

"What are you doing?" asked Naruto, bewildered.

"I'm looking for Sakura and Ino," Kiba fussled, "This is one of your tricks, they're gonna' pop out
from behind a door somewhere any second now and laugh their asses off at me!"

Naruto's blush grew from anger, "This isn't a joke Kiba." She stomped her foot and put her hands on her hips, loudly crying, "Just shut up and tell me about sex already!"

"What in the world are you two up to?"

Naruto gave an undignified squeak and spun around while Kiba emitted a strange croaking noise and lost the remaining color in his face.

Inuzuka Tsume stood in the doorway, framed in the orange evening light, Kuromaru sitting stately at her side.

"Nayughh" Naruto managed to gurgle, hands drawn tightly against her chest in fright.

"What?" Tsume frowned. "Speak up girl," she barked, stepping completely into the kennels, Kuromaru giving a low woof as the metal door shut with a clang behind them.

Naruto tried to speak and choked on her words, beginning to cough.

Tsume crossed the room and whacked her on the back. "Kiba, what the hell did ya' do to the poor girl?"

"I didn't do nothin'!" Kiba yelled back at his mother, Naruto continuing to wheeze in the background, only now her gasping breaths were more due to having the air knocked out of her than to a loss of words.

"She's the one who came in here sayin' her sensei told her to come ask me about shit!" Kiba waved his hands in the air enthusiastically, Akamaru accentuating his gestures with loud, excited barks.

"Shit?" Tsume's question sounded more like an accusation, and her solid grip clutching Naruto's shoulder both kept the girl from melting onto the floor in a humiliated puddle and thwarted the blonde's plans to slip away during the mother-son exchange.

"Shit!" Yelled Kiba.

Tsume rolled her eyes, "Sex, Kiba, not shit. I swear, the crap they teach you brats these days."

She shook Naruto roughly, "Whadda you wanna know 'bout sex, kid?"

Naruto's head bobbed and her voice wobbled as she looked everywhere but at Kiba or his mother. "I just," she stammered nervously, "I'm supposed to ask sensei but he told me to come ask Kiba and I can't tell you why 'cuz it's classified and oh, God don't eat me!" Naruto squealed as Kuromaru stood on his hind legs, placing his paws on her shoulders to get a good look at her face.

The blonde squinched her eyes shut as the dog sneezed in her face and, presumably finished with his inspection and satisfied with what he'd learned, dropped back to the ground.

Tsume took her by the elbow and tugged her over to sit down on an upturned bucket.

"That's fine kid," Tsume said in a clipped tone, completely unfazed by the situation. She leaned against the table in the center of the room, settling into a lecturing posture.

"And where'd you think you're goin'?," she shouted, turning to glare at Kiba's back as he tiptoed quietly toward the exit.
He comically shuddered to a halt, whining, "Aw, Ma! Come on!"

Kiba muttered unintelligibly under his breath as Kuromaru slipped in front of him, cutting off his escape and herding him back to the center of the room.

"Sit down and shut your mouth, pup," said Tsume in the tone of a woman used to her orders being obeyed without question.

Kiba sat, reluctantly, on a small wooden crate next to Naruto, Akamaru waffling happily between the two, tail stirring up dust and straw as it wagged against the floor.

"Why do I have to stay?" He complained, "She's the one who can't remember her lessons."

Tsume pursed her lips. "Don't be talkin' 'bout people who don't have the same opportunities to learn 'bout things that you do. It's not her fault she's not got parents to talk to and those prissy Academy women teach it all wrong anyway."

Naruto cringed as Tsume pointed out her orphan status, but the matter-of-fact manner that the woman phrased it in didn't rile her up the same way as it did when someone whispered the words pityingly in a classroom.

"'Sides," snorted Tsume, "If you can't give a straight answer to the question yerself, I'm thinkin' you need a refresher course."

Kiba's head lowered in a sulky, submissive gesture.

"Now foxy," grinned Tsume, with a fanged smile, "for dogs, breeding is all about the strongest and the quickest passing on the best traits, and while some of that holds true for people too, we get to have a little more fun goin' about it. Just remember, he may have the edge on the battlefield, he may have a bit more bulk on you, might have a bit more force behind his punches, but in the bedroom, you hold his balls in your hands—"

Naruto did not want to think about why Kiba was cringing at that particular statement.

Forty two minutes and thirty seven excruciating seconds later, Kiba and Naruto sat in silence in an empty barn. Tsume had finished about ten minutes prior, taking all the dogs out for a jog so Kiba could finish up getting their dinner ready.

Naruto's jaw opened and closed, two, three times.

Kiba wouldn't look up from the floor.

"This never happened," he said eventually.

"Agreed," Naruto wheezed, standing up on shaky feet and stumbling to the door.

Kakashi was in a quiet corner of the cemetery, under a large cherry blossom tree that was in beautiful full bloom this time of year. He didn't come to this particular spot often, preferring to spend his time with Rin or Obito at the obelisk. He supposed a part of him felt that those were the two he'd failed the most and, as a result, to whom he owed the most attention. And they had been his comrades, once upon a time. It felt more natural to complain to them about the latest ridiculous mess Gai had roped him into, or his students had caused, or the most recent assignment that had dissolved into madness.
He only tended to come to this grave when he'd done something monumentally stupid and had a confession to make.

He took a deep breath and sat in the shade of the tree in the dying afternoon. "I'm very sorry Sensei, but I think I just sent your daughter to ask an eighteen year old boy what he liked best in bed."

He ducked his head, recalling the unpleasant feeling of being twelve and being scolded for blowing up the laundromat and blowing out the electricity for five blocks while trying out experimental seals and raiton justu when his teacher was preoccupied with mooning over the pretty red-head chūnin who lived in the apartment above the ramen stand.

He still felt monumentally stupid, but at least he had his eyebrows this time.

There had to have been a better way to have handled that situation.

But for the life of him, the answer wasn't coming to him at the moment.

With a muffled groan, he sprawled out under the tree on his back, lacing his fingers underneath his head and staring up at the intertwining boughs overhead laced with delicate pink blossoms.

He was in the same position two hours later when he felt Gai's chakra signature register on the edge of his awareness. He closed his eye and kept it shut until he could tell that the taijutsu expert was standing directly above him.

He opened his gray eye to Gai's grinning visage, teeth gleaming and a hand forming a thumbs up gesture above him.

"Greetings, rival!" said Gai, in a strange loud whisper, as if trying to be respectful of Kakashi's time in this place but not quite capable of using what normal people considered a 'reverent' tone.

"What dampens your hip spirits today, my friend?" Gai waited expectantly.

Kakashi gave him a considering look, "I think I sent one of my kids to ask one of Kurenai's kids how to have sex."

Gai nodded grimly, "The flames of youth overwhelm us all from time to time."

Kakashi snorted and rolled up to a sitting position, taking Gai's outstretched hand and allowing the man to pull him completely upright.

He stumbled forward a bit as Gai jovially slapped the copy ninja on the back.

"Come, rival," called out Gai, voice returning to its normal volume, "Let us celebrate the Springtime of Passion which embraces our dear ones!"

Kakashi didn't know if he should be proud or embarrassedly resigned to the fact that, at this point in his life, his eye didn't so much as twitch when Gai expressed such statements.

Nevertheless, he accompanied Gai as the man guided him to the outskirts of one of the livelier parts of Konoha, to a seedy little bar known for serving ninja. Civilians nervously skirted around the entrance as they carried about their lives, never sure when things inside would get a bit rowdy and someone would fly through a wall from some over-exuberant rough housing.

"Sit right here, rival!" Gai pushed Kakashi into a booth that had seen better days, the wooden bench bearing deep grooves gouged from many a kunai over the years. "I shall get us drinks and we shall
see who can better perform drunken fist at the end of the night!"

Kakashi snorted, trying to remember if he'd ever actually had his sharingan active when Gai or his protégé employed the technique in battle. Oh, well, he could always play the 'too cool' to participate card, for the sake of keeping the bar standing another day.

A drink appeared in front of him and Kakashi reached for it, pausing when he realized that Gai was still standing and not sliding into the booth across from Kakashi.

He waited patiently as Gai focused on the entrance, confusion apparent on his face.

After only a second or so, the man shook his head and took his seat. "I'm sorry," he said with a grin, picking up his own glass, "I thought I saw your lovely Sakura-san, but she left before I could greet her."

"Oh?" Kakashi asked politely, not particularly concerned. He doubted it was Sakura. Actually, he doubted that either Sakura or Sasuke were in any condition to celebrate after the spar they had earlier that afternoon.

"Ah," Kakashi sighed, a little remorse coloring his words. "She and Sasuke were both a little wound up in practice today, I actually may need you to work with them if they didn't manage to beat the anger out of one another today."

Gai tossed his head back with a laugh, "How exciting! The flames of youth burn strong in your students, dear rival!" He set his drink down so forcefully that the table rattled.

Kakashi leaned back and settled in for a long evening of listen to Gai ramble and get progressively drunk to the point where he decided to challenge Kakashi to bar tricks, which Kakashi had essentially already begun to cheat at by using sleight of hand to spill his drink out on the floor instead of actually consuming his liquor. The place was such a mess that no one ever noticed, and Kakashi refused to let his guard down when every other ninja on the premises was already compromised by inebriation.

Naruto stirred her ramen in her bowl forlornly, Teuchi-san and his daughter exchanging concerned looks over her head.

"And then she was like, *BAM,* take this Dickwad, and out of nowhere she delivered this awesome right hook—"

"Is something wrong, Naruto-san," Ayame asked gently as Konohamaru enthusiastically ranted about a battle he'd seen earlier that day.

Naruto sniffed, sadly. "I just had the most awful day."

"What happened?" The young woman looked at the normally cheerful blonde, worried.

"But Sasuke-san was totally awesome too," defended Moegi, indignant, eyes flaring bright as she ignored her food in favor of contesting Konohamaru's account of events. "He did this thing with his eyes and that girl couldn't even move—"

Naruto turned sad eyes on the sympathetic brunette. "I got into an argument with my sensei, and I'm never going to be able to look Kiba in the face again, and worst of all," Naruto shuddered and took a deep breath.
"But the best part was when Sakura-san surprised him with the kage bunshin, and he realized just how badly he'd underestimated her chakra reserves," Udon said calmly, wiping his glasses as he tried to give what he considered an unbiased retelling.

Naruto hiccupped, "I missed Sasuke-Bastard getting his ass kicked by Sakura-chan!"

Ayame seemed a bit confused, obviously not aware of what a monumental occasion that Naruto had been forced to forego. She came around the counter and patted the upset blonde on the shoulder gently as the three genin continued to talk over one another about the spar.

Two civilians walked by the booth, chatting loudly.

"Did you see the Uchiha and that pink-haired chick when their spar spilled over into the fish market today?" Asked the taller man, juggling some bags of groceries on his way home from work.

The shorter, younger man answered excitedly, "I did, I know! It was the most epic shit I'd ever seen, I didn't know tuna could be used that way!"

Naruto looked after them, eyes large and yearning. Ayame watched her nervously. Naruto let out a loud, despairing cry and threw her head on the counter dramatically. "I missed the most epic shit ever, Ayame!" She pounded the counter with her fist, dishes rattling. "And it involved tuna! I'll never get that moment back!"

"Oh, Naruto," Ayame sighed and clucked about the girl, unsuccessfully trying to get her to stop sulking as it was scaring off the other paying customers.

Meanwhile, Konohomaru and Moegi had progressed to stabbing each other with chopsticks while their friend with glasses sneezed repeatedly into a growing pile of napkins.

Teuchi sighed and began to prepare to-go boxes.

Chapter End Notes

Betas: CrystallineX and LadyWinterFic
The Root of the Problem

Chapter Summary

Sakura is going to make them all get along if it kills her and Kakashi's teaching style is unusually effective, as usual.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Naruto threw open the door, tripping on the edge of a rug as she struggled to take off her sandals and yell at the same time. "Kurenai-sensei, I can't believe you told him!"

Finally victorious in the battle with her shoes, Naruto looked up, footwear in hand, only to realize that the room was empty. "Kurenai-sensei?" Naruto called tentatively.

"Back here," came the muffled response.

Naruto set her shoes down by the front door and slipped past the couches, curiously peering into a bedroom door on the left. "What are you doing?" Naruto looked around the room, observing the walls painted to look like the sky, the myriad of fluffy stuffed animals, and the brightly colored blocks and other toys haphazardly strewn about the floor. She picked her was through the minefield carefully, not wanting to break any of Matsu-chan's playthings.

In the bathroom, Kurenai was bent over the bathtub as Matsu splashed at the bubbles, "More! More!"

Kurenai, laughed at her child, dumping some water over the toddler's head to more squeals and using a washrag to dry Matsu's face before turning to Naruto. "Matsu-chan discovered jam this morning," Kurenai explained with fond exasperation, drying her hands on a towel in her lap. "We had to have an emergency bath time."

"Oh," said Naruto, peering around the doorframe connecting the bedroom to the bathroom.

"Come on in, take a seat on the toilet and tell me what's wrong," Kurenai tickled Matsu in the tub, leading to more squeals and splashes.

Naruto slipped into the now crowded bathroom, picking up a couple of towels set atop the toilet and sitting on the closed lid, setting the towels in her lap. She took a deep breath, trying to convey her words calmly so as not to upset Matsu-chan. "I was just, surprised you told Kakashi everything."

Kurenai looked at the blonde, brows drawn in confusion. "I didn't tell him everything. I told you I would tell him a little bit about the mission, and that is all I did. He just knows you've been assigned to a seduction mission, he doesn't know anything else."

Naruto's eyes went wide and she clutched the towels in her lap tightly. "Are you serious?"

"Yes, I'm serious," responded Kurenai a bit dryly. "Why? What happened?"

Naruto moaned and buried her face in the towels to hide her embarrassment.
"Naruto-chan, what happened?" Kurenai leaned forward to place a hand on her knee, concerned.

"Notin'" Naruto's muffled voice barely carried through the towels.

"Ma!Ma!Ma!" cried Matsu.

"Shh, darling," soothed Kurenai, returning her attention to poking and prodding her child in the tub, picking out some brightly colored rubber fish off the floor to put in the water. "Naruto, I can't understand you if you hide in my bath towels. You're welcome to find solace with them, but I think you'll feel better if you talk to a real person."

Naruto removed her head from the towels, face flushed. "I thought he knew! And I acted like he knew! He was all," Naruto lowered her voice to mimic the man's, "I talked with Kurenai and the Hokage and they told me everything!"

Matsu giggled at the unusual sound.

Naruto hid her face in her palms, speaking between the gap that they made so that Kurenai could still understand her. "No wonder he was looking at me like I was crazy!"

"Did you say something to give away the game?" Kurenai said, all calm and logical in the midst of Naruto's emotional crisis.

Naruto bit her lip, trying to recall the exact words of the conversation from the prior day. "No," she said finally, "I don't think I did." Her voice gained confidence, "I just think he thought I was a bit," Naruto struggled for the right word, "bold."

"Bold?" Kurenai repeated, puzzled.

Naruto's lips twitched, still embarrassed but able to see a bit of the humor in the situation and also feeling relieved that Kakashi hadn't been acting that calm because he knew, it was just because he thought that he knew. And now that she knew that he didn't know what he thought he knew, she could breathe a bit easier.

"I kind of got mad, cuz he was actin' so, you know, laid-back, about the whole thing, like it wasn't really important." Naruto valiantly tried to explain herself, "and I was thinking, how can you be so calm about all this? And then he goes and says that he's going to help me, and I just blurted out 'Fine then! Tell me what you like!'"

Kurenai quirked an eyebrow, "What he likes?"

"You know," Naruto said with a blush, "in bed."

Kurenai began to laugh softly.

"It's not funny!" Insisted Naruto, cuddling the towels close, "He kind of panicked, or something, and told me I should go ask Kiba!"

Kurenai's laughter paused for a moment. But only a moment, and then she was laughing even louder.

"Kurenai!" Wailed Naruto, "I didn't know what he was talking about, but I went to ask Kiba anyway and we wound up both getting lectured by his mother!"

"Tsune-san," gasped Kurenai, tears appearing in the corner of her eyes as she continued to laugh.

"Yes! And you wouldn't believe what she said!" Naruto declared, face turning redder recalling the
"Did she get to the sex in the shower part?" said Kurenai amidst her laughter, "That was my favorite part, personally."

Naruto gaped, "How do you even know that?" Naruto groaned, hiding her face in her hands again, "Oh my God, just," Naruto returned to the towels, gibbering intelligibly.

Kurenai could make out words like "soap" and "slip" and "penile fractures" and "just too much information," which only made the jōnin laugh harder.

"Never, never, again," mumbled Naruto darkly as she hid in the towels.

Kurenai took some pity on the girl, explaining her familiarity with the clan head. "I had her come talk to my three students when they hit puberty." Kurenai wiped a tear from her eye, "Shino really had, well, odd ideas, about sex, and Kiba..." she trailed off with a shrug and a quirk of the lips, as if that should explain itself, "and Hinata hadn't been allowed to attend any of those types of lectures in the Academy." She sighed and shifted into a more comfortable sitting position on the floor. "I was such a new jōnin that if Hyūga-sama discovered I'd lectured the girl on the issue there could have been serious consequences. Tsume-san, however—"Kurenai's eyes flashed mischievously.

Naruto finished the sentence for her. "Tsume-san doesn't give a shi-," Naruto's gaze slid to Matsu, "ship."

"Well, yes," admitted Kurenai, reaching forward to rescue her towels from the chūnin's worrying hands and standing up, pulling Matsu out from the tub. She wrapped the towels around the toddler and headed into the bedroom to dress the child in clean clothes, Naruto trailing behind the pair and sitting forlornly in a rocking chair.

"Anyway, Tsume-san was more than happy to come lecture the three of them once she understood my dilemma, and, honestly, I think they were mortified, but they all managed to live through it."

Kurenai released a squeaky-clean and chipper Matsu to play with some dinosaurs. She looked at Naruto, lips twitching, "I thought she had some very sound advice."

Naruto gulped, pale, just barely keeping herself from starting to babble about bizarre sexual scenarios Tsume had described that all began with, 'And let me tell you from my personal experience.'

"The question that concerns me, Naruto-chan," said Kurenai, waving a hand for Naruto to follow her out of the baby's room and into the living room, where they settled on the comfortable couch, "is why you needed to ask what Kakashi liked in the first place."

Naruto froze, "Umm..." her wide eyes looked longingly toward the back windows.

Kurenai continued her probing, ignoring her companion's discomfort. "The basic skills don't really vary that much," she paused, watching the chūnin's response carefully, "have you never been involved with someone before?"

Naruto twisted, uncomfortable with the questions. "Not really?"

Kurenai blinked, surprised. "You've never had sex with someone before, or you've never been in a romantic relationship with someone before?"

Naruto studied her hands in her lap, unusually shy. "Neither?"
"Oh." Kurenai blinked again. "Oh.

Naruto bristled, "There's nothing wrong with that! It's not like I've had time to-" Naruto snapped her mouth shut, cutting herself off before she said something truly embarrassing, like who would have wanted to with me.

"No," Kurenai said hastily, "I don't mean to imply that there is anything wrong with that." She held her hands out to calm the girl, "it's just surprising, I just thought," Kurenai sneaked a quick look at the girl and glanced away again, "Well, never mind what I thought. This may make things a little more difficult but we'll manage." Kurenai hesitated, lost in reflection for a moment. "I was just thinking that maybe Kakashi knew that, that you were inexperienced. It would explain some of his attitude the other night."

"Attitude?" Naruto asked, "What attitude? He seemed fine enough with everything by the time he talked to me," she said, sounding a bit put out over the whole thing.

"Really?" Kurenai questioned, leaning back into the couch cushions. "I thought he was upset, when he talked to me the other night."

"He told me it wasn't the best use for me," Naruto admitted bitterly.

Kurenai hummed thoughtfully. "I don't think he meant it the way you seem to have interpreted it," she said, still thinking over the situation. "He was probably mostly upset that you, to him, at least, seem a bit young for a seduction mission." Kurenai sighed, "And now that I know what I know, he probably thought that you were too inexperienced for this type of thing." Kurenai gazed at her temporary student fondly, "I think he was mostly upset that this was not something that he had trained you for, and he didn't want to see you hurt by it if at all avoidable. He cares very much for you, Naruto-chan, don't doubt that."

"Oh," said Naruto, voice small. "But, where do I go from here? What do I do now that he thinks I'm training for a seduction mission?"

Kurenai waived her hand dismissively, "Just leave it to me, I've got a couple of ideas I'm working on. But don't forget" Red eyes grew bright with excitement, "You have his attention now, so in general, the next step is to get a bit closer. You need to make him come to terms with the fact that you are not a child anymore, and that will come with time. He needs to see you in various circumstances, acting only as an adult would."

Naruto's eyes grew wide at the other woman's enthusiasm.

Kurenai continued on cheerfully, "Just watch for any opportunities I make and be sure to take advantage of them."

Naruto plopped back into the couch cushions with a groan. "That's what I'm worried about!"

Naruto didn't see Kakashi until the next team practice session on Saturday.

She spent her time busily avoiding the man. Not that avoiding Kakashi was particularly difficult, considering that outside of scheduled meetings he tended only to be found at the Memorial Stone. Still, she'd been searching for the right words to apologize and hadn't quite found a comfortable way to begin the anticipated conversation. "I know you probably think I'm either a slut or that I don't know the first thing about sex, but…" just didn't quite sit right with Naruto as the best icebreaker.

I mean really, where do I go from here? Naruto fretted as she played with the Academy children on
the playground swings, tried valiantly not to sleep through Tsunade's lectures on politics, and joined Chougi and Shikamaru for an afternoon of cloud watching.

Kurama, for once, was silent and unresponsive. Apparently giant chakra beasts didn't have any helpful tips on how to get 'closer' to older men you were trying to seduce.

Well, beyond the whole 'naked and chickens' idea.

Ino probably had some advice.

Naruto wasn't *that* desperate yet.

Which was why Naruto was already at Training Ground Three before the sun rose on Saturday, trying to dispel the restless energy from her body as she ran laps mindlessly around an area she knew better than the back of her hand. After working up a light sweat, she settled down to work on chakra exercises, taking some twigs and leaves and trying to build a structure held together by chakra, as she had done with the cards at dinner a few nights ago.

Eventually, the sound of leaves crunching under heavy feet alerted her to the fact that Sasuke had sussed out where she was hiding and was headed her way. Surprisingly, Sakura was with him. And their chakra signatures didn't seem like they were trying to murder each other. Naruto stopped her efforts, assorted twigs, pebbles, and wilted leaves falling to the forest floor as she stood, dusting her hands together, waiting for her teammates to arrive.

Sasuke stopped a few feet short of her, face blank, Sakura a few paces behind him.

"Naruto," he greeted, tersely.

The blonde blinked. "Sasuke," she greeted, caught a bit off-guard by the fact that they were actually *greeting* each other.

"Naruto," said Sakura in a light, friendly voice.

"Sakura." Naruto nodded her head in acknowledgment, tensing further at the stilted atmosphere.

Silence fell over the clearing, broken only by the rather noisy white-eye birds nesting in the trees around them.

Sakura looked at Sasuke expectantly; frowning when he failed to do whatever it was that she was expecting him to do.

She huffed and turned to Naruto, "Sasuke has something to say to you."

Naruto blinked again, "He does?"

A muscle in Sasuke's jaw twitched.

"Yes," said Sakura, hands on her hips and words clipped short, "Yes, he does."

The blonde looked at the boy dubiously, "I don't think he do—"

"I apologize." Sasuke's words came so quickly that the jinchūriki didn't quite catch them.

"What?" Naruto rubbed at her eyes, trying to make sure that she was awake.

"I said," Sasuke gritted his teeth, "that I apologize."
Sakura looked smug.

Naruto rubbed harder at her eyes, "I don't-," she couldn't finish the sentence, instead inserting her pinky in her ear, checking for wax to make sure that she was hearing things correctly.

"Sasuke," said Sakura with a hint of exasperation.

Sasuke straightened slightly and glanced at the medic nin from the corner of his eyes, before returning his full gaze to the blonde chūnin. "I apologize for the way I treated you last week."

"Oh," said Naruto, still confused, "...ok."

"Well?" Sakura asked, sounding very pleased with herself.

"Yes?" asked Naruto, cautiously.

Sakura frowned, "Well?"

"Well what?" Naruto tugged at her pigtails nervously.

Sakura scowled, tapping a foot impatiently. "Don't you have something to say?"

"I dunno," Naruto looked to Sasuke bewildered, "Do I?"

Sasuke looked up at the sky, refusing to take any further part in this madness.

"Oh good grief," Sakura slapped a hand to her forehead, "You say 'I accept your apology, Sasuke-kun'"

"I accept your apology Sasuke-kun," repeated Naruto obediently, if uncertainly.

That muscle in Sasuke's jaw twitched again.

"Good," Sakura nodded, and then took a deep breath, "And now I have something to say, too."

The pink-haired girl cleared her throat, "Sasuke-kun, I'm very sorry for making a bet to provoke you into certain behaviors; it wasn't a very nice thing for a team mate to do. Please forgive me."

Again with the twitch.

Sakura narrowed her eyes, "Sasuke," she hissed.

"Apology accepted," came the eventual, reluctantly given words.

The awkward silence came back in full force, and Naurto shifted uneasily in the tense atmosphere. "I'm sorry too!" she blurted out, loudly.

Sakura looked at her in surprise, "What are you sorry for?"

"I dunno," said Naruto earnestly, "Since we are all being touchy-feely I thought I'd just throw it out there."

"Dammit Naruto, you don't apologize unless you have something to actually apologize for, it devalues the sincerity of others' apologies." Sakura's nostrils flared in anger.

"But," Naruto said tentatively, shuffling a few feet to the left so that Sasuke was between the two girls, "Sasuke really didn't do anything last week to be sorry for."
Sakura crossed her arms. "He was apologizing for being a dick Naruto, I didn't think you'd dispute that particular point."

Naruto played with the ends of her hair, "Well, that's kind of mean, Sakura-chan, I mean, you really shouldn't make people apologize just for their existence."

Sasuke threw Naruto a nasty look accompanied by a snort, which might have sounded amused, but Naruto was obviously hearing things today so no one should trust her perception of events.

Sakura opened her mouth and then snapped it shut again. She put her hand over her face, and then dragged it down with a groan. "—you know what, I don't care. Come on," she leaned forward and grabbed Naruto's hand, pulling her along, "I want to see how strong Sasuke has to make his raiton jutsu to break through my mud walls."

Sakura stomped away, Naruto tripping after her, both of them making enough noise to alert any ninja within a five mile radius to their presence.

Sasuke stood in the clearing by himself for a moment, songbirds chirping prettily.

He slouched a bit, sighed dramatically, and reluctantly trudged after the female duo, all the while wondering how his life had gotten to the point where his greatest challenge came in the form of little girls with pink hair and pigtails.

Four hours later, all three of them were smothered in mud from head to toe, having been rolling, and jumping, and running (and dumping it down certain unsuspecting party's comically wide collars) in the substance for the majority of the afternoon.

The sudden, loud rumbling of Naruto's stomach interrupted Sasuke's attempts to bury his blonde teammate in a large mud pit as Sakura called an end to the day's training so that they could each take a much needed break for showers.

Which is, of course, the moment that Kakashi decided to stroll into sight. "Yo," he greeted, taking them in with a smile.

Sakura sat up from where she'd been sprawled in the mud, assessing the man with a tired, but alert gaze, "You've pretty much missed all of practice, Sensei."

"Ah, no, I've been watching," said the jōnin, hands in his pockets, "you didn't really need my help today."

Sakura's eyes narrowed as she drawled, "You mean you've been busy reading and didn't want to risk getting your precious books dirty."

Kakashi gave a noncommittal hum, but didn't move any closer to Training Ground Three's new mud pit feature.

"Whatever," sighed Sakura, rolling to her feet and stretching, dry mud coming off of her in little flakes as she moved, "I desperately need a shower and then, as much as I love you all, I don't want to see any of you until practice next Wednesday."

Naruto laughed as Sakura offered her a hand and pulled the blonde into a standing position. "Not even at the hospital?" Naruto asked, teasing.

"Especially not then," grumbled Sakura. "I'll restrict your diet to carrots and tell the student nurses that you've volunteered to be the live practice dummy for whatever they are working on that day.
Hopefully they'll be learning how to give shots."

"No!" said Naruto with an exaggerated, horrified gasp, "Anything but carrots."

"You're both idiots," grumbled Sasuke, ignoring Sakura's outstretched hand and standing on his own.

"So you'll see us Wednesday then, Bastard?" asked Naruto, eyes twinkling.

Sasuke grunted and Naruto called out a goodbye to his back. And then Sakura was saying goodnight too, and it was just Kakashi standing with his hands in his pockets in the woods and Naruto standing, shivering a bit in the cooling evening in a mud pit.

Kakashi took in the unpredictable girl, dirt caked over every visible part of her body, green leaves and twigs haphazardly woven in her hair. Just a bunch of mud with... really pretty blue eyes, Kakashi felt a guilty twinge from his conscience.

Externally, he was calm and collected, not giving away that he was feeling a little awkward and unsure of how to address the girl given the events of their last meeting.

Naruto blinked, eyes wide in the silence. Unlike Kakashi, Naruto's face was an open book, clearly communicating that she was uncomfortable in his presence and conflicted about what to say.

Which was both endearing and a little comforting. And that twig in her hair, the large one with a couple of leaves on it, caught right at the back of her head where her hair had come undone and now seemed to be somewhat of a knotted rat's nest. How had she not noticed that yet?

"I'm sorry!" blurted the mud monster.

Kakashi's eyes flitted back to her face, diverted from contemplating the distracting state of his student's hair.

Her words came out rushed, "I shouldn't have behaved like that the other day, you just, you kind of caught me off guard and I was upset and I—"

"Ahh," Kakashi held up a hand, "It's fine. I should have—" he let his hand drop, eyes softening a bit, "I've warned you I'm not very good at saying what I'm supposed to say in those sorts of situations." Which was as honest as Kakashi could be about things like that. Truly, he should be expected to screw up that type of conversation Every. Single. Time.

"I didn't mean to offend you," he continued, considering the girl watching him, face full of hope, glowing a bit in the light cast by the setting sun as it filtered through the trees around them. "I meant it when I said I would offer you whatever help I can," added Kakashi, still not quite sure what help he could be in such a situation. Except, you know, maybe offer to go kill whoever it was that made this mission necessary in the first place. He could probably do that very well.

"Right," Naruto nodded, voice wobbly, "thank you." She tried to take a step forward and stumbled, left leg stuck in the mud.

"Huh?" confused, Naruto tried to work her leg free of the viscous mess, but the mud sucked greedily at her boot and all she seemed to do was get more stuck. She scowled, puffing out her cheeks and trying to think of a solution.

Kakashi's eye crinkled in amusement, "Problem?"
"No!" Naruto said, scrunching up her face.

She wiggled a bit more, and then an idea came to her, so she slumped a little, hiding her face, "Ok, maybe."

She groaned, trying to look defeated as she gazed at the mud, "Could you just give me a hand so I could pull myself out?" She stuck out her right hand expectantly, letting her hair fall forward and veil her face a bit.

Kakashi heaved a put upon sigh, not actually irritated at her, but that twig in her hair was annoying him again. Couldn't she move it? "I suppose so," he said, keeping his tone light and taking a step forward. He extended a firm hand for Naruto to grab, intending to yank the girl free from the mud and reach up and brush that twig away while he was at it.

At least, that was what Kakashi had intended, but, he quickly realized, with wide eyes as Naruto clasped his fingers and pulled in the other direction, Naruto had other plans.

Naruto laughed delightedly and yanked hard. Kakashi, not paying complete attention and unprepared for the added weight, lost his balance and, suppressing the instinct to react in a way that would cause damage to his attacker, had to twist awkwardly to the side to avoid landing on the girl. Which sent him fully sprawling on his back in the mud, Naruto cackling on the ground by his left side. He blinked in surprise, gazing up at the green and gold tinged canopy. Naruto's face came into view as she sat up and leaned over him, placing a palm on each side of his head, pinning him in to, presumably, get a better view of his face and to keep herself from collapsing in laughter.

"I can't believe you fell for that," she crowed, face bright and golden and glowing, smile wide.

Something funny fluttered in his chest.

Kakashi blinked again, noticing one particular streak of dirt on her cheek, and stomping down the urge to raise his hand and wipe it off. He did allow himself to sit up, and as he did so, he took Naruto's hands and pushed her back a bit as he rose.

And he pulled that damn twig from her hair as she giggled.

That's better, he thought, throwing the twig away. The he realized that she was practically in his lap, although, she was too amused to have realized this yet. He carefully tried to extricate himself from her grasp and restore appropriate personal boundaries.

He cleared his throat, "Naruto."

She continued to giggle.

"Naruto," said Kakashi somewhat sweetly, single eye curving in a smile, which caused Naruto to stop mid-laugh and her eyes to dilate once more.

"I think it's time to work on the next phase of your training," said Kakashi calmly, as if he chose to sprawl in the mud at every practice he'd held with Team Seven. "I'm giving you a thirty second head-start, starting now: Thirty, twenty-nine, twenty-eight..."

Kakashi continued his countdown as Naruto let out a surprised "meep" and fled. He felt her agitated chakra flicker distantly and wondered how long she'd run before she realized that he had no intention of doing anything to her. He rose from the mud, hands running through a familiar sequence as Pakkun poofed into existence before him.
The pug wrinkled its already wrinkled face in distaste at the sight before him. "You're a mess."

"I missed you too," drawled Kakashi.

"I'm not getting in that," the pug backed up a few steps. "It will mess up my soft, delicate paws."

"I don't need you to," said the jōnin, "Just follow Naruto and make sure she finds the scroll in her pocket with her newest assignment on it before she dumps it in a washing machine or destroys it somehow."

The dog turned tail, already trotting off on its mission, "On it, Boss."

Kakashi looked about him, pulling his legs free from the mud with a resigned grunt. Some days the messes his cute little students got him into were more literal than others. Although, usually when this particular cute little student dragged him into a mess, the reaction he fought to suppress wasn't—

Kakashi's eye widened, then closed.

He might be in a bit of trouble.

The next morning Kakashi, mostly clean, although he was still finding mud in odd places every so often, reclined on his own couch, looking over the Root Investigation notes. He ran a hand over his face and sighed, flipping through the pages one more time to make sure he had all the basic facts correct.

Danzo has an incredible breadth to his operations, and while, perhaps, once upon a time, the Sandaime had trusted the man to take care of some unfortunate necessaries that the Third wanted his own hands clean of, Kakashi doubted the Sandaime had approved of Danzo's power growing to its ultimate extent.

Frowning, Kakashi tented his fingers and considered the situation. If you weren't man enough to do something yourself, then perhaps it ought not be done.

A low whine reached his ears and Kakashi glanced to the left, where a small furry head had popped up over the side of the couch.

Kakashi reached down to rub Guruko behind the ears, the tell-tell clack of claws clicking on linoleum announcing the arrival of Pakkun and Ūhei, the remaining members of the pack staying in the kitchen, happily gnawing away at some bones that Kakashi had picked up from a local butcher shop.

"Oooo, that was good," sighed Guruko, leaning into the scratching hands.

Pakkun jumped up onto the sofa, climbing onto the back of the couch so that he might get a better look at the documents in Kakashi's lap. "Whatch doin', Boss?"

Ūhei nudged Guruko aside, "My turn, my turn."

"Ahh," Kakashi admonished gently, "I won't be petting anyone if you're all going to fight about it."

"Noooo—"whined the two dogs on the floor in chorus as Pakkun gave a snort from behind Kakashi's ear.

Kakashi turned to examine his most intelligent summons.
"You're not about to get into something stupid, are you?" asked the pug, sounding apathetic in spite of the call of the question.

"Sometimes I wish that I'd never taught you to read," commented the copy ninja lightly.

"But then no one would sneak into the nurses' station and learn the rotation charts so that you could read your books in peace and sneak out when they're not looking," said the pug, licking the remnants of his dinner from his pink paws.

Kakashi just hummed his agreement, making some notations on the documents in his lap. He looked at the roster of names in front of him and tried to recall all the information that he'd gathered from those marked as accounted for about the aggravating handful of names which had nothing more than question marks by their sides.

It had been roughly one month since he'd received this assignment. In that time, the copy ninja had successfully tacked down most of Root's remnants and interrogated them about their organization. With the cursed seals dissipating from their tongues upon their leader's death, and their last orders to follow the Hokage, they'd all been surprisingly cooperative with his efforts to uncover the history and extent of the organization.

Sai alone had been an invaluable resource. The boy had been able to point Kakashi to many leads, and with his help, Kakashi had assembled a list of fifty-seven names of known Root members over the past two decades. Sadly, the ones who remained alive could be counted for on two hands.

Of those living, two had been particularly helpful: Hyō and Terai. Those two were the only ninja other than Sai who were in any shape to be assimilated back into the main forces of Konoha's shinobi. The last war had taken a hard toll on the ninja forces of every nation, but Konoha's Root Division almost had been completely destroyed. Root members had become reckless and desperate in battle following Danzo's death. For many, it had almost been as if, once the strings were cut, and no voice was present to whisper directions into their ears, they no longer had any will at all but to fight and die for their village.

And so they did.

"You're thinking depressing thoughts," said Pakkun, curled in a ball on the top of the couch, perched precariously between the backboard and the back cushions. "I can smell them."

"You worry too much," Kakashi tensed and relaxed as a cold nose was thrust into his palm and Guruku began to lap at his palms. Kakashi wiggled his fingers to scratch the youngest of his ninken under the chin. Guruko's tail thumped happily against the ground and Ūhei yawned from where he'd curled up on Kakashi's feet.

"What's really depressing is that somehow, two Root members have remained unaccounted for since the war." Kakashi underlined the two names with firm strokes of his pencil.

The jōnin still had a few more Root hideouts to investigate, but so far, he'd been unable to dig up anything on the whereabouts of the agents known as Dajimu and Tera. As of yet, there was no particular reason for him to be alarmed at the situation. After all, they had been in a war, it wasn't uncommon for bodies to be left too mutilated to identify. However, something about the whole thing was making Kakashi uneasy. It was a gut instinct, cultivated from years of experience as a top of the line shinobi, and he was triple-checking all of his work at the moment to make sure that the smallest piece of information didn't slip through his fingers.

Most of Root's meeting places were in the bowels of Konoha, built off of the sewer systems, a
meandering labyrinth of a mess, some of which had been caved in during the rather violent battles of
the recent past and which were now difficult to almost impossible to breach. Over the past month,
with the help of Sai and his ninken, they'd been able to uncover most of the locations. This upcoming
week he and Sai should reach the last spots on the map that they'd cobbled together between the
memories of Sai, Terai, and Hyō, as well as some older Root ninja who were coerced into retirement.

"I don't understand why this is our problem," muttered Pakkun.

"It's our assignment," replied Kakashi, "We'll see it through."

"It's getting tedious," Pakkun complained, Ūhei yipping in agreement, "why don't you let some
puppies have at it."

Kakashi raised an eyebrow, "You want to send Naruto and Sakura down in the sewers to chase
rats?"

Pakkun snorted and gave the jōnin a look, "Those are not puppies, Kakashi. What I mean is that, if
all there is to do is chase rats, you should let the actual puppies, you know, those fresh-from-the-
academy brats, learn to do the chasing. It's not like we're encountering anything dangerous down
there."

Kakashi narrowed his good eye at his oldest summons, "Since when have my students been anything
but, 'those dang puppies,'?"

The pug leveled a flat look, "Does your nose tell you they're puppies?"

Kakashi remained silent, in reflection or denial, Pakkun wasn't interested enough to determine.

"Well, your nose may be failing you as you approach retirement, but mine's not. Those three are not
puppies anymore."

Kakashi through a dark look at the pug, disgruntled. "I'm not getting that old."

The pug ignored the jōnin, jumping into the man's lap to better look at his notes. "I just don't see
what's got you so worked up about everything."

"Ahh," Kakashi said finally, "I just have this feeling that maybe we're chasing snakes instead of rats.
It's hard to tell in the dark, you know."

"Hmm," said the pug, tone considering, "Well then, that makes it a bit different. You don't send
puppies into a nest of pit vipers."

Guruko nipped at the jōnin's hands, "Are we going snake hunting?"

Kakashi petted him distractedly, "Not yet."

"Oh," Guruko sighed, "But it's so fun to hunt snakes, you have to take the whole pack for that, you
know."

Kakashi gave a grunt as Guruko jumped into his lap, sending the copy ninja's notes flying about the
living room area.

Pakkun growled irritably and nipped the younger dog on the ear. "I don't know why he'd take you
snake hunting, that kind of hunt is all about timing, which you never learned!"

"Now, now," said Kakshi, prying apart the fussing dogs in his lap. He set them on the floor and
began to recollect his notes as Ūhei barked from the couch at the whimpering Guruko, flat on the floor with his tail between his legs, receiving a lecture from the pug about the delicacy of paper and its importance to two-leggers.

"So, what are you trying to do again?" Konohamaru asked, leaning over the chūnin's shoulder as she sat studying a training scroll on one of the long staircases in the public park.

Naruto looked dubiously at the document, "I'm not too sure myself honestly."

Konohamaru bent down to sit next to her, craning his head to read the words. "What's it about?"

"Well," Naruto shifted closer so that he could get a better look, "Kakashi has been giving me these exercises. I wasn't too sure what he was trying to get at in the beginning, but I think I'm getting the idea."

And here I thought your stupidity would persist until the last possible moment.

Naruto mentally rolled her eyes at the arrogant interruption.

Sorry I haven't mastered reading the minds of elite jōnin, she thought to Kurama.

Why don't you start by trying to master his dick?

Naruto choked, doubling forward and wheezing a bit.

"Boss!" The genin pulled away a bit to slap her on the back, hard.

Naruto waved him off, "Ah, sorry, I'm good, I'm good, just got choked up on some thoughts."

Dark eyes squinted at her, "You sure you're ok?"

"Yeah, yeah," Naruto took some deep breaths and attempted to compose herself. "Did you need something Konohamaru-kun?"

"No," the boy mumbled, suddenly looking down and sounding a bit awkward. "I just thought I could help you with your training."

Naruto sighed and looked at the scroll clutched in her fists. "It sounds like Sensei wants me to find a way to make my chakra thicker without making it take up more space," she rubbed at her temples, "He's outlined all the theory here, but I still don't really understand how I'm supposed to go about doing it. I'm using the chakra as if it were a solid force, to move things and hold things down. I've got to work on keeping a lot of it concentrated in a small area and operating on specific objects," Naruto pouted, a bit put out, "I've never really tried to do that before, mold chakra that way, other than the rasengan, really, but this isn't quite the same."

"You've just gotta increase its' density!" Konohamaru's excited shout cut the girl off as he jumped to his feet.

"...Ok," said Naruto, agreeing hesitantly as she wasn't certain exactly what he was taking about.

"Come on," said the genin, grabbing at her hand and pulling her down the stairs.

"Ok, ok, I'm coming," griped Naruto, letting the kid pull her to an unknown destination. "Where are we going?"

"Have you tried practicing using your chakra this way with shifting surfaces?" Konohamaru called
out to her as the jumped to the roofs and headed toward the training grounds.

"Like the water walking exercise?" asked Naruto, curiously.

"Yeah," agreed the genin, "Ebisu-sensei told us when we started it that it was a good way of working on manipulating the density of your chakra, because you're constantly having to mold different amounts of it to respond to a reactive surface. I bet once you get on the water and start molding your chakra that way, it'll be easier to see what your sensei is trying to get you to do."

Konohamaru kept a tight hold on her hand. "I mean, I know you've done this exercise before, but you've probably never tried to _expel_ your chakra to make the water move, right? Usually we just mold our chakra to cling to the water and respond to how the water moves. Since you're trying to make your chakra move other objects, why not try to mold your chakra to change the way the water is moving. Because water is moving constantly anyway, I bet you'll have to increase the density of your chakra to make it work."

"Oh," Naruto blinked, "That's really smart."

Konohamaru beamed, "You don't mind if I train with you right?"

Naruto shook her head, "Yeah, of course you can help, although, now that I think that I know what Kakashi is trying to get me to do, I'm not too sure this is something you'll be able to do in the end."

The Sandaime's grandson smiled, as they began to slow their pace a bit, heading for the training ground next to Three which had a larger body of water. "That's ok, it'll help me understand you more, and that's worth it."

Naruto looked at him, amused. "It is, is it?"

"Yes, I've gotta' be strong enough to beat you one day, after all," said the boy, fist pumping the air in excitement.

"Na-ah!" Naruto laughed, leaning forward to ruffle his hair.

"Ah-ha!" Konohamaru retorted, ducking her hands and sliding out onto the water. "You'll look back one day and need help, and I'll be right there. And I'll be strong enough for you."

Naruto continued to laugh, sliding across from him and taking up an opening sparring stance. "You keep that promise, you hear."

"Always," said the boy, with a determined grin.

"This is the place?" Kakashi asked, wiping the sweat from his brow as he heaved the last boulder away from the entrance.

Sai jammed a support beam into place to keep the ceiling from caving in on the pair. "According to Hyō," Sai said softly, looking around as the lantern held by one of Kakashi's earth clones cast strange shadows on the tunnel walls.

Kakashi gave a grunt of acknowledgement and gestured at his clone to lead the way, Urushi and Guruko cautiously stepping right behind, noses high as they sniffed furiously at the stale air.

"Smells dead, Boss," whined Guruko, Urushi snorting in agreement and pawing at the ground as Sai studied the map in his hands and directed Kakashi to clear debris out of certain areas so that they might move more freely in the tunnel.
"I don't like it down here," Guruko whined softly.

"Tch," sniffed Urushi, "You're such a puppy, stop complaining. Or just leave," the other dog snapped, "I can do this without you."

"Hush now," cautioned Kakashi, not wanting to be distracted by their bickering. And why was he *always* stuck with the bickering ones?

They both quieted down at his admonition, and suddenly the tunnel opened into a large, cavernous room, natural light filtering in from somewhere far, far overhead.

Sai stepped close behind him, looking at the map and then back at the jōnin. "According to the number of steps that Hyō recalls making, this is the right room." The boy looked around with critical eyes. "I have never been here; I would remember otherwise."

Kakashi stretched a bit, relieved to be able to stand completely upright after crouching through tunnels for most of the day. At least his present company wouldn't make any wise-cracks about his age while he took a moment to loosen up his muscles. Flipping his fingers in a familiar sequence, he called out the rest of the pack. "Spread out and search," he ordered, the dogs waffling happily and separating to examine the various corners of the large cavern. Moss covered boulders jutted out up from the floor, filling the room with various nooks and crannies, innumerable natural hiding spots.

Kakashi turned to regard his temporarily commandeered subordinate. "It is not unusual that you haven't been here before today." He looked out at the cavern, bending over to examine the moss. "Danzo was a man of darkness… he had many secrets. I doubt any individual member of ROOT ever knew the entirety of the man's plans." He stood to survey the room again, noting that, were it not for the circumstances surrounding its discovery, the place would be quite beautiful. The jagged gray stone walls reached high toward the sky, and it looked like eventually tree tops had grown and merged together to form some sort of ceiling, but he'd have to do some climbing to investigate. The jōnin created a few kage bunshin and set them to the task, and Sai mirrored his actions with clones from ink.

The two took a seat on a large stone, waiting for the reports to trickle in from dogs and clones.

Kakashi joined his hands behind his head, sprawling on the stone, looking relaxed, but still intimately in tune with his surroundings, "Danzo-sama valued his privacy."

"I have come to understand," said Sai casually, sitting straight and alert, eyes constantly scanning their environment, "that a little privacy is a good thing. But Ugly and Bimbo seem to believe that secrets make strangers, not friends."

"Some people need more privacy than others, but, yes," Kakashi slid his eye over to the younger ninja, knowing that boy was still struggling to meld two very different cultures that existed within the same village, the same body of warriors, even. "In a Hidden Village, where our very existence is a secret, privacy is a valuable commodity."

Sai was silent for a few minutes, processing the answer before he gave his response. Eventually, he turned a plastered smile at Kakashi, "If so, then you must be quite wealthy, right, Senpai?"

Kakashi's gazed at the boy, focused and sharp, but was spared from answering by Ūhei's loud barks.

"Boss! Hey, Boss, over here," cried Guruko from next to his companion, running himself silly in little circles. The other dogs made their way to the duo curiously, sniffing the air to see what the pack had discovered.
Kakashi made his way over slowly, Sai at his elbow, not too worried as whatever the dogs had discovered wasn't an immediate threat. If it had been, the dogs' responses would have been quite different.

Guruko and Ūhei were in a small, seemingly empty alcove in the back of the cavern.

"What did they find?" asked Sai, eyes casting about for a disturbance or something else out of the ordinary, frowning when he detected nothing.

"Ah," said Kakashi, kneeling down and running his fingers through the dirt, sniffing at it cautiously through his mask. "The more appropriate question would be, 'What did they smell?'"

Sai's eyes widened minisculely in understanding.

"People 've been here, Boss," gushed Guruko with nervous excitement.

"Four," agreed, Pakkun, pushing his nose through the dirt, "Three men, one woman, at least two weeks ago."

"I could've told him that," whined Guruko, "I so could've told him that."

"Good job, Guruko, Ūhei," Kakashi praised the two. As younger members of the pack, they still needed a bit more immediate affirmation when they'd accomplished something. He pulled some biscuits out of a pocket and slipped them to the two, who munched on the treats happily.

"Anything else, Pakkun?" asked Kakashi softly.

The pug had the best nose, and he sat carefully, trying to sift through what he was smelling and filter any information that might be helpful to Kakashi. Eventually, the pug concluded, "Not much. Two I've...I've smelt before, in the village. One smells a bit like snake. Decaying. The female is," the dog hesitated before settling on saying, "strange. Maybe she's sick?"

Kakashi nodded and thanked the pug. He moved forward to examine the alcove. He began to point out certain things to his younger two-legged companion, "You can tell that they've lit a fire here," he dug through the dirt a bit, "they removed the wood, but see how if you dig a bit further the earth is scorched," he removed his glove so Sai could better see the color of the dirt against the copy ninja's bare hand, "and you can't fully bury the smell—"

Bull's deep bellow cut off the jōnin's words, and the ninja flashed to the side of Kakashi's largest ninken in a second.

"Yes?" asked Kakashi, Pakkun arriving to interpret, clambering over the stones with six other dogs yapping eagerly behind him.

However, after taking a deep breath of his own, Kakashi didn't need an interpreter. "Oh," said the jōnin, blinking, "that's a lot of blood."

Sai perked up a bit, reaching for some kunai.

"It's old," hurried Kakashi, trying to convey that he wasn't sensing any immediate danger, "It's just, quite a bit of blood has been used here, repeatedly."

Sai blinked, "A blood seal?" he offered.

"Yes," Kakashi agreed, "most likely."
"Then," Sai cocked his head, considering the odd shaped stone in front of them, "must we have Danzo's blood to activate it?"

Kakashi considered the stone for a few minutes before slowly answering, "I don't think so." He tapped his nose, "most of the blood I'm smelling seems to be Danzo's, but more recently…the blood is different."

Sai paused, then reached for his kunai and held out his arm.

Kakashi didn't react and Sai narrowed his eyes, impatience audible to only the most attuned. "You think the seal is attuned to the blood of Root operatives, don't you? Then mine should work just fine."

Kakashi sighed, "Don't be such a martyr. There are less painful ways to donate blood." The jōnin took the younger man's hand and slipped off his glove, pricking just the tip of the boy's finger with his kunai and placing it against the stone.

Blood bloomed on the surface of the stone in a large strange pattern, glowing deep and dark before concentrating into a small sphere in the middle of the stone, finally flashing into emptiness, leaving behind a fist size hole in the stone.

"Huh," said Kakashi.

Sai moved forward to reach into the hole, and Kakashi held out a hand, stopping him.

He wrinkled his visible eye in a smile at the boy, "What did I say about being a martyr? You're not fodder for the front-line," said the more experienced ninja lightly.

Kakashi summoned another kage bunshin, who stepped forward to tackle their newest mystery. "Oh," said the bunshin, sounding surprised, "It's just a latch inside." The bunshin released the latch, and the stone, which the investigating duo now saw to be an odd, cleverly disguised door, swung open bit.

Kakashi motioned Sai and his ninken to get back a bit, and then he joined them as his bunshin pulled the door the rest of the way open, and then disappeared down stairs leading into an inky darkness.

A few minutes later, Kakashi blinked, Sai watching in fascination as he could see Kakashi's eyes flicker strangely as he worked to absorb the onslaught of new information.

Kakashi looked at his companion, "It's an archive," he said, voice strained.

Sai retrieved the lantern that he'd discarded earlier once emerging from the tunnel system. The two descended into the cave, the dogs milling about anxiously outside, ready to return to Konoha and retrieve aid should the two get locked in the room.

After about two dozen stone steps the stairway ended in a small storage space, about the size of Kakashi's bedroom. The walls were filled with shelves, and the shelves were filled with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of scrolls.

"Should we open them?" asked Sai, stepping forward to examine the objects.

Kakashi looked around carefully. "No," the copy ninja finally said, "We aren't in any hurry, and some of these might have 'locks', so to speak, I don't care to trip anything in this room. Let Tsunade-sama decide what to do with the mess." Kakashi pulled out and activated a sealing scroll, releasing materials. "Get out your inks," said the older jōnin bluntly as he set about to make more seals. "We'll
seal all of these up in a few scrolls and carry them back to the tower," said Kakashi. "I don't feel comfortable leaving them here knowing that unknown parties have access to them."

Sai studied the man carefully. "They'll know they've been found out."

"Yes," agreed Kakashi, "They must feel like this place is safe, hidden away and undiscoverable or they wouldn't have left these materials here, whatever they are." Kakashi didn't appear very regretful though, meticulously observing the storage room with both eyes. "They probably didn't have a better place to put the scrolls, and after two years grew a bit too comfortable with being able to come and go as freely as they wished."

"Let's go," he said, the unease beginning to creep back in his belly. He and Sai worked swiftly to pack the scrolls away. Kakashi wanted to be back in Konoha, to be able to examine the contents of the scrolls at his own leisure, and to be away from a place where the enemy, whoever they were, had the advantage of familiarity with the terrain.

Kakashi brought a dog down to make sure there were no more secret rooms in this dark little space, and then headed topside, he and Sai carrying about a dozen sealing scrolls each. The copy ninja conferred with the pack to make sure that the cavern contained no more surprises and then he and Sai both stopped, pausing as their brains took in the information from the released kage bunshin that they had sent to explore an hour or so earlier.

"We're outside the bounds of the village," murmured Sai, looking up curiously.

"Yes," agreed Kakashi, wryly, "Right underneath the Forest of Death."

Kakashi sighed and gathered his ninken. They agreed to work in a rotation where two of the dogs would remain in the cavern at all times, ready to report to Kakashi should the strangers return.

Kakashi noted the eerie sensation of being watched as he left, but neither his nose nor the dogs could detect another physical presence. He picked up his pile of scrolls and left with six of his ninken, letting Sai's clone lead the way with a lantern as they retraced their steps out of the tunnels and back to the village.

Naruto kicked her feet petulantly, arms crossed in irritation as she waited for her teammates to show up to practice. Really, she thought, irritated, I can understand that Sakura might have shit at the hospital to do, but where is the Asshole?

Speak of the Devil, rumbled Kurama distantly.

Naruto's head snapped to the right as Sasuke walked, slowly, ever so slowly into view, bracing himself against a tree, and sliding down to sit amongst the roots, eyes closed and head falling back against the trunk.

"What's wrong with you?" cried Naruto, alarmed, extending her senses, trying to see if she could pick up the chakra signature of anyone who might have attacked her teammate.

Sasuke flinched, otherwise not responding.

"Bastard!" Naruto's voice was shrill and loud, ready to jump to her feet and start checking the guy for fever or something else terribly nurturing that would have the Uchiha making snide comments for weeks.

He held a hand up, flinching again, eyes remaining closed, mumbling something under his breath.
that Naruto couldn’t quite catch.

"What?" Naruto called, getting up and coming closer, bending down to peer at his face.

"I said," Sasuke murmured just as softly as the first time, forcing Naruto to draw even closer to hear him as his eyes opened just the slightest bit, "Not so loud, Moron."

Naruto huffed and shot back upright, "See if I ever worry about you again," she snapped, not moderating her volume.

"Naruto," came Sakura's distressed drawl, as the medic ninja came into view with a large steaming mug of something really smelly, "Just. Stop. Talking. Please, just for today, that's all I ask."

Naruto gaped at the girl, trying to comprehend what it was exactly that she was seeing.

Her female teammate was, well, a phrase that Ino had used came to the forefront of Naruto's mind. Naruto hadn't understood it at the time, but now she thought the term was probably applicable. "You're a hot mess," blurted out loudly, finger pointing in accusation.

Sakura just snorted, taking a seat at the base of a tree midway between Sasuke and the alert blonde.

The medic nin's hair was a mess, frizzy and sticking out in all directions, pulled back into a sloppy messy ponytail. Her face was pale and she wasn't even wearing her usual minimal amount of makeup. Her posture was slumped and her clothes were rumpled, not neatly, obsessively-compulsively pressed as usual. She sipped tentatively from the smelly mug in her hand.

Naruto stuttered a bit, "A-are those sunglasses?"

Naruto had a feeling that Sakura was rolling her eyes at the blonde behind her glasses.

"They're shaded glasses covering my eyes, what else would they be, Naruto?" Sakura sarcastically retorted.

Naruto wasn't done verbalizing her observations, "And you smell like," Naruto took another long sniff.

Like that Hokage of yours after a bad vacation, supplied Kurama, whiskers twitching in amusement.

"Are you," Naruto asked cautiously, taking a step toward Sakura and then stopping, eyes wide, "Yes, you are!" Naruto pointed again, "You are, you are! You're totally hung-over," she began to laugh at the other girl's expense, Sakura muttering darkly and Sasuke beginning to mumble what were probably death threats.

Naruto wiped a few tears from her eyes, "Why are you even here, why don't you just go sleep it off?"

Sakura sipped silently on her beverage, and an awkward quiet settled over the group.

Naruto's eyes began to grow big, a revelation tickling at the edge of her mind. She turned slowly to look at Sasuke, advancing on the boy and taking another big sniff as he snarled and pulled back.

"Oh my God," Naruto said, looking between the two of them, "Sasuke's hung-over too!"

"What the hell!" Naruto spun to yell at Sakura, "What were you both doing to get so drunk? More importantly, why wasn't I invited? You don't smell like sex, so that can't—"
"Naruto," Sakura pleaded, clutching at her head with her free hand, "Please, please, be quiet, I'm begging you."

"Oh, no!" Naruto stopped her foot and snarled angrily at the pair. "No, no, no! This is team training day! And both of you had the bright idea to go off and party last night without me and now neither of you are any good for sparring today—"

"I am completely capable of sparring, Idiot," rasped Sasuke darkly, still clutching at his head.

Naruto looked at him blankly for a few moments. "You're kidding me right?"

Sasuke opened his mouth to continue protesting but Naruto cut him short.

"You *flinch* at the sound of my voice Asshole!" Naruto ran her fingers through her hair in aggravation, "Seriously, what is this is about? Are you and Sakura-what are you two *doing*? Did we start a 'who has the biggest pair of balls' competition when I wasn't paying attention? Did you try to see who could hold your liquor better last night and now are you trying to see who can recover quicker or who—"

"*Moron,*" Sasuke bit out loudly, "I am completely capable of training."

"And me!" Sakura cried out, drowning out the boy, "I mean I train," she hiccupped, "I mean, I can train too. Today. Now. No problem," she finished, voice trailing off to a whisper.

Naruto glowered at the pair, face growing a lovely, indignant shade of purple.

"Ah," Kakashi said, stepping into the clearing, "It's so good to hear that the two of you are so excited about training today."

Sakura gulped and Sasuke didn't raise his head from where he had buried it in arms, which were crossed over his knees.

"That's just wonderful, because," Kakashi continued cheerfully in a sing-song voice, "Since I knew that I needed to work with Naruto today on a new training exercise, I brought some help."

Loud crashes through the brush alerted Naruto and her teammates to the arrival of another ninja.

"Yosh!" roared the man as he came skidding to a stop, teeth gleaming in his patented smile, both hands in 'thumbs up' position. "It's a bright and beautiful morning!" greeted the jōnin at the top of his lungs.

A few tears began to leak out from behind the sunglasses covering Sakura's eyes.

"Do not fear, fearless students of my eternal rival," the green beast gripped Sakura by her shoulder, pulling her to her feet and marched over to Sasuke to do the same, "your dear Sensei has entrusted your training to my capable hands!"

Sasuke was doing a very good impression of a chameleon, his complexion changing to match that of the infamous spandex jumpsuit.

"We shall begin by running 75 laps around the market district!"

Naruto watched the proceedings curiously, noting that for once in his life, the Bastard could actually be described as looking unattractive.

"If that does not bring you to your usual youthful vigor, we shall do 75 more running backwards!"
"I think I'm gonna throw up," mumbled Sakura, breathlessly.

Gai slapped her on the back. Hard. "You lack hydration, my beautiful little flower. Come, let us remedy this, we will meet with Lee at his house. You can have a drink and then he can join us in our youthful exercises." Gai pulled them both away toward the village, "You will soon be blooming like a lotus flower in Spring!"

"That's kind of evil," said Naruto at last, watching Sasuke's heels dig literal trenches through the forest floor as Gai manhandled him forward.

Then she remembered that apparently Sasuke and Sakura went out and painted the town last night without her.

"I like it," Naruto beamed and turned to face Kakashi. "So what are we doing today?"

Kakashi shrugged, scratching the back of his head idly with one hand, "I thought we'd go into the village, sit on a roof in the marketplace, and every time Sasuke and Sakura run by, you show me how you've been improving on that chakra exercise by reaching out with your chakra and trying to hold them in place." Kakashi seemed to reflect upon his words for a moment and then nodded decisively, beginning to walk toward the village. "Let's see how good you are at that and how long it takes them to catch on.

Naruto followed him, "How do you think up these things?" Her tone was an odd mix of awe for Kakashi's masterful plan and sympathy for her teammate's plight.

The jōnin hummed noncommittally.

The blonde squinted at him suspiciously, "You made this up just right now, didn't you?"

Kakashi pulled out a book, which continued to keep him occupied as he let Naruto pick out the roof with the best vantage point and they settled in amidst the clamor and overwhelming noises of the market district on its busiest day of the week. Naruto set up a new seal she'd learned which completely hid the presence of their chakra as Kakashi supervised and made a few helpful suggestions on the design.

It took her a couple of tries to start 'catching' at Sasuke and Sakura with her chakra, but after the first successful 'catch,' she was able to do so a bit more quickly and forcefully each successive attempt. The good thing was, that at this early stage in the process, her attempts weren't strong enough to apparently register with Sakura and Sasuke as any type of separate physical sensation. They weren't feeling any 'nudge' that they could trace back to an individual person, just a bit more resistance from their muscles as they passed through Naruto's, at this time rather limited, range.

"I should probably feel a little guilty about this," the blonde chūnin finally admitted, taking a sip from her water bottle and watching Sakura and Sasuke huff and pant, putting twice as much effort as they tried to run past Naruto's building as they did on any other part of their route.

"Don't," Kakashi said dismissively, flipping a page in his book as he reclined behind the girl, head pillowed on a relaxed Akino. "Think about it this way: You help them train, they help you train. It is team training day after all, what is there to feel guilty about?"

Akino gave a low yap of agreement.

"It's good to do a little mischief every once in a while," said Pakkun from his spot in the girl's lap, enjoying the ministrations to the back of his neck, her gentle fingers rubbing smooth, firm circles.
Naruto snorted, "You're growing soft, Kakashi, letting me in on your pranks."

"Maybe I'm just joining in on yours," suggested the man, unusually talkative.

Naruto giggled, "Yosh!" she cried in agreement, fist pumping the air.

Kakashi paused in the midst of his reading, looking up at her from the novel, a dismayed expression visible despite the ever-present face mask.

Naruto scratched the back of her head, a bit sheepish, "too much?"

"Ah," the jōnin agreed, as Gai and Lee bellowed encouragements below them, unable to understand why Kakashi's students kept slowing down every time they passed the butcher shop.

Naruto settled down, enjoying the spring sunshine warming her back and a slight breeze which kept the direct sunlight from being too overbearing. She petted Pakkun with one hand, the other she still needed to 'direct' her chakra. She wasn't using a hand sign for the technique, perhaps that would have made it easier but she wasn't sure what symbols she should have used. When she used Kurama's chakra as an extension of herself, she only had to direct it with her mind. She couldn't quite make it work with only her mind when she was directing her own chakra, so using one hand was a happy medium. She reached out and clenched her fist and pulled as Sakura and Sasuke appeared around the corner once more.

Sakura tripped and was caught by Lee, who threw his arms around her chest to stop her from falling and got punched through a fence with a snarl for his troubles. Sasuke just grunted and kept running.

Naruto giggled and then paused, distracted by the curious sensation of being watched. She turned to catch Kakashi staring at her.

"What's wrong?" she asked, curiously.

Kakashi cleared his throat and turned his attention back to his book. "Nothing."

Naruto continued to watch him for a few moments, puzzled at the odd behavior, before returning her attention to her targets.

"You should work on making sure you can do that without the visible hand movements," the jōnin said calmly, sounding almost bored as he remained sprawled with Akino behind her.

Naruto grimaced. "I'm not sure how to do that."

"Well," said the copy ninja eventually, "I'm sure if you get stuck, Kurenai-san might have some insight on how to help you."

Naruto blinked at the strange tone of the man's words.

Pakkun grumbled from her lap, "Such puppies, every one of you."

"Wait," said Naruto, pigtails flying as she twisted around sharply to eye Kakashi, "Are you," she squinted at him, "are you upset that I've been working with Kurenai-sensei?"

"No," said Kakashi, too quickly, flipping a page in his book a tad too harshly.

"Yes you are!" cried Naruto, finger pointing at the man in accusation.

"No I'm not," he replied calmly, refusing to look at the girl.
Akino gave a whiny bark.

"Puppies," sighed Pakkun, loud enough that Kakashi finally turned his attention away from his book, if only to throw the dog a narrowed, one-eyed glare of warning.

"Huh," said Naruto, turning about to face the street again, "Whatever you say," she muttered, confused, not sure how to react to the idea that Kakashi might be upset that she'd been working with another teacher. Wait, Naruto thought, is he upset about the other teacher, or upset that I didn't tell him about the other teacher?

Does it matter, Kurama responded grudgingly, enjoying the afternoon sunshine on the rooftop and not appreciating being summoned from his leisurely sun-nap.

As Naruto continued to radiate a rather high level of bewilderment, the Kyūbi eventually elaborated, It's a male thing, dogs/foxes/humans, it seems it's tran-species—

Trans-what? asked Naruto, puzzled.

Shut up, brat, your Betters are speaking.

Stop speaking in a royal plural, Naruto gave a mental huff. Your tails don't count as separate entities, no matter how proud you are of them.

Do you want me to continue? Kyūbi hissed threateningly. I promise you, my afternoon nap is much more pleasant than watching you bumble haplessly through the human courtship process.

Courtship? Naruto's squeak was loud in her mind.

Kurama lectured on condescendingly, Yes, courtship. All those little insignificant steps that humans insist are necessary before they mate and spawn more of you awful tiny two-legged cowardly toothpicks—

How is this related to Kakashi and Kurenai, interrupted Naruto hastily, having experienced that particular diatribe far too often in her (albeit comparatively short) life.

Kyūbi snorted, Think of it like this. He affiliates with those obnoxious, furry things—

Naruto assumed from the amount of contempt dripping from the mention of "furry things," the Kyūbi meant dogs, as Kurama's description of cats typically began with a much longer and more colorful list of adjectives.

-so let's put it in the proper terminology. Dogs have packs. You and the pink thing and that one with the eyes, you three are part of his pack. The Kyūbi's eyes glittered in the darkness of Naruto's mindscape, tails twitching idly the only indication that the bijū found this all highly entertaining.

In his mind, at least, he is the Alpha of this pack. You are not. But you went and made an Alpha decision by going to get help from someone not-pack and not sharing your problem with him. It's going to ruffle his fur the wrong way, so to speak.

Alpha, Naruto thought, surprised. So what, he thinks he's the boss of me?

Until you correct that mistaken assumption.

That doesn't make sense, Naruto continued, trying to think about it logically, which was, admittedly, not her forte, Why doesn't he get upset when Sakura and Sasuke go off and make their own decisions
then?

Does he not? Came Kurama's all-confident reply, *Name me one time his two-legged pack has bucked his authority and he's taken it calmly, without saying anything about it.*

*Well, there was...*Naruto sat and thought, and thought some more. *Uhh, Tsunade taught Sakura! He didn't give permission for that! Same thing with Jiraiya.*

Kurama didn't budge, *Who is Alpha in that scenario, the dog-lover or your pitiful little leader?*

*Well, Naruto grudgingly agreed, They do outrank him and Kurenai-sensei doesn't.*

Yes, Kurama cooed, *in a pack it's all about hierarchy, and you are in the process of turning his well-established pack hierarchy on its head. It's probably breaking his poor, puny, pathetic mortal brain.*

"Oh, go hole up with a badger," snapped Naruto, unintentionally saying the words out loud.

She stood, abandoning her exercise, spinning about on her heels to face Kakashi, Pakkun tumbling from her lap ungracefully. The forgotten canine looked up at her balefully.

"And you," she fussed at the older man, "Really, you should know better. It's not like you've exactly been Mr. Open Book when it comes to 'let's talk about how we feel about our missions."

She sniffed, "sometimes girls just need advice from other girls, just deal with it, it's nothing for you to feel threatened or upset by, believe it."

Kakashi blinked up at her, stunned, not quite following what she was yelling about. He'd believed their earlier exchange finished due to her silence, and had gone back to reading about the adventures of the well-endowed Mina being shipwrecked on the Coral Islands. She was just about to get rescued by the pirates again, so Kakashi had been understandably preoccupied.

Now his blonde student was babbling away passionately about something or the other, with enough vehemence that both Pakkun and Akino had flattened themselves to the floor of the roof, ears pinned back, tails tucked, silent.

"Really," Naruto said, continuing her rant, "The first time I come to you about it and you are all, 'go ask Kiba,' like that's *any* help. I'm scarred for life from that, thanks. I don't think I'll ever be able to look Kiba or his mom in the face again, and if I *ever* hear her say she knows how to——"

It slowly dawned on Kakashi that Naruto was upset that he'd been *upset* about the situation with Kurenai. Unfortunately, it didn't seem like she'd drawn the correct conclusion as to *why* he was upset.

"Naruto!" Kakashi stood, voice cutting through the girl's irate rambling.

She paused, startled.

"That's not," Kakashi held up placating hands, "I wasn't *upset* because of that."

"Oh," said Naruto, eyes wide, voice small, "You're not?"

"No. " Kakashi said firmly.

Pakkun coughed, suspiciously sounding similar to 'liar,' but Kakashi ignored the dog.

"Then," asked Naruto, hesitant, "why'd your voice get all funny when you mentioned Kurenai-san
"Ahh," said Kakashi, backtracking a bit, _why had he said that earlier, quick man, think, and don't say because she's too young, you already know that's the wrong answer!_

The pug gave him a knowing look from where he'd scooted out of Naruto's line of sight, and consequently, the line of fire, peering around the chūnin's legs at the jōnin.

"I just," Kakashi cleared his throat, "I wished you'd told me about the mission first, that I hadn't had to hear about it from Kurenai."

Naruto shrunk a bit, _Really?_

"Yes," Kakashi felt himself nodding repeatedly, "Yes, I know I'm not the best person to help you, but I'd hoped you would have felt comfortable enough to discuss any mission with me."

"You mean," Naruto's voice grew very quiet and she seemed to shrink in on herself, "You were disappointed in me?"

_Uh-oh,_ Kakashi thought, visible eye twitching as he noted the tell-tale signs of tears beginning to gather in the corner of the jinchūriki's eyes. Pakkun was shaking his head rapidly back and forth from behind the girl, implying that Kakashi should stop whatever it was he was doing before it was too late.

"No!" Kakashi tried to sound calm and soothing, "Not disappointed in _you_! I just hoped my students trusted me enough to come to me with their problems. I was disappointed in myself for not inspiring that type of confidence in you."

Kakashi congratulated himself on some solid-sounding spur of the moment bullshit as Pakkun rolled his eyes.

"Oh, please," the dog muttered, which fortunately seemed to go unheard by the chūnin, who'd suddenly broken the _Personal Bubble Rules_ and thrown herself at the older man, wrapping her arms around him in a tight hug.

Kakashi was so thrown so off-balance by the entire situation that he didn't gather himself in time to successfully dodge the embrace. He could only wheeze a bit as the air was knocked out of him and pat the blonde on the head awkwardly as he tried to squirm from her grasp.

"Oh, but I do trust you, _I do!_" And Naruto was smiling up at him with that big happy smile that she only used when the people who were important to her did something unexpectedly nice and personal. Kakashi had no idea what he'd done to earn it this time, but he stopped trying to get away so hard and resigned himself to being squeezed tight once more (his ribs were going to be bruised after this—the girl _never_ learned her own strength) before Naruto released him. _I'll come to you next time, Believe it!_ She was all grins and thumbs up signs, bounding away from the roof, training forgotten in an emotional high.

Kakashi watched her go, waving absently, before sinking to the ground in a tired heap.

"What just happened?" asked Akino, still hugging the ground but ears beginning to perk back up to their original position.

Kakashi looked at them both. "Puppies," he said, voice a mix of confusion and fondness.

Pakkun snorted, scratching at his ear before pinning the copy ninja with a look. "No, Boss," said the
dog ruefully, "That's not a puppy thing. That's just," the dog shook his head with a mournful sigh, "women."

Kakashi shuddered a bit.

"I'm so confused," whined Akino.

"Me too," said Kakashi, commiserating with the dog, patting him on the head as Sakura and Sasuke ran by the building below for the 63rd time, relieved to discover a second wind and picking up their speed.

Chapter End Notes

Betas: CrystallineX and LadyWinterFic
Accommodating Changes

Chapter Summary

Kakashi doesn't know how to deal with this. No, really. It wasn't in the handbook.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"No way," wheezed Naruto, staring in shock at her landlady, who was barring the blonde's entrance to the upper floors of the apartment building and, subsequently, Naruto's home.

"What do ya' mean there's toxic mold in my apartment?" Naruto looked bewildered, "What the hell is toxic mold? What does this even mean?"

"It means you can't stay here for the next few weeks," scowled the overbearing woman testily, dressed in a fluffy pink robe with her hair done up in sponge rollers, obviously unhappy to be disturbed at ten o'clock at night.

Naruto couldn't help that she was out late doing her job, training because she was one of the ninja to whom this crazy woman owed her life.

The annoyed woman bent down to pick something up right inside her door frame, which turned out to be a large black duffel bag. She swung the bag at the blonde, who caught it as it hit her stomach with an "oof!"

Naruto looked at the bag in her arms uncomprehendingly.

"That nice lady-friend of yours came by and packed a bag for you since I couldn't find you after the health department visited."

"Nice lady-friend?" Naruto blinked, puzzled, trying to think of who her landlady might have gotten a hold of to pack Naruto a bag and who would still come across as a nice lady.

_Maybe it was Sakura_, she thought, still a bit doubtful, but before she could spend more time on the issue her landlady moved to close the door in the blonde's face.

"Wait!" Naruto reached forward to grab hold of the door knob, beginning an awkward tug-of-war between the two.

The civilian pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. "What," she said sharply.

Naruto stumbled through her words, "but where am I supposed to go? This has always been my home—"

The older woman sniffed, waving her hand dismissively, "I don't know, and I don't really care, but you can't stay here. The whole top three floors of the place are quarantined. Nobody's goin' in, nobody's comin' out."

Naruto turned and pointed at the entrance window to the lobby, "But its' pouring outside!" Indeed,
the night outside was unusually windy and dark, with cold rain aggressively rapping against the lobby windows. This was the only reason that the blonde had come home this early anyway, and not slipped through her own windows in the dim pre-dawn hours after exhausting herself on a training field.

The crabby woman rolled her eyes and pulled a cigarette out of the pocket of her bathrobe, lighting it and inhaling deeply, exhaling little smoke rings as she critically eyed the younger woman before her and examined her from head to toe. "Look," she said slowly, "You're a pretty little thing and I imagine that in your career you've picked up a few tricks and know a whole cart-load of athletic, lively young men."

Naruto's face scrunched in confusion.

The landlady brusquely tapped her cigarette against her doorframe, ash falling to the already dirty floor. "If you play your cards right, I imagine you'll have your choice of beds to choose from the next few weeks, if you get what I'm sayin'."

"No," said Naruto in dismay, letting go of the door to brush her bangs out of her face, "I don't get what you're say—"

Her words were cut off as the door slammed in her face.

Naruto gazed at the door a bit blankly for a few minutes, and then turned away, miserably clutching her duffel bag. She walked down the hall to the small lobby area, considering the stormy atmosphere outside.

Oh well, she thought wearily, might as well get on with it and go start seeing who'll let me crash at their place for a little while, Naruto looked out at the storm dully.

You really should have let me eat that one, came the fox's dark grumble.

Naruto ignored the Kyūbi, putting her hand on the door and taking a deep breath as she braced herself to head out into the storm.

I'm telling you, Kurama continued, back during the whole, my-eyes-are-better-than-yours bitch-fest, it would have taken five seconds. No one would have even noticed her missing.

Naruto appreciated the sentiment, and therefore didn't bicker with the testy creature about the propriety of eating one's proprietors.

She placed her hand on the door and pushed it open, making a mad dash to the nearest building with an awning.

"Ir-ru-ka-sen-sei!" Naruto chanted the name in time with her knocks on the academy teacher's door.

She'd been pounding on the door for a good two minutes, but it'd yet to be answered. Still, she didn't stop, probably more due to the desperate hysteria that was beginning to grow in her gut than the actual likelihood that the door would open.

She'd started out trying to go to Kurenai's house, but the lights in the woman's apartment were all off and no one had answered the door.
Then Naruto had headed to Sakura's, before remembering that Sakura still lived with her parents and Naruto never really knew what to say around her friends' parents so she was a bit shy of going and crashing on their couches for a week or so. And Ino was in the same situation as Sakura.

Naruto's teeth were beginning to chatter and she zipped her little jacket shut, not caring whether it stretched out like Ino warned her about. She pounded again on the door.

She'd tried going to the Hyūga compound to see Hinata-chan, but the main gates were closed because of the rain, and whoever had drawn the short straw to work the gatehouse was old, snobby, (possibly half-blind) and obviously never got the memo that the fox-brat was now considered socially acceptable company. Naruto was sure that Hinata would be mortified to realize the blonde had been turned away, but it didn't really help Naruto now as she scuttled about Konoha in the worsening storm, soaked to the bone and running out of doors on which to knock.

The loud crashes of thunder were setting her nerves on edge and making her jump at every shadow, and there were lots of shadows this late at night, when the sky was illuminated with a flash of lightning.

Kiba was out for obvious reasons.

The streets had been achingly empty, everyone warm and safe in their own homes. Naruto had felt quite alienated as she'd travelled the familiar routes, even though she knew all of the villagers were just inside the walls of the buildings she passed, happily chatting with their loved ones after dinner, or curling up to sleep in their own comfy beds.

She'd thought about going to Sai or Sasuke. Then she realized that she had absolutely no idea where the creepy boy lived and she blanched a bit at invading the Uchiha compound at this time of night. Who knew all the traps the Asshole had set up around the place. And a few of them were probably genjutsu, the Bastard. Not to mention that things had been a little shaky between the two of them since the whole 'bet' thing. And she still wasn't sure what her landlady had been implying, but she'd made it sound like going and asking the boys would be something wrong to do.

Maybe it was, it wasn't something Naruto had ever done before, or ever heard of Ino or Sakura or Hinata doing.

And then Naruto had started to go to the Hokage tower, to Tsuande, on the slim hope that she or Shizune might be working late. She had stopped with the academy a dozen yards away, overcome with the whole, "I'm a big girl and don't need the Hokage to fight my battles" issue.

Naruto continued to shiver and pound on the door. "Iruk—"

"Dammit, would you shut up, decent people are trying to sleep here!" Iruka's neighbor, another chūnin who taught at the Academy, but who'd never taught Naruto, was leaning out of the upstairs window from next door. He shielded his head with a newspaper from the rain and glared down at the girl.

"'M sorry," Naruto called up to him, trying to be heard over the heavy sound of water slamming against the concrete walls, "I'm just looking for Iruka!"

"He's not here," yelled the man, scowling, "He's out on a mission you dunce, go home!"

"But I-" the man slammed the window shut, ignoring Naruto's protests, and Naruto could see the curtains yanked closed in the next burst of lightening.

She drooped a bit, leaning forward to rest her head against Iruka's door, trying to flatten herself up
against the building to get a bit of a break from the rain.

Her apartment was the only home she'd ever known. It was supposed to be safe. It was always, always there. It had stood through every invasion that Konoha had ever had. Naruto didn't know what to do now that it was gone. Was she just supposed to go camp out somewhere? She'd camped out before in rough weather, but she didn't have her gear, it was all in her apartment, which she couldn't access.

And this was her home! She should be able to have some place to go to for an evening where she could take a warm shower and sleep under a roof without having to pay hotel prices (which weren't cheap in a village like this one). She shouldn't have to be alone in the storm and wet and cold and hungry and tired and sad and scared in Konoha, she shouldn't feel this way at all. She pushed back the tiny sob that tried to escape her throat. She wasn't a cry baby. This was just a really bad day. That's all. Nothing to cry about.

Naruto drew herself upright. She still had one option she'd yet to try and he had told her, just the other day…

She drew a shaky breath, swung her bag back onto her shoulder and dove back out into the rain, sprinting toward her destination. Oh please, Oh please, let me in!

It was slightly before midnight and Kakashi was brushing his teeth in his bathroom when he was interrupted by a loud banging sound coming from his front door. Kakashi paused and turned, hesitating. Eventually, he shook his head and went back to brushing his teeth. He couldn't sense a chakra flare, so it wasn't someone coming to alert him about a mission, but he couldn't smell who it was either with the storm going so strong outside. Whoever it was probably had the wrong door; they'd realize this and move on in a minute, Kakashi reassured himself as he continued to brush his teeth.

However, the banging didn't stop, and, as Kakashi continued with his ablutions, the knocking only grew louder until finally Kakashi could make out words being yelled through the wooden door, "Kakashi, I know you're in there, open up!"

Recognizing the voice, Kakashi pulled on his mask and the dark, long sleeve shirt he'd just taken off and tossed in his laundry hamper. He emerged from the bathroom, tucking his shirt into his pants out of habit as he crossed the living room area to the front door, hoping to reach it before this particular visitor decided to kick it in and enter anyway.

The banging continued.

"Ka. Ka. Shi—" the syllables enunciated each bang, but the girls' words were cut short as the door opened and she abruptly found herself facing the very person for whom she was yelling.

Naruto paused, arm raised, fist about to knock on the door again. She blinked up at the jōnin.

"Maa, Naruto," said Kakashi, "what's the problem?"

Naruto continued to blink up at him. Her clothes were soaked, so sodden that the rain just ran off in tiny rivulets instead of being absorbed by the material. She shivered, probably suffering a chill from being stuck out in the storm so long. The blonde clutched a well-abused, wet, stuffed duffel bag with her free hand, hair plastered to her scalp.

Overall she looked like a very miserable, pathetic, drowned kitten.
She sneezed.

Which was not cute. At all. Not one bit.

Kakashi flinched, but held firm, however sorely tempted he was to slam the door shut and pretend this was not happening.

He cleared his throat, "Naruto?" he prompted again.

Naruto snapped out whatever trance she'd been stuck in, "Kakashi," she sniffed.

She hiccupped, and tried to begin again, eyes growing large and watery.

Kakashi held himself very still, his own visible gray eye wide open, and he tried not to breath. He wasn't sure what would push her over the edge and didn't fancy being the catalyst for the torrent of tears it looked like she was trying to hold back.

"My landlady," she sniffled, and apparently that word was what allowed her to talk because the rest came flooding out, "Says that there is mold inside my apartment and I can't go back for weeks and that I have to find someplace to stay and Iruka's out of town and Kurenai won't answer her door and Ino and Sakura live with their parents and nobody will let me in the Hyūga compound to see Hinata and I don't know where Tenten or Tsunade or Shizune actually live and I don't need the Hokage anymore to bully my landlords into behaving 'cuz I'm not five and I can't go to Kiba's because of you and I don't know where to go but my landlady says I can't go home and that I should have plenty of beds to choose from because I'm pretty and have tricks and I don't know what that means except now I really don't want to go and ask to sleep with Sai or Bastard," she finally stopped, gasping for air, and then she wailed.

The tears came on, big and thick and not stopping and while it was impressive that she'd managed all of that in one breath, Kakashi's brain may have shorted out because—had her landlady suggested that Naruto prostitute herself for a place to sleep and maybe he should think of that later because there was a hysterically crying teenager on his doorstep who wouldn't stop and any minute now that nosy chūnin with the too-big glasses from 36C was going to poke her head out and this would be all over the administration building the next morning—

Kakashi tugged the shivering, dripping, crying girl inside, closing the door. He almost pushed her to sit down on the couch but grabbed her shoulders and kept her standing at the last minute, thinking better of the idea and going to retrieve some old towels to line his couch before pushing the girl to sit. Naruto continued to cry, eyes scrunched tight, small frame shaking from the cold and she wasn't stopping.

Kakashi nervously skittered backward, feeling useless and mentally deciding on the best and slowest way to kill whoever had the bright idea to send Iruka out on a mission this week because that was kind of their unofficial deal; Kakashi made sure that Naruto learned enough to keep herself alive and didn't kill herself during training and Iruka dealt with shit like this which everyone completely agreed that Kakashi wasn't qualified to handle.

Kakashi backed into the kitchen area and bit his thumb. Pakkun appeared on the countertop in a small burst of smoke.

The pug took one look at the situation and snorted, "I don't think so, you're on your own for this one."

Kakashi grabbed the summons by its vest to keep the dog from vanishing, visible eye twitching,
"What. Do. I. Do.," hissed Kakashi softly at the creature, throwing fretful glances toward the girl on the couch who was still sobbing.

Pakkun leveled an unimpressed look at Kakashi, from where he was hanging in the air as Kakashi clutched tightly at the scruff of his neck. "Well," drawled the pug, "Seems to me like she's cold and tired and wet and probably hungry. Go fix it."

Kakashi nodded, still a bit shaky, setting the dog back on the countertop before visibly collecting himself and returning to the girl on the couch.

"Ah, Naruto," said Kakashi, gently, awkwardly reaching forward to pat her on the shoulder before retreating just as quickly.

Her sobs quieted a bit, but tears continued to stream down her face and she hiccupped irregularly.

"Why don't you," Kakashi cleared his throat, "why don't you go take a shower, get warmed up and dried off, ok? You can," he hesitated before bravely offering, "You can stay here on my couch tonight, all right? Its old, but it's comfortable, and it's one of those ones that will pull out into a bed, ok?"

Naruto sniffled, wiping at her eyes with the sleeves of her jacket and nodding her head wearily, all the energy seeming to just drain out of her. She took the hand that Kakashi offered to pull her up from the couch, and let the man gently usher her in the direction of the bathroom. She shrugged out of her jacket as she plodded into the room, ignoring Kakashi's stuttering protests about something or another.

Kakashi firmly shut the door behind the girl once she was fully in the bathroom, catching a glimpse of skin as the girl began to undress by pulling her tank top overhead, apparently too tired to care whether Kakashi was watching or not. He took a deep breath and hit his head lightly against the wall a few times, before turning around to endure the amusement of the pug still sitting on his kitchen countertops.

"I told you," said Pakkun smugly, "Not a puppy."

"Not helpful," declared Kakashi with a baleful glare. "And weren't you leaving?"

"I changed my mind," said the Pug, hopping down from the counter and heading over to the couch, where Kakashi was pulling out the cushions so that it would fold out into a bed. "This is going to be far more entertaining than anything that happens back home tonight."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Kakashi said in a clipped tone as he crossed the apartment to the single bedroom, rummaging through a cupboard and returning with a pile of spare blankets that he only ever used during the winter time. He arranged them carefully on the bed, eyeing the pug as the dog jumped on top of the covers once he was done.

Kakashi looked at the creature, confused, "Are you staying the night now?"

The pug stretched across the blankets, digging at the material a bit with his claws. "Of course," said the pug with a yawn, "You may not appreciate a pretty bitch in your bed, but I do."

Kakashi's eye twitched and he reached forward to cuff the dog off the bed, but before his hand made contact, his actions were halted by Naruto's voice calling for him from the bathroom.

"Yes," Kakashi answered in trepidation.
"Could you bring me some nightclothes from my bag?" Naruto's voice sounded muffled through the door, but at least she was sounding a bit more alert. "I forgot to bring something to change into in here."

"One moment," Kakashi called back, turning around to look for the duffel bag he'd seen Naruto carrying earlier.

Pakkun drug it out by the straps from under the sofa-bed. "Here it is," he said from around the woven handles.

Kakashi grunted his thanks and hauled it up to the table, zipping it open mindlessly, ready to pull out one of the overly-large t-shirts and pant sets he was used to seeing Naruto sleep in on overnight missions when they had the luxury of sleeping in guest quarters and not camping. Instead, his hand came out with some flimsy lacy thing and it took a couple of seconds for his brain to identify what it was he was seeing. When it finally did, he dropped the offending garment as if burned, and snatched his hand back, cheeks hot underneath his mask as he gazed with a wide open eye at the far wall.

"What was that," asked Pakkun curiously, vision blocked by Kakashi's back from where the dog was sprawled across the sofa-bed.

Kakashi made an inarticulate noise and stiffly carried the bag back to the living room, where he dropped it on the floor and unceremoniously shoved it back under the sofa-bed with a firm kick of his foot.

"Kakashi," the pug asked, confused, "What's wrong?"

Kakashi didn't respond and instead disappeared into his room, appearing with one of his own spare night shirts. The garment was a little loose on Kakashi, which meant that it would dwarf Naruto, but it would be better than that, that—*thing* that Kakashi refused to think about which he'd found in her luggage. She might not be a puppy, but she still wasn't old enough to be wearing *that*, and now he was never going to be able to erase the image from his mind. *Ever.*

He rapped his knuckles gently on the bathroom door and it opened a crack, Naruto peering out, obviously wrapped up in his towels. He thrust the shirt at her, "Here."

"Eh," Naruto looked confused, door opening a bit wider as she reached for the garment, "What's this?"

"All your clothes were wet from the rain," Kakashi found himself saying, studiously looking anywhere but at the pretty girl dripping wet in his bathroom, steam curling around her as she was wrapped up tightly in his large fluffy towels.

She frowned, biting her lip, and then shrugged. "Ok, thanks. I'll probably have to go get some more tomorrow anyway," she said with a sigh, "I think Sakura packed that bag, so there's no telling what's in it."

She shut the door and Kakashi took a step back, mind gratefully and hopefully latching onto the idea that the lacy *thing* had been some kind of prank of Sakura's and wasn't something that Naruto habitually wore to bed nowadays. Because—well, just *because.*

Kakashi sat on the sofa-bed, head sinking into his hands with a tired groan.

Pakkun looked at the man unsympathetically. "You're doing this to yourself."

Kakashi ignored the dog.
"You know, I bet if I ask, she'll rub my belly all night long—" the dog yelped in surprise as he found himself swatted off the bed with a strong sweep of a pillow, Kakashi stalking to his bedroom and slamming the door shut behind him.

Naruto timidly emerged from the bathroom, at first relaxing when she saw no sign of Kakashi, and then stretching out her senses for him, concerned, and confused when she realized that the man had sequestered himself in his bedroom.

She felt a bit exposed in the large shirt, which hit her mid-thigh, right where Ino said it should, part of her recalled a bit snarky and bitter. The air was chilly against her bare legs and she crossed her arms over her chest to conserve warmth.

"Don't mind him," came a gravelly voice, causing Naruto to start before she realized it was just Pakkun, sitting on the sofa-bed. She padded over and sat down beside him, reaching out to rub behind his ears in the way she knew that he liked.

The dog sighed, melting a bit into her touch, "He's just in a funny mood. He'll get over himself eventually."

Naruto smiled a bit weakly.

"Tough night," asked the dog, cold nose pushing against her fingers.

"Yeah," she said shakily, "Sorry for kind of falling apart on both of you."

"It's ok," said the pug, rolling over to get his belly scratched, wiggling pink little paws in the air. "He doesn't really mind, it just scares him you know? He doesn't like seeing pack upset that way."

"Oh?" asked Naruto, curious, "I'm pack?"

"Ooohhh, that's the spot," moaned the dog, in a tone of voice that would have been indecent coming from a person.

Naruto grinned a bit, "I think I'm hungry, is there any food around here?"

Pakkun, sighed mournfully, "You're gonna stop petting me 'til you get fed, aren't you?" He rolled back onto his stomach. "You can always make a sandwich in the kitchen, but he doesn't keep a lot of food here."

Naruto rose and walked past the table to the refrigerator, Pakkun hopping down from the bed and trotting at her heels.

She looked at the dog, "Ham or turkey."

Pakkun cocked his head, considering the options. "Turkey," he said after a few minutes.

Naruto smiled and pulled out the meat. She found a loaf of bread in a breadbox and some cutlery in a drawer to the right of the sink at Pakkun's direction.

Once done, she set aside a few slices of turkey on a plate for Pakkun and they ate together at the table in a companionable quiet, Pakkun delicately nibbling on the deli meat in front of him.

Naruto took a sip from her glass of milk, feeling much calmer than she'd been merely an hour earlier. "So what's this about me bein' pack," she asked the pug again.

"Pack is family," shrugged the pug, "you protect pack, and you don't let non-pack hurt pack," he
explained in a matter-of-fact tone.

"You know," continued Naruto softly, in between bites of her sandwich, "the Fox said somethin' 'bout that the other day too, that I'm part of Kakashi's pack and like, his little sister or something."

"Huh," said Pakkun. "Don't put too much stock into what that thing says, foxes hate us, we hunt them."

"But," Naruto said, wrapping her arms about herself as Pakkun finished the last of his meal, licking at his paws, "It kind of made sense, that Kakashi sees me as a little sister, someone he's supposed to be the boss of?"

Pakkun watched the girl as she cleared away the dishes, washing them, drying them, and placing them back in the exact spots from which she'd removed them.

"Well, it's a funny thing about pack," the dog explained, happy to be scooped up and carried to bed despite being perfectly capable of caring for himself. "Pack is always changing," Pakkun snuggled into the covers, digging himself a little burrow in the blankets next to Naruto's warmth. "Nobody's static you know, everybody grows and changes," he growled appreciatively as Naruto gently stroked him behind his ears, "everybody needs different things at different times in their lives. So," said the dog, drifting off a bit, "Once you're pack, you're always pack, but your place in the pack can change. And we're flexible, we can have more than one leader" The dog gave her hand a lick. "That's not a bad thing."

Naruto yawned, curling up on her side, one hand growing more and more still as it petted Pakkun distractedly, the other curled into her pillow, clutching it tightly.

"Smells nice," she mumbled sleepily, burying her face into the fluffy thing, drifting off to sleep.

"Smells like 'Kashi," yawned Pakkun, "smells safe."

"Oh," Naruto sighed, not really awake anymore, letting her thoughts still and giving into the emotional toll of the past few hours, "that's it."

Kakashi didn't sleep that night. He sat in his bedroom, his back to the door, listening to the deep, even sounds of breathing coming from the living room. He tried to drift off as he counted them, but it just wasn't working.

This shouldn't be that big of a deal, he thought, head resting on his knees. He'd spent many nights camping out before next to others, even a few uncomfortable missions where he'd had no choice but to spend the night literally plastered to his teammates to conserve body warmth and try to prevent frostbite from setting in.

Somehow, though, this was different. This was his home, and now there was somebody in it, right on the other side of the door. This was his safe place, where he took all of the masks off because nobody was there to care or see. Except, now, somebody was here. And Pakkun was right. Kakashi had caught bits and pieces of their conversation through the door of his bedroom. Not all of it, their voices had grown too soft from sleep for him to catch the tail of the conversation, but he'd caught the important bits.

Pakkun was right. Naruto was pack.
So it shouldn't really matter. This *shouldn't* be that big of a deal. It should be like it was when Guruko and Akino and Bull and all the boys were milling about in the kitchen. It should be just like she was another one of the boys. A younger sibling.

But it wasn't.

It *wasn't*.

And Kakashi could only sit there in the dark, drawn tight and as focused as he would be right before slicing a kunai across a man's jugular, counting the breaths of the woman in the other room, *waiting* for them to stop, for something to go wrong, for it all to end.

It wasn't right. Something was wrong and he didn't know what. Because Naruto was *still* pack, but it *wasn't* the same and Kakashi didn't know what that *meant*.

Something was *wrong*.

Kakashi let out a frustrated breath, running a hand through his hair.

He'd go talk to Kurenai tomorrow.

Naruto couldn't stay here.

Kurenai would see that.

Kurenai would help.

In the morning, at what was a mostly reasonable hour, Kakashi gently opened his bedroom door and crept quietly into the kitchen, careful not to wake his company and studiously looking everywhere but the blonde sprawled inelegantly across his sofa-bed, covers kicked to the floor during the night, her borrowed shirt riding a bit indecently high on her hips.

Kakashi did not look at her at all, choosing instead to pull out the bacon and eggs he kept for the rare times he was actually home and awake for a morning meal, starting up the coffee machine that was used on even fewer occasions. Pakkun roused not long after, the smell of food making him curious and sending him padding into the kitchen.

Kakashi gave him a look, "You're not even that hungry, I know you had turkey last night."

His words were soft and the dog shrugged them off, "Only taking my dues," retorted the pug, "it's not like *you* were any help yesterday."

A sharp retort died on Kakashi's lips as a low moan alerted both dog and man that their visitor was awake. Naruto sat up on the sofa-bed, looking a bit dazed and disoriented, hair a fuzzy golden halo around her head. Her face was flushed from all the crying she'd done the day before, blue eyes dark and sluggish.

It wasn't attractive. Really, it wasn't, thought Kakashi a bit desperately, turning to glare at the bacon, poking it a bit violently.

"Geeze," said Pakkun, from where he'd clambered onto a kitchen chair and then the top of the table to get a better view of things. "What'd that bacon ever do to you?"

Kakashi cleared his throat, "Good morning, Naruto."
Naruto gave an unfeminine grunt, and threw her arms over the back of the couch, watching Kakashi cook with a languid expression.

Kakashi looked back at her briefly and regretted it, turning around quickly, not having taken into account how wide the collar of his shirt would be on her and getting an *interesting* view to say the least.

Kakashi's eyes twitched a bit and he took a deep breath. It really wasn't Naruto's fault after all, it wasn't like she was trying to look adorable or cute or, even, Kakashi admitted very, very reluctantly to himself, *sexy* this morning. After all, Kakashi thought a bit hysterically, if she was actually trying all she would have to do is change into what was in her luggage.

"I made breakfast," he said briskly, using a spatula to scrape the bacon and eggs onto a plate, pouring a cup of coffee and setting the table for one.

Naruto frowned, attention perking up a bit, "You're not staying?"

"Oh, no," Kakashi said, running his hands under the water in the sink and letting the skillet soak a bit. "Places to do, things to see, you know the drill."

He turned around to leave and started, Naruto had walked into the kitchen, and was now only a few feet in front of him, arms crossed and pouting cutely in his nightshirt, looking for all the world like she was about to let loose a tantrum reminiscent of her mother's when Minato couldn't stay for breakfast in the mornings.

"Bye," Kakashi said with a wave, eye smiling as he used a shunshin to flee.

Naruto squawked in surprise, stumbling a step or two backwards, turning her glare on Pakkun.

"He's so rude," she complained.

"I know," nodded the pug, sagely, "His momma' didn't teach him no manners."

"Let me see if I understand this," Kurenai said slowly, considering the copy ninja as he sat on her couch, twitching occasionally, which was more anxiety than Kurenai had ever seen the man express before in his life.

"Naruto has been kicked out of her apartment for a bit and needs a place to stay—," stated Kurenai as Kakashi nodded along impatiently.

"—And she can't stay at your place because your *ninjen* are inappropriately fond of her," the woman concluded, her sarcastic tone completely going over the other shinobi's head.

"Yes," said Kakashi, sighing in relief, "that's exactly it."

Kurenai rubbed at her temple with her fingers. "Kakashi," drawled the kunoichi, "that is the *stupidest* excuse I've ever heard you give! And I've heard you give a lot of stupid excuses over the years," the genjutsu expert scolded.

Kakashi wilted a bit. "But it's true," claimed the copy ninja, "If she stays with me, they'll get all out shape, lazy. She'll spoil them rotten and they'll be useless on missions. They'll lose their edge."

"Kakashi," Kurenai said, eyes narrowed and voice lowering. "I've known you for a very, very long
time. And considering that many of our friends are no longer alive, and that Gai has the emotional perception of a blunt kunai, I'd like to say that I am one of the people who know you best at the moment." She turned her deep red eyes to the man sulking on her sofa, "Would you like to know what I think?"

Her companion didn't contradict her, choosing to remain silent and seated, fingers clasped tight and head ducked.

Kurenai took this as permission to continue. "I think that what you just told me is mostly bullshit."

Kakash flinched a bit and Kurenai took the seat opposite to him, where she could keep an eye on Matsu-chan, playing with cereal at the table.

"Do you know why I say it's mostly bullshit?" Kurenai asked, voice low.

Kakashi continued to sit in silence.

"I think that it's mostly bullshit," Kurenai explained, "because I think that what you're saying actually applies to you, not your ninken. You don't want Naruto there because you're too attached to Naruto and you'll afraid that you'll get soft and lose your edge. Does that ring a bell, Kakashi?"

A dark eye glared out at her from beneath silver bangs, but she wasn't feeling any hair rise on the back of her neck or any killing intent leaking from the other party, so she imagined that this was a realization that Kakashi had already made on his own.

"It's ok, you know," said Kurenai gently.

Kakashi's brow furrowed, confused.

Kurenai smiled a bit, "Its ok to like Naruto, to like her, romantically, not just a general like as in, 'Oh yes, she's a likeable person'."

Kakashi looked pale.

"What do you think is going to go wrong, Kakashi?" Kurenai asked, probing for the real reason behind his reluctance and grief. "She's a ninja, she can protect herself." Kurenai frowned thoughtfully, adding "And she's a grown woman who can make—"

"She's fourteen years younger than I am," Kakashi bit out, cutting the woman off. "She should have," Kakashi looked away, irritated. "Her father was my Sensei, her mother used to cook," the man stopped sharing as quickly as he started. He put his head in his hands, "She was supposed to be my sister."

Well, thought Kurenai, and isn't that a crap load of guilt I hear?

Kurenai considered the man before her critically. The question was, how did one push a man—someone who'd lost so much that he'd had to emotionally lock himself down to survive— into risking a new relationship? Kurenai started reviewing the events that had occurred so far and was surprised to realize that for Kakashi to react this way, he'd already let the girl in farther than Kurenai would have thought possible, and probably farther than Kakashi himself realized.

Kurenai knew she had to proceed carefully, Kakashi was balancing dangerously on the edge of precipice, and Kurenai didn't know what would be the strong breeze that blew him in one direction or another. A relationship with Naruto could be the best thing to ever happen to him, if he allowed it. Or, he could completely shut down and shut the girl out, which would break both his and the girl's
heart. He would hide it well and Naruto was young and would recover with time. But it would leave wounds. And Kakashi would never, ever let someone in again after this.

Kurenai didn't want that kind of life for her friend.

She didn't want those kinds of wounds for either of them.

But, Kakashi didn't react well to emotional sensitivity. He was never one to crave hugs and platitudes, or even kind words. So, Kurenai scowled, and fed the man some of his beloved, tough-love logic. "She's not your sister Kakashi. Life didn't work out that way. Deal with it." Kurenai stood and walked over to Matsu, bending down to pick up cereal off the floor, avoiding looking at Kakashi, not sure she could bear it if she turned around and saw his heart on his face and breaking instead of carefully tucked away as usual.

"I don't know what this is Kakashi. It's ok for you to like someone. It's ok for you to like her."

Kurenai ignored the small wounded sound coming from the grown man on her couch which pulled painfully at her heartstrings.

"But I won't be a party to this, whatever this is—you're just," she paused, searching for words, "you're hiding away from your own emotions like a scared little boy." Kurenai swallowed and shook her head. "I'll be here to help when you man up, but you need to own up to the fact that you're attracted to her, that it's not wrong, and that she might reciprocate that attraction. You're a good man, Kakashi, and you are both adults—"

She felt Kakashi's chakra flutter and vanish, he'd obviously listened to her for as long as he could take. He'd handled enough challenges to the foundations of his worldview for the day and had fled to take stock of the damage and rebuild.

Kurenai took a deep breath and blinked back a few tears, smiling widely at Matsu-chan who cooed up at her curiously. She clenched the sippy cup she'd picked up off the floor tightly, nails biting into the plastic. She could only hope that the man would take the time to listen to her words, wrestle with them, and come to understand them. She could only hope that she hadn't chased away one of the few friends that she had left.

Chapter End Notes

Betas: CrystallineX and Ladywinterfic
When the Bough Breaks

Chapter Summary

Kakashi's kitchen becomes a casualty of war.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"And you haven't seen him since," asked Kurenai, her puzzled voice echoing oddly as she stuck her head inside a kitchen cupboard. The jōnin was searching for various cooking utensils and ingredients, pulling a strange assortment of pans and bowls from the deep recesses of her culinary workshop and piling them on top of the stove haphazardly. Matsu sat impatiently on the countertops, banging metal pots together noisily.

"No, not anywhere," huffed Naruto, arms crossed as she leaned back against the pantry door.

"Here, measure out four cups of this for me, please," Kurenai thrust a sack of flour and a large measuring cup toward the surprised blonde. Naruto squawked as she hurriedly untangled her arms and struggled to juggle the unfamiliar objects.

Naruto regarded the items skeptically, not sure what was meant by the phrase 'measure out.' She set the sack of flour down on the counter and opened it gingerly, peering into its' contents suspiciously as Kurenai continued to bustle about, gathering the rest of the materials to bake a batch of home-made cookies for Gai.

Naruto originally had come to complain about Kakashi and seek advice on how to proceed, but Kurenai had seized the serendipitous moment and drafted the younger girl to help with Kurenai's good deed of the week.

Naruto was surprised to discover that Kurenai considered Gai to be a close friend, but decided she wasn't in a position to judge when the older woman likened the relationship to those that Naruto had with Sai and Lee.

Matsu, evidently, was used to such behavior from Kurenai and cheered noisily on the countertop, watching the activity with bright, eager eyes. Matsu liked baking time because Matsu got to lick the bowl, and was generally well behaved for the duration of the prep time in anticipation of such a treat.

Naruto didn't understand why getting to 'lick the bowl' was so exciting as she'd never baked anything before (successfully), but she just nodded knowingly along with Kurenai, smiling her 'oh that's so cute smile,' because it seemed to be what the older woman expected.

In reality, the blonde was more than a little agitated and distracted by the whole 'Kakashi' situation. The chūnin had tried to make several trips back to her own apartment, only to be met each time by an increasingly irritated landlady, and, on one memorable occasion, a rather fussy health inspector.

Naruto didn't even know that Konoha had health inspectors.

It must have been one of Granny's reform efforts. Poor little old health inspector man with the odd nervous facial tics. Living in a ninja village must drive the guy batty. He was certainly eccentric. He
was disturbingly well informed and had developed an arsenal of creative threats to keep Konoha's professional population in line. Naruto doubted it was possible for him to make good on those threats, but as she'd rather not be the impetus for a surprise inspection of every ramen stand in Konoha, she hesitated to test the inspector's resolve.

She glanced over her shoulder to see if Kurenai was paying attention. Noting that the woman was preoccupied with some eggs, Naruto turned back to study her own assignment. She picked up the plastic measuring glass. Squinting, she could make out that the small etchings on its' side indicated that it could hold up to '2 cups.' Naruto bit her lip and tapped her fingers nervously against the plastic sides. Hopefully what Kurenai wanted her to do was just fill it up twice.

"So, have you looked for him," Kurenai asked in a matter-of-fact tone as she cracked some eggs open on the rim of one of the larger bowls with experienced hands.

"Yeah," said Naruto, hefting up the bag of flour, "No luck."

Naruto had been fortunate that Kakashi had been willing to let her stay at his apartment for the duration of the mold mess. However, ever since Naruto had started staying at the man's apartment, Kakashi had stopped staying at the apartment. She'd seen neither hide nor hair of the man since the breakfast where he'd so rudely abandoned her. Kurama occasionally borrowed her nose and reassured her that Kakashi was stopping by the place when Naruto was out, presumably to bathe and change and munch on what little food was in his refrigerator.

Pakkun had disappeared after that fateful breakfast as well, and hadn't returned, so she didn't have the pug's helpful insight into what the man was doing or why he was doing it.

She hadn't really worried about it until a couple of days had passed and Kakashi had neither shown up to the scheduled team practice time nor could he be found in any of his usual haunts. Naruto had even caved and gone to ask Gai if he'd seen the silver haired jōnin. She explained that Kakashi was supposed to be tutoring her in sealing but had missed some of their scheduled lessons completely. Gai had frowned, but offered no clues as to the whereabouts of his eternal rival. Naruto got the feeling that the taijutsu expert knew exactly where the other man was and just wasn't telling.

Matsu scooted closer to Naruto on the countertop, peering into Naruto's empty bowl with interest. Naruto tilted the bag toward the measuring cup and frowned when the substance stuck to the bag and nothing poured into the bowl. She snuck another glance at Kurenai, who looked deep in thought as she measured out some similar looking white stuff into a different bowl.

Matsu squealed and Naruto offered the kid a weak smile. Maybe Naruto just needed to be a little more forceful. She took a deep breath and tipped the bag toward the measuring cup once more, shaking it roughly—

And promptly started choking as all the flour flew out of it in one big rush, the stuff seeming to *poof,* billowing up into the air in a large cloud and covering *everything.*

Naruto blinked watery eyes rapidly and coughed as Matsu laughed, clapping hands together and demanding, "Again! Again!"

"Oh!" Kurenai exclaimed from the other side of the kitchen, hand covering her mouth, eyes wide, "Naruto, what happened?"

Naruto looked at the jūnin miserably, "I'm so sorry, it just all came out at once!"

Kurenai choked down a 'that's what he said' joke which would have been entirely appropriate in
front of Anko, but would only have served to make Naruto more miserable. She hid a smile behind her hand and coughed politely, disguising her laughter. "Flour does that sometimes, you have to be careful with it." She grabbed some sponges and handed Naruto a damp dish rag so she could clean off her face.

"Its' a very light substance," continued Kurenai, "it tends to fly up if you don't pour it gently."

"Now you tell me," muttered Naruto as she wiped the substance off her face. "Ugghh, it's not coming off!"

Kurenai laughed, "Be patient, it clumps when it's wet, but it will come off, I promise."

Naruto sighed, heading over to the sink to finish cleaning herself off as the jōnin tackled her toddler and the counters. "So you don't have any ideas as to where he's gone?"

"No," Kurenai said a touch too lightly, "I have no idea what could have happened to him. Have you tried asking the Hokage if he's out on a mission?"

Naruto rubbed at her eyes with some paper towels, squinting at the woman from her own position at the sink. "No, should I?"

"It might help to keep Tsunade in the loop on certain things," was all the jōnin said.

Naruto waited for Kurenai to expound upon her comment, but no such elaboration was forthcoming.

Naruto snorted, she tried to get the flour out of her hair but quickly abandoned her efforts as a lost cause, resigning herself to go home and shower. "Maybe it's just better if I try and find somewhere else to stay. Maybe I'm just," Naruto waved a dirty dish rag in the air absently, "I dunno, maybe I'm pushing him a bit too much."

"No!" Kurenai said, with a little too much force, picking up Matsu and putting the child into the empty sink, letting the water run over the toddler and wash away all the flour.

Kurenai rubbed at her offspring's filthy hands with a sponge. "No, Naruto. You need to take advantage of this opportunity. You're never going to get anywhere if you don't push occasionally."

She rinsed the sponge and wrung it out before wiping down Matsu's legs.

Naruto rubbed at her eyes, blinking as her tear ducts activated in an attempt to clear her eyes of the foreign substance clouding her sight. "I feel so rude, intruding this much."

"Well," Kurenai said logically, "You have a perfectly reasonable explanation for needing him to play temporary host, so I wouldn't worry about it too much." She turned off the faucet and twisted her hands, shaking off fat droplets of water. "Watch Matsu-chan for a minute, please?"

Kurenai left the room without waiting for an answer and Naruto paled a bit, before realizing that the Potential Disaster was well-contained by the sink for the thirty seconds it took Kurenai to return to the room with some towels.

The woman handed one to Naruto and used the other to wrap up Matsu as she retrieved her giddy toddler from the sink. "Take a seat, Naruto," directed Kurenai, guiding the girl toward the table a few feet from the kitchen in front of the windows. "Hang on to Matsu while I finish the cookie dough," said the woman kindly, before unloading her child into the reluctant arms of the younger woman.

"Er—" mumbled Naruto, beginning to object.
Kurenai waved her hand dismissively at the beginnings of the protests about to tumble from the girl's mouth. "There are some blocks on the floor in the living room if Matsu starts to get fidgety."

"Ok," said Naruto, smiling hesitantly at the toddler. Naruto liked kids, but she rarely was around them when they were this little. Naruto knew that they came even littler of course, but she hadn't gotten to play with any younger than Academy age. Kakashi's genin team mysteriously missed out on what should have been their allotment of babysitting D-rank missions. Naruto had a sneaking suspicion that her sensei had just traded them away for that damn cat-catching mission, just because he thought it a more entertaining one to oversee. But maybe it was Iruka-sensei intervening for the greater good, trying to prevent the inevitable eventualty of Team 7 trotting around toddlers on leashes across Konoha. At least Tora-chan could fight back.

Unfortunately, while Team 7's lack of childcare D ranks saved the Sandaime some headaches, it also meant that Naruto didn't know quite what to do with the kid currently curled up in her lap. However, Matsu seemed content to be held, watching Kurenai from Naruto's arms as the older woman confidently moved about the kitchen and efficiently finished mixing up the rest of the dough and salvaging her project.

"You know," said the jōnin as she mixed in pieces of chocolate with the batter, "If you really feel like you're intruding, why don't you do some little things to help out?"

"Help out?" Asked the blonde curiously, eager to find some way to make Kakashi comfortable again in his home. "How?"

"Just keep an eye out for things that need to be done and then go ahead and do them," said Kurenai with a shrug. "Think about the things that you'd normally do in your own apartment, like taking out the trash, doing the dishes or a load of laundry."

Matsu squirmed a bit in Naruto's arms as Kurenai approached them with two spoons, the one she'd been using to stir the batter and another she'd just dipped into the batter and removed. The reason for doing so became clear as she turned over one spoon to Matsu's grabby hands and offered the other to Naruto.

Naruto took it timidly, but appreciatively as the older woman smiled softly at her. Following Matsu's lead, she stuck it in her mouth.

"Hey," said the blonde, "this tastes really good!"

Kurenai just smiled wider and laughed a bit. "Cookies are easy to make once you know the recipe, and most people like homemade sweets. Actually, cooking isn't that hard to do. I can't recall if Kakashi likes sweets, but why don't you try your hand at making him a meal some time? I'm sure he'll appreciate it."

Naruto nodded thoughtfully, sucking on the spoon in her mouth.

"Well," Kurenai amended her answer as she picked up Matsu and repositioned herself in the chair next to Naruto's, "I'm sure he'll appreciate it once you find him and get him to come back to his apartment, anyway."

Kakashi sneezed a bit and rubbed at his nose, wondering if he was coming down with a cold. He hoped not, he hated not being in top condition. And getting a head cold was the worst because he couldn't always think straight when his head was stuffy. However, it wouldn't be a surprising turn of events after he'd spent that last couple of nights sleeping in trees in various training grounds.
"As your oldest and most intelligent summons," muttered Pakkun from beside him, "I feel that I have a fiduciary responsibility to tell you when you are being particularly stupid."

Kakashi ignored the pug, hoping, as he had been for the last two days, that if ignored the dog would eventually get the hint and go home, leaving Kakashi to see to his own affairs sans the non-stop commentary from the peanut gallery.

"In case that wasn't clear, let me put it bluntly," continued the pug, apathetically observing the peaceful forest scenery surrounding them, "You are being particularly stupid."

Kakashi just scratched his nose again. Being here in the trees was nice. He didn't have to deal with demanding students. Or bizarre announcements of the "Oh yes, I'm teaching your kid how to seduce our enemies and live to tell the tale" variety. And he didn't have to deal with actually acknowledging that said students had somehow grown the assets to be successful at such missions.

Obviously overnight.

Maybe it was a jutsu.

Maybe if he prayed hard enough, he could just go "kai" and the nightmare would be over.

Or he could just go get drunk again, but Pakkun seemed to frown on that behavior too.

Spoilsport.

Anyway, Kakashi was just going to live in the training grounds for a few weeks and when he emerged his life would be completely back to normal. Naruto would most likely be done with her mission, Kakashi would be off furlough, Naruto would be back in her own apartment, and Kakashi's world would be as whole and sane as it ever was, not cracking into a million tiny pieces that Kakashi couldn't figure out how to tape together.

It was a sound plan.

He didn't know what the dog's issue was with the whole thing.

The pug continued to watch Kakashi with a mix of disdain and condescension, "You know, this is even worse than when you were four and decided to run away and join a gypsy circus."

Kakashi sniffed. Such dramatic dogs, his pack.

"I say your current behavior is worse," drawled the pug, undeterred by Kakashi's lack of reaction, "Because at least then you stopped about 100 yards past the village gates when you realized you hadn't mastered tree-walking well enough yet to walk a tight-rope and throw kunai at the same time and therefore weren't marketable enough, which led you to return to your house for further education to beef up your resume."

Kakashi remembered saying those words, just more proof of what a logical, intelligent child he had been. See how well-thought out his ideas were even at such a tender age? Obviously, his decision making abilities could only have improved with time so it wasn't possible for his current course of action to be worse than one he embarked upon when he was four. Pakkun always had loved to exaggerate things.

Kakashi turned the page of Icha-Icha Tactics. He'd have the book finished (for the third time this month) within the next five minutes—or at least, he would if that wasn't Gai's chakra signature rapidly approaching.
"Eternal rival!" Gai called up to the copy ninja loudly, waving his arms, as if the silver-haired man would ever have any difficulty spotting the taijutsu expert.

Kakashi finished the last page of the book, and then turned back to the first page to start re-reading it again.

"Kakashi," said the green man, exasperation actually beginning to color his tone.

Kakashi raised one eyebrow in surprise and glanced at his unwelcome visitor.

Gai stood, hands on his hips, observing his peer with a slight frown on his face. "This is the fourth day in a row I have found you up in a tree in the training fields."

Kakashi just looked at the man as if to say 'and?'.

Gai continued, "Your students are searching for you, and asking me if I have seen you." Gai's frown deepened when Kakashi returned his attention to his book. "It is most un-youthful of you to make them worry," the spandex-clad man admonished.

"Ahh," drawled Kakashi dismissively, "they don't need me. They're fine." They're busy shopping for négligée and learning new ways to break my brain, thought the copy ninja to himself, before returning back to the book clutched tightly in his hand so he could drown himself in the mind-numbingly familiar pages.

"He's come down with a bad case of Stupid, Gai-san," said Pakkun from his perch on the limb above Kakashi, "I'd leave before you catch it."

"How tragic," sighed Gai. "Well, dear Pakkun-kun, what is the best medication for his ailment? What remedies can I fetch to restore my hip rival to his former vigor?"

The pug hummed thoughtfully as Kakashi held his book up to his face, blocking his view of either being.

"Well, I figure he needs one of two things," said the dog, "You either need to find someone willing to roll up their sleeves and pull the stick out of his ass or willing to take off the sleeves entirely and go for a good tussle in the hay with him. Either of those ought to do it, although if you can find someone who could do both at once it would certainly be preferred."

Kakashi's eye twitched as the other jōnin let out a bellowing laugh.

"And do you have any ideas on who might be willing and capable, with a youthful spirit to counter my rival's sullen disposition?" asked Gai in a teasing tone, not truly expecting an answer.

Pakkun, however, perked up at the question, "Well, there-mphff."

Kakashi reached up and clamped the pug's jaw shut with one hand.

He smiled with his visible eye, "I think that's enough chit-chat for today."

"Oh." Gai looked startled, and then excited, "whom have you found to share the remnants of your youthful springtime?"

"Remnants?" Kakashi muttered, eye narrowing, "I'm not that old."
"Ahh," Gai nodded knowingly, "Its alright to admit it old friend, Springtime is part age and part attitude, and you, dear rival, have entered an Autumn of Discontent far too early in life." Gai looked at the man pityingly.

Kakashi froze, the tiniest bit horrified.

"I see you have finally come to this understanding and your age is weighing heavily upon you, but do not worry, dear rival," Gai flashed him a thumbs up, "While you are adrift like a lonely autumn leaf at the mercy of heartless winds, I have faith that you shall work through this, weather the storm and take root to blossom in your Eternal Springtime once more."

"Are you," Kakashi's fumbled for the proper phrasing, "Are you suggesting I'm having," he paused again, "a mid-life crisis of some sorts?"

"Oh," sighed Gai with a smile, "My hip rival knows all the trendy phrases!"

"I'm not—" Kakashi spluttered a bit, flustered, before settling on, "I'm just fine. Fine."

Gai nodded in agreement, and then he was suddenly sitting right next to Kakashi on his tree limb. Uncomfortably close.

"Whoa!" Pakkun cried, backing up a bit on the branch above the pair.

Kakashi mentally flinched at such an abrupt invasion of his personal bubble and held out his book defensively to keep Gai from coming closer, tapping it against the other man's chest.

Gai leaned toward Kakashi over the book, lowering his voice in that strange stage-whisper of his. "So," said the man in a conspiratorial tone, "tell me who has captured my most esteemed rival's affections, and caused you such grief over your station in life. Is my cool rival having difficulty obtaining her affections? Does she disdain your reputation and profession? Is she unobtainable because of your esteemed position in our social hierarchy?"

"You sound like an adolescent girl," said Kakashi flatly.

Gai's dark eyes shone with an epiphany, "Ah, it is unrequited then! You have not revealed your desires to the object of your affections!"

"No, its not," Kakashi's words were short and clipped, "Because there is not an "it", there is nothing there. Because the girl which you are imagining exists, doesn't. Exist that is. At all. Anywhere."

Gai completely ignored his companion's emphatic denials and mentally ran through a list of reasons as to why his companion might not pursue the object of his affections. Eventually, he could settle on only one rationalization. "She must be much younger then, for you to protest so much," Gai said, rubbing his chin in thought.

Kakashi experimentally poked at the other man with his book. "Shoo," he said hopefully. Sometimes it worked on his dogs.

Gai didn't move and Kakashi tried to think of alternative ways to get the man off his branch without expending too much energy.

The energetic jōnin slapped his knees, "Do not fear, dear rival, I assure you that you are a fine specimen for your age, despite your current bout of melancholy."

"Thank you," said the copy ninja flatly, "I think."
"After all," continued Gai enthusiastically, "My own sweet Ten-Ten has found her youthful heart blossoming under the tender administrations of an older man."

Kakashi tried to remind himself that Gai didn't mean what Gai thought his words meant and congratulated himself on only responding with a slight twitch of his uncovered eye.

Gai paid him no attention, wrapped up in his own story, "She and the roguish Genma have formed quite the camaraderie over the application of senbon in close-range combat."

Kakashi, really, really didn't want to know.

Wait—Kakashi's brain caught up with what Gai was actually saying, he looked at the man in disbelief, "Genma is," Kakashi had to think for a minute, "at least fifteen years older than your kid."

"Yes," Gai said, voice turning nostalgic, "But she is no longer a child but a fearsome kunoichi, a beautiful warrior in full-bloom, a flower with thorns, capable of shredding all her enemies—"

Kakashi interrupted Gai's passionate bellows, "And you're just ok with that. That someone your age is in that kind of a relationship with your student."

Gai gave Kakashi an odd look, "Well, it is not very youthful to dampen the spirits of those in love."

"Love?" Kakashi raised his eyebrow, "How do you," Kakashi cut himself off, shaking his head. "That could end very badly," he settled on saying, "your student could be very hurt."

Gai shrugged his shoulders, "I have trusted the man many times in battle with my life and he has never failed me, why should I not afford him the opportunity to care for the life of one important to me when he has proved himself so capable time and time again when handling my own?"

"Besides," said the spandex man cheerfully, clapping a wincing Kakashi on the shoulder, "if he hurts her, she is perfectly capable of imparting her own memorable lessons." Gai seemed quite proud of this. "And then, of course, I would see to his rehabilitation afterward personally."

Kakashi shivered slightly at the actual subtext to Gai's spoken words, he hadn't thought the other man capable of insinuation.

"But now I must leave you dear rival and attend to my own tasks!" Gai beamed and jumped back to the ground, gesturing goodbye in his own particular 'thumbs-up' way.

"Remember old friend, Springtime is fleeting for ninja such as us, take advantage of your vigor and prowess while you have it!" Teeth sparkled brightly and the other man flashed away.

The copy ninja stared blankly at the spot where the other man had stood, and then picked up his book and settled in to read some more. But his eyes stared uncomprehendingly at the pages, not actually registering the words before him and his hands didn't move to turn the pages.

Clearly, the kids weren't, well, kids, anymore. But that didn't mean it was open season for anyone post puberty to have a go at them.

"You know," said Pakkun at last, peering down from where he'd taken shelter in a particularly leafy cluster of branches, "now that even he's told you that you're obviously infatuated with someone, will you please take your head out of whatever hole in the sand you've stuck it in so we can get down from this god-awful tree?"

The kids—right, have to stop calling them that. Kakashi tightened his grip on his book. The, er,

Pakkun yawned, "It's just, I'm getting hungry again and this is not natural for a dog you know, being up in a tree and trying to act as the moral compass for a 32 year old grown man who can't come to terms with the fact that he is physically attracted to a pretty girl."

Kakashi turned the page of his book. And if Genma put his lecherous hands anywhere near Sakura or Naruto Kakashi would take that senbon and show the man exactly why chopsticks were now outlawed in that tiny village on the border of Mist.

"Seriously?" moaned the pug. "So be it. I'm warning you, I've gotta pee, and since we're already in what my species considers to be the equivalent of a human restroom, I won't feel guilty at all if my aim is a bit off."

Naruto looked at the paper in her hands dubiously. She'd spent the rest of the morning talking with Kurenai about cooking and the woman had given her a couple of recipes and then taken her shopping for ingredients. Naruto learned how to examine fruit and vegetables to determine what was ripe and rotten, something she'd been ignorant of prior to today. She'd been lectured on spices and herbs and types of rice and a million other culinary concepts that she promptly forgot. Her head was still spinning from the overload of information. Who knew cooking was so complicated? This was why everyone should just eat ramen. So much less in life to worry about that way. How did people even decide what they wanted to eat with so many options?

*It's much easier to just eat your own kills,* came Kurama's agreement.

Kurenai had scribbled down detailed instructions for Naruto on a piece of paper, but Naruto was still convinced she was going to mess this up somehow. She'd taken her several bags of purchases and stopped by the Hokage Tower on the way home, briefly visiting with Shizune, as Tsunade was nowhere to be found, much to the consternation and fuss of the ANBU flitting frantically about the place. Shizune had not been worried, though, so Naruto didn't pay it too much attention. Naruto confirmed that Kakashi wasn't out on a mission, and Shizune pursed her lips when she heard the man was completely neglecting his teaching duties and promised to look into the matter of his whereabouts.

Naruto hoped that with Shizune on the case, Kakashi would eventually be harassed back to his proper lodgings.

In the meantime, the man's absence gave Naruto the perfect opportunity to practice cooking.

"Ok," said Naruto aloud in the empty apartment, observing all the ingredients and appliances she'd assembled in an orderly fashion in the man's small kitchen. She looked over the crumpled paper in her hand one more time to make sure she'd gathered everything she needed. "Oil, ginger, ground beef, onions, carrots, eggs plant, curry sauce mix, soy sauce, curry powder, and apricot jam. Oh, and the rice too, can't forget," she chuckled nervously to herself. "You've got this Naruto, believe it! Just follow the instructions like Kurenai-san said, and everything will be fine."

Naruto hauled Kakashi's rice cooker, salvaged from the depths of the cupboards under his ancient kitchen sink, over to the electrical outlet and tentatively plugged it in. She jumped back once it beeped on, eyeing it as if she half-expected the machine to explode in her face just from having access to an electrical current.
Are you trying to speak this meal into existence? Grumbled Kurama, derailing Naruto's train of thought.

Naruto sniffed, "If you don't have any cooking experience or advice, you should probably just go back to sleep. This will most likely be very boring."

The Kyūbi snorted. *I have enough experience to tell you that you're going about this all wrong. It should be the male that hunts for the food and brings it back to the den. And then you eat it raw, without complaining, and are thankful that he's shown you how successfully he can provide for you and your kits. None of this cooking nonsense.*

"Yeah, well, just chalk it up to us being backwards two-legged furless monkeys again," mumbled Naruto, stirring the rice in a pot of water in the sink, draining the water, and repeating the rinsing process.

Naruto checked her instructions again and wrinkled her face in confusion. "How much water am I supposed to put in the steamer with the rice? It doesn't say."

*Like I give a rat's tail about your human food.* The fox bared its teeth, completely unhelpful.

Naruto bit her lip and then shrugged, "I'll just fill the pot to the top with water and put it in the steamer-thingy, can't hurt it, right?"

Silence met her statement, and Naruto hummed cheerfully to herself to cover up the lack of noise and proceeded to execute her plan. She made instant ramen all the time and it tasted fine. How much harder could this be?

"You smell like dog piss," Tsunade said flatly, addressing her latest problem-child as he was reluctantly and sullenly corralled into her office.

Kakashi carefully maintained his neutral expression and bit his tongue to keep from explaining that it was one of his books which was the source of the smell, not Kakashi himself, and his rude ANBU escort hadn't cared to give him time to stop by his apartment and trade literature before hauling him before his technically official superior. Probably because of that one time he skipped out on the bill and left Shrew washing dishes at that high-end restaurant. All Kakashi had to say in his defense was that the woman had been aptly code-named.

Tsunade wrinkled her nose and waved the copy-ninja's 'fetch-ers' out of the room. Kakashi hooked his ankle around a chair and tugged it over in front of the desk before taking a seat himself. He studiously ignored the smell emanating from the front pocket of his flak-jacket and contemplated the logistics of painting Pakkun's paws black in the pug's sleep.

"Now," Tsunade said, tapping a finger impatiently on a stack of papers, "What is this I hear about you skipping out on training sessions with your three brats?"

Kakashi shrugged, "I thought I was on furlough."

"You're part of a ninja village, you don't get *true* furlough," the Hokage snapped. "Congratulations, you've lived long enough that it's now a better long-term investment for the Village to have you spend your psychologically mandated recovery time passing on your skills rather than work on getting your own ass back on the field anytime soon."

Kakashi narrowed his eyes, tone slightly disbelieving, "Are you calling me old?"
Tsunade snorted and with a twist of her wrist she pulled two glasses seemingly out of midair and set them down on her desktop with a thump. A few seconds later she’d retrieved an obviously mislabeled jar (Kakashi would eat his Icha-Icha collection if that was actually apple juice) and poured an ample amount of amber liquid into each glass. She pushed one toward Kakashi and took the other herself, leaning back in her chair and savoring her drink.

"All I'm saying," she continued, "is that there comes a time in every ninja's career where they have to acknowledge that they aren't twenty and can't bounce back from S-class missions with just a couple of days of rest." Tsunade's voice dripped with sarcasm, "In case you haven't noticed, you've reached that time." She took a long drink and emptied her glass before turning her entire attention upon her audience with a stern frown. "I need you to find more productive outlets for your down-time; I'm not going to let you fulfill whatever moronic death-wish quest you think you've embarked upon."

Kakashi leaned back and crossed his arms, keeping his voice calm. "I don't have a death wish."

"Oh," Tsunade said, raising an eyebrow in surprise. "Really?" She pulled a thick folder out of the top drawer of her desk and waved it in the air. "Because I've got independent reports from two psychological evaluators, an iryō-nin, and three nurses, all turned in within the past six months which beg to differ." She dropped the large folder onto the desk with a heavy thud and let silence settle between the pair.

Kakashi struggled to suppress his scowl and the sarcastic retorts that desperately wanted to escape his lips. His hand tightened around his kneecap and he took a deep breath. "What will convince you that I'm fit for duty, Hokage-sama?"

Tsunade huffed, "Don't convince me, convince yourself." Tsunade reached forward and claimed Kakashi's untouched glass of liquor for herself. "I've been where you are, you know." She closed her eyes, "I didn't necessarily try death by mission-binging, but I can tell you that drowning yourself in alcohol and gambling doesn't work any better than throwing yourself over and over again into intense assignments until you are too exhausted to catch that one little detail which will cost you your life."

Kakashi let the older woman lose herself in her own memories for a few minutes and tried to analyze the current situation with his normal sense of detachment. He wasn't sure what had inspired the military leader to suddenly call him in for a heart-to-heart chat, but he was becoming increasingly uncomfortable, and was feeling a bit like the pot was calling the kettle black at the moment.

Tsunade slowly turned her honey-colored eyes on her companion, "What are your goals, Kakashi-kun?"

The copy ninja tensed at the nickname. It was strange how one variation of a name could have so much power. Suddenly he was barely a teenager again, sitting in Sensei's shadow, listening to the conversations of ninja twice his age as they gathered at a bar in between assignments to the front lines. And Tsunade would be there, drunk, launching into a diatribe before Jiraiya could escort the inebriated woman back to her own lodgings. She was telling a pale-faced Shizune how to permanently damage the nerves in an eye with a pinky finger, telling the passing waitresses to get out of this god-forsaken place while they were young, telling Kushina to marry Minato before he accidentally blew himself up with those damn seals, telling Kakashi, depending on the day of the week, to either fall in love fast and hard and never let it go or to never fall in love at all.

Kakashi pushed down the indignation coiling in his gut. How dare she bring back those memories. What right did she have to bring up those memories, when she left. She'd left everyone.

He raised his own gray eye resentfully to her thoughtful ones, "I stayed," he hissed, "and I'm still
here, what more do you want from me? What more do you have the right to ask of me?"

Tsunade thought over her words carefully. "I think, the better question is, what more do I want for you, Kakashi-kun." Tsunade leaned forward, tenting her fingers and focusing on the man in front of her. "What do you want Kakashi?"

Kakashi stayed silent, thoughts whirling in his head. He wanted his life to go back to normal. For Naruto to not be his temporary house-guest. For Kurenai to have answers that didn't make him want to vomit when he was too confused to figure out what he was feeling about something. He wanted for his students to be twelve again, only he didn't, because it was kind of nice to not worry that they were going to get themselves killed every time he left them alone for thirty minutes, either because they'd been assassinated by foreign powers or because Sakura finally snapped and remembered Chapter 13 Section 6 of her academy textbook on killing with traceless poisons.

He wanted his students to be strong, and they were.

He wanted them to be safe, and they were.

He wanted them to live to be adults…and they had.

And now, now he wasn't so sure what he wanted anymore.

Tsunade gave a sigh, her expression indicating that she was disappointed, but unsurprised with Kakashi's response. She cleared her throat, "Well, Hatake," she sorted through some loose papers on her desk, "until you can articulate a well thought-out answer to that question, I will be giving you goals to meet, and I expect you to fulfill those goals. In fact," she caught his eyes and continued confidently, "I order you to fulfill these goals as your Hokage. Let's take a moment and review these goals, shall we?"

Kakashi felt a bit like a child, and tried not to appear too sullen and bolster the impression.

"First," Tsunade said, ticking off the number on her fingers, "I expect you to train your students for the jōnin exams, for the reasons we discussed a month ago."

Kakashi inclined his head, acknowledging the discussion. "They've performed admirably so far, they really don't need my help reaching that goal. They're on an independent study schedule, my presence as a babysitter isn't necessary."

Tsunade pursed her lips disapprovingly, "You're a paid babysitter, required by the Council in Uchiha's case, and it's your job to make sure they don't maul themselves accidentally with some experimental jutsu. I don't care how annoying it is to hear Naruto complain about Uchiha pulling her hair or how many bruises my apprentice has given you for showcasing that your reading level hasn't progressed past picture-books: Your job is to be there and deal with it. Got a problem with that?"

"No, Hokage-sama," Kakashi murmured, leaning back in his chair.

The blonde eyed him wearily for a minute, as if expecting more of a fight on the issue, and then apparently decided to take Kakashi's abrupt compliance as a blessing and tackle other issues.

"Second," Tsunade, reached under her desk to activate a privacy seal, and Kakashi shivered slightly as the cold release of chakra washed over him. "I need you to finish the Root Investigation."

Kakashi straightened with interest, "Have the scrolls been examined already?"

Tsunade shook her head slightly, "Yes and no. They've been thoroughly examined for further seals
or 'surprises,' and cleared in that regard, but they haven't all been thoroughly read yet."

"But you have an idea of what the collection was," Kakashi stated, noting the displeased turn of
Tsunade's lips.

"Yes," the blonde gave an irritated noise and poured herself another drink. "It's a duplication of
every file that should only have been contained in the Hokage's personal archive. But it's more than
that too," Tsuande grit her teeth. "It contains notes on missions that seem to have been sanctioned
and commissioned solely by Danzo, and it also contains notes in Sensei's handwriting that I've never
seen before. It appears to be Danzo's personal library." Tsunade spared Kakashi an aggravated look,
"I'm sure you don't have to be told how annoying it is to have your recollection of the Village's
history and politics re-written yet again. I swear, every time I think I know the truth behind a series
of events I discover so-and-so's personal diary and have to re-evaluate everything all over again."

"Will this affect the current political climate?" Kakashi's thoughts turned toward Naruto, who, as
Tsunade's announced successor, would have to deal with the repercussions that might occur from
any unfortunate discoveries.

Tsunade shook her head, "It's not likely, I'm more than happy to let the past stay buried if I can. But I
do intend to make sure that there is only one military hierarchy in Konoha and that all subversive
groups are thoroughly exterminated."

Kakashi hummed his agreement, "Did your fūinjutsu expert discover why Sai and I were able to
access the vault?"

"It's mostly theoretical," drawled Tsunade, "But I did have someone take a look at it. The original
seal securing the vault was definitely keyed only to Danzo's blood. However, recently, the locking
seal was re-keyed, sloppily. It looks like whoever adjusted the lock seal meant to only re-key the seal
to one or two people, but the blood sample they used was contaminated…or something. Somehow
the seal is keyed to most, but not all, of the individuals we knew to be Root operatives."

Tsunade pulled a scroll out from under a pile of paperwork on the far corner of the desk and pushed
it toward Kakashi. "Here is the bloodwork analysis for the seal, stating the dates, times, and the
identity of the blood samples used to open the vault."

Kakashi opened the scroll and scanned the report. "It says that Sai's blood has been used to open the
vault four times in the past month?"

"Yes," Tsunade tilted her head, "Sai submitted to a Yamanaka interview which confirmed that the
first time he'd ever personally been to the vault was the day which he discovered it with you." The
blonde watched Kakashi's face closely as he finished reading the report. She narrowed her eyes as he
finished the last line. "You didn't find what you were expecting."

"Not quite," agreed Kakashi, "But it's just one more piece for the puzzle, I'll put it all together
eventually."

"Yes," Tsunade agreed whole-heartedly, "I have complete faith that you will." She stood and
stretched, releasing the privacy seal and making a shooing motion with her hands. "Now go home
and take a bath, you reek."

Kakashi stood to comply, tucking the scroll inside his vest and bowing slightly.

"And on the topic of goals," the Hokage continued, "maybe you should take a close look at your
students and peers. If you understand their goals, you might be inspired to develop some new ones
for yourself."

The copy ninja nodded absently, not paying too much attention to his leader's advice. He headed to the window, placing a hand on the sill and balancing precariously for a moment as the Hokage's parting words washed over him, "And get a good night's sleep, while you're at it. In your own apartment. If I hear you're spending the night in a tree again I will assign you a babysitter, don't think I won't!"

Kakashi stood outside his apartment, fingertips resting on the smooth, cold metal of the doorknob. He could feel Naruto's familiar chakra fluttering on the other side of the wall, and he was trying to soothe the unsettled feeling in his stomach and gather the willpower to face company.

A shrill shriek made up his mind for him and he threw open the door, eyes wide as he took in the scene before him.

Naruto spun to face him, blue eyes startled, one hand clutching tightly at an oven mitt and the other pointing furiously at his kitchen. "It's on fire! It's on fire, fixitfixitfixitfixit!"

He rushed past the flailing blonde and took stock of the raging grease fire in his kitchen. In a few seconds he'd turned off the heat on the stove and smothered the flaming pot with a metal lid. Deprived of oxygen, the fire quickly died and Kakashi felt the tension in his shoulders lessen. He took a moment to take a deep breath, before turning to look at the upset girl anxiously fidgeting behind him.

"I'm so sorry!" Naruto babbled, "I was trying to cook but I've never done it before and I put the eggplant in with the oil and I was following instructions I swear and suddenly it was *woosh!* Fire! And I tried to douse it with a suiton and it just made it bigger and it was like a-a-a Zombie Fire! It was supposed to be dead but it came back to life bigger and scarier than before and I just couldn't kill it-"

"Mah, Naruto," Kakashi interrupted, holding up a calming hand, "It's fine. Really. But you can't put out a grease fire with water, you have to smother it. Next time, just put the lid of the pot on the pot and that should take care of it."

"Oh," said the girl, in a small voice, worrying one of her pigtails between her fingers. "Ok."

The copy ninja took a step back to try and completely take in the disaster-zone that was now his kitchen. "What were you trying to do in here anyway?" He lifted the lid on the pot, examining its charred contents cautiously.

Naruto flushed and looked down at the floor. "I was trying to do something nice for you to thank you for letting me stay here. 'Cuz I know you're not totally cool with it, and I'm really sorry I chased you out of your house so Kurenai said I should try and do something nice like making dinner." Naruto made a strained hiccuping sound. "Only I've never cooked before and she said it was easy and it's not!"

Kakashi rubbed at the back of his head awkwardly. "Well, it's very thoughtful of you, but next time you try to fry something, keep it away from the flame and don't try to put out the grease fire With water. And you shouldn't add the seasoning so early," he continued to investigate the mess, thoughtfully poking unidentifiable things that may have been edible in a past life and lifting up lids, "and you added way too much water to the rice. That's a new one," he hummed, "it's actually kind of hard to ruin the rice but you've …" Kakashi trailed off as he turned around and noticed just how upset his houseguest was by his critiques. "Er," he said hesitantly, "but it was obviously a great first
effort and I'm sure you would have corrected all your mistakes by the next time."

Naruto wilted and Kakashi hastily tried to salvage the situation the only way he knew: "Why don't we go out for ramen?"

The blonde perked up immediately, cooking failure forgotten. "Really?"

Kakashi nodded absently.

"Awesome!" Naruto bounced on her heels, optimism completely recovered and ready to lunge in for a hug. Before Kakashi could sidestep the inevitable physical contact, she stopped short, settling for tentatively patting his arm. She crinkled her nose, "Maybe you could take a shower first, because, I don't know if anyone's told you, but you stink."

"In fact," said the blonde, edging toward the door, voice sounding odd as she tried to hold her breath. "Since it was supposed to be my treat tonight anyway, why don't I go get the ramen while you take a shower and then do something with those clothes, and maybe then with the mess in the kitchen because this whole place stinks really bad."

Kakashi sighed as the girl slipped out the door and surveyed his kitchen. He rolled up his sleeves and went to grab some trash bags. He was quite sure that being volunteered to clean up Naruto's mess negated the kindness of paying for dinner, but he was equally sure that Naruto-logic and real life-logic were inherently incompatible. He said a sad goodbye to the brutalized eggplant as it went down the garbage disposal and wondered whether he could throw the rice into the garbage disposal too or if he'd have to walk it outside to the garbage bin. Laziness won out, and he decided if he broke the garbage disposal maintenance could just fix it. He was sure they'd had to fix garbage disposals from weirder things being stuck down them. They would probably just be grateful that it wasn't body parts this time.

Naruto was seated happily in a chair at the kitchen table, starting in on the second of her five containers of ramen by the time Kakashi was done with his shower.

"What?" He asked, as he stepped out of the bathroom only to be greeted by an intense, focused stare from his temporary room-mate.

She gave an annoyed huff and slumped across the tabletop. "I can't believe you're still wearing the dumb mask. Do you ever take it off?"

Kakashi just shook his head, "You really didn't think I'd give up the game now did you?"

Naruto pouted a bit, but pushed a bag with two ramen containers it toward the empty chair on the other side of the table. "A girl can dream," she drawled.

Kakashi pulled out the chair and sank into it, grabbing the nearest container and poking at its contents. Miso. Of course it was miso. He cast the genjutsu that let him appear to eat with his mask up, and Naruto narrowed her eyes, but didn't vocally protest or try to break the illusion.

They ate their meals in companionable silence, but Naruto inevitably finished before the jōnin, despite having twice as many containers, and let her eyes wander to the pile of pots drying on the kitchen countertops.

"How do you know anything about cooking, anyway," she asked curiously.

Kakashi hesitated, but then decided to go ahead and answer honestly. "Your mother was an excellent cook. Since I demanded to live on my own when I was very young, she decided that I should be able
to cook nutritious meals. She taught me a bit.” He slouched his shoulders, feeling awkward, "I don't know as much as she did, but I can make a meal that tastes better than ration bars."

Naruto's stared at him from across the table, struggling to decide what question to ask first. "You knew—I mean, of course you knew, but can—wait," the blonde suddenly looked irritated, "If you knew how to cook this whole time, how come you never took a turn cooking on missions? None of us could cook worth shit, but you made us cook every time!" She huffed indignantly.

Kakashi blinked, "I was hoping eventually you'd be motivated to learn for yourselves, or that one of you might know how to cook and teach the others." Naruto's face was turning a fetching shade of frustrated purple, he decided to push her a bit further, to see if she could match the color of the eggplants she'd cruelly ruined earlier. "Unfortunately for our team's taste buds, you were all equally untalented in the culinary arts."

Naruto fluffed up, and then just as quickly deflated and stuck out her tongue. "Mean," she pouted. Then her expression turned thoughtful, and she used her chopsticks to poke at the menma she'd pulled out of her dish.

Kakashi decided to leave her to her own thoughts and continued to make headway devouring his own dish.

"Could you," Naruto's voice sounded timid, "could you maybe show me what she taught you to cook, someday?"

Kakashi felt like his mouthful of food was suddenly twice as big and he struggled to swallow. She can't be blamed for wanting to know about her own parents. He looked blankly at his almost empty dish. And its not her fault I had more time with them, she cares about them just as much despite never knowing them. He finished his meal and began to gather up all the paper containers to throw away. Naruto's head remained bowed, but he couldn't bring himself to speak until his back was turned. "I imagine I could find the time to teach you a few things now and then," he finally managed to say roughly. Which was a far cry from what he intended to say, which was along the lines of, 'I don't remember most of it,' or some such wishy-washy excuse.

The fact that he could feel Naruto beaming even with his back turned didn't make him feel much better, and Kakashi mumbled a quick excuse about needing some sleep before retreating to his room for the night.

Once safe within the boundaries of his own room, door locked and warded behind him, he allowed himself to sigh in relief, shoulders sagging. One dinner down. He'd made it through one evening with the girl. Surely, he'd only have to do this a few more days.

He sat on his bed, hands on his knees, trying very hard not to dwell on the fact that he really hadn't wanted to dodge the hug that she'd almost given him earlier that night.

That the reason he'd mentioned Kushina was because he wanted her to know, wanted her to ask.

Wanted to voluntarily spend time with another person.

Ridiculous, he snorted.

The sound of the shower turning on carried through the thin walls of the apartment and he groaned, reaching for a book from his shelf to distract from thinking about the girl showering in the other room.

And the fact that she wasn't clothed at this moment.
Which he wasn't thinking about.

And he wasn't thinking about how she looked wrapped up in his towels either.

Not thinking about any of that at all.

Really.

Not one bit.
"Do you think I'm having a mid-life crisis?"

Kurenai choked on her tea-cake cookie as Kakashi looked on, waiting for the answer to his serious question. Once Kurenai dislodged the crumbs in her throat and caught her breath and Kakashi had resettled across from her, she blinked at him and managed to wheeze out an airy, "'Scuse me?"

Kakashi crossed his arms and leaned back in the rickety chair, glancing at the living room with a somewhat contemptuous expression.

Kurenai had been under the impression that Kakashi disproved of Konohamaru's cartoon-watching habits, but as her nephew and child laughed carelessly from the front room, she realized that Kakashi's irritation stemmed from a completely different train of thought.

The copy ninja flicked his eye back to his female companion. "Gai said I'm having a mid-life crisis."

The television blared loudly from the living room, keeping the younger guests entertained, and covering up the soft tones with which the two more experienced ninja were conversing with at the kitchen table.

Kurenai considered herself one of the most emotionally perceptive of her peers, but when she'd asked Gai for his help, she hadn't anticipated that he would tackle the problem from this angle. "Have a cookie," she said weakly, pushing the tin toward Kakashi, watching him indulge in one of the treats as she scrambled to collect her thoughts and figure out how to turn the situation to her advantage.

She watched Kakashi chew (mask up, but Kurenai wasn't paid well enough to tackle the gray-haired man's father issues) for a few minutes and struck out on ideas for carrying forward the conversation.

Well, when in doubt, back to the basics. "Do you think that you're having a mid-life crisis?" She managed to ask with a straight face, giving herself a mental pat on the back.

"No," said the man quickly, resting his gloved, empty hands on the tabletop. "Maybe. No. Define midlife crisis."

"Oh, I don't know," Kurenai drawled, leaning forward to put her elbows on the wooden surface, resting her chin in one palm. "I suppose if I had to take a stab at a dictionary definition, I'd say it is an emotional crisis of identity and self-confidence that can occur in early middle age."

Kakashi looked disgruntled.

At least, that's how Kurenai would describe his expression. The look wasn't that much different from
his normal apathy however, so she could very well be mistaken.

"Why, Kakashi," Kurenai murmured, trying for a teasing tone, "are you having a hard time coming up with an explanation of who you are and what you want in life?"

For only having one eye and three-fourths of his face covered, Kakashi was quite good at giving her a dirty look. "No."

Kurenai snorted, "Well, let's hear it then. Prove it to me." She leaned back in her chair, "Let's hear Konoha's most formidable jōnin introduce himself."

The television emitted a particularly obnoxious noise common to children's shows and both jōnin twitched slightly, eyes darting to the machine and then back to each other. Or, in Kakashi's case, the suddenly fascinating grains in the table.

"I'm a trained assassin." Kakashi eventually muttered.

Kurenai continued to wait, her posture conveying that she expected him to continue.

A cheerful theme song sounded, signaling the end of Konohamaru and Matsu's afternoon entertainment.

Kakashi ducked his head, tracing the whirls in the wood with a finger, shoulders slightly slumped in defeat.

Kurenai frowned softly, and gave a disappointed but sympathetic sigh. She pushed the cookie tin forward again, "Have another cookie."

"Kakashi," hissed a tense, feminine voice.

The copy ninja jolted awake from a dead sleep, body responding instinctively, whipping out a kunai and twisting to take the intruder off guard. In two seconds, he'd rolled out of bed and to the floor, using his weight to push the intruder down and pinning the intruder's arms above her head with one hand, while the other pressed a blade against her throat.

Wait.

Her hands.

Her throat.

Startled blue eyes blinked up at him, curiosity framed in a golden halo of hair.

Kakashi's brain caught up with his muscle memory and he immediately released the girl. He sat up, rubbing at his forehead, trying to chase away the last remnants of sleep that were clouding his brain so that he could better understand the situation.

He looked over his shoulder at his bedroom door.

"How'd you get past the seals?" He asked, voice deep and gruff with sleep.

"Kakashi," repeated the girl, pulling his attention away from the door, "there's a man talking to me through your wall."

"What," Kakashi asked, staring tiredly into the wide, blinking blue eyes. So blue.
"There's a man talking to me through your walls," Naruto repeated patiently from her position on her back on the floor.

"Oh," said Kakashi, relaxing a bit now that there was no emergency. "My neighbor, he's harmless. Mostly," he admitted, distractedly noticing the kunai in his hand and tossing it back onto his bed.

"Ok," agreed Naruto amiably, "but do you think you can move, 'cuz you're kind of heavy."

Kakashi looked back down at the girl, only just noticing that he was still straddling her in a rather compromising position, beginning to feel the body heat that automatically generates when two bodies come into close contact. He pushed down the blush that threatened to spread across his masked face hurriedly rose, grabbing Naruto's hand and pulling her up with him as he stood.

He pushed his embarrassment to the back of his mind. Obviously Naruto wasn't bothered by the situation, so it wouldn't accomplish anything if he made an issue out of it. He should focus on more pressing matters. Like what used to be his door. "What did you do to my door?" Kakashi asked, bewildered, as he walked over to inspect the destroyed seals lining its' frame. The seals were burned and cracked, steam wafting visibly into the air.

Naruto shrugged, "I didn't recognize them, so I just changed the lines a bit and overloaded them with chakra. Who is your neighbor?"

"He's a special jōnin who works in intelligence. He's been a paper ninja since he lost hearing in one ear in the third shinobi war." Kakashi reached out to touch the seals cautiously, quickly retracting his hand, the tips of his fingers burning from the heat. "You could have set the door on fire. You could have blown up the door. What do you mean you changed the lines and overloaded them?" Just changing unknown seals was dangerous, who knew what you could turn the seal into. You could seriously damage its contents if it was a container, or if it was an explosive…well, Kakashi knew a few men who'd lost limbs that way.

"I just made them into failed explosive seals, like some of the ones I originally did that would just fail when I put too much chakra in them." Naruto tossed her hair over her shoulder impatiently, obviously annoyed at having to repeat herself and not understanding how a supposed genius like Kakashi just didn't get it. "And then I put too much chakra in them and they failed. It was easy."

Kakashi stared at her blankly. "Someday, I wish the world would work for me the way it does for you," he finally settled for saying. It was far too early for him to try and figure out how Naruto had managed to disprove centuries of sealing theories.

Naruto just blinked, puzzled, "What?"

Kakashi shook his head. "I need coffee." He didn't even drink coffee. But he had a coffee maker and the necessary products because that's what you got from co-workers for birthday presents when you were a mysterious ninja who kept his personal habits hidden from others. He didn't drink coffee, but he was obviously going to have to start if Naruto was living in his apartment.

He plodded into the kitchen, Naruto trailing at his heels and jabbering excitedly like a particularly attention-hungry puppy.

"-And then he asked who I was and said he was looking for Katsushi. Who is Katsushi?"

"That would be me," Kakashi said, looking at the instruction manual for the machine and trying to properly arrange the pieces and put the roast coffee grounds in the machine. It wouldn't start. He pressed the button again. Still nothing.
"You just need to hit it."

"I'm not sure that actually helps—"

Naruto hit the machine with a closed fist, and it promptly stuttered to life. "See," said Naruto, "that always works."

Kakashi just nodded along and went to find a glass for his drink.

"I know I've heard of this stuff before, but what is coffee supposed to do anyway?" Asked Naruto, eying the machine dubiously as it puttered to life and brewed the unfamiliar beverage, "It smells strange. And what do you mean you are Katsushi, is that a code name or something? Are you sure that stuff is safe to drink?"

Kakashi, used to Naruto's strange train-of-thought spasms, poured himself some coffee and blew on it, deciding to allow the beverage to cool for a minute before trying to take a drink. "It's supposed to be a drink that wakes you up. It's like a liquid, watered down soldier pill." Probably. At least, that's what Kakashi understood the drink to be when it was explained to him. "And he thinks I'm Katsushi because he's hard of hearing and old and paranoid and can't stop listening for information through walls and I really just can't bring myself to care enough to correct his misconceptions."

The blonde regarded him with a flat expression. "He thinks you have seven brothers and are impoverished from trying to feed them all and that they vandalize your apartment on a semi-regular basis."

Kakashi shrugged, "An unintended, but inevitable consequence of occasionally entertaining a large pack of talking dogs in a small apartment."

Naruto narrowed her eyes. "And he was telling me all about your numerous girlfriends who you entertain every week. I was jealous until I realized that their names were the same as all the heroines of Ich-Icha."

Kakashi started and choked on his coffee, eyeing his roommate strangely until he attributed the implied possessiveness to the social concept known as 'teasing.' He gave another, feeble, sheepish shrug. "What can I say, it's nice to have someone to talk to about the plot of the books," he looked imploringly at the ceiling, praying for a summons from the Hokage. "I can't help it if he misunderstands our conversations."

"Well," said Naruto with a sniff, opening the fridge to pull out some milk and pour a glass of the safe, known substance. "I tried to tell him who I was and that I'd be staying for a little while and that I'm pretty sure Iruka-sensei says it's rude to eavesdrop on people through walls."

Kakashi sipped his coffee calmly and Naruto pushed herself up to sit on the countertop with her glass of milk. "Only," she continued, "I'm pretty sure he thinks we're having a threesome and doing kinky role-plays with ramen toppings."

Kakashi gave up on the coffee and poured it down the sink.

Naruto just nodded her head seriously, "I'm just glad to know that it's totally not my fault he thinks you and Iruka are sexual deviants."

Kakashi started practicing his breathing exercises.

The strong smell of nail polish filled the air as Naruto curled up on the old, comfortable overstuffed
couch, enjoying being invited to this impromptu pampering fest that Sakura and Ino had decided to throw.

It apparently involved watching cheesy romantic movies, popcorn, painting nails, and letting Ino wrangle Naruto's hair into strange shapes and knots.

Strangely enough, it was kind of fun.

"You have such beautiful hair," cooed Ino, combing her hands through Naruto's long locks as she pulled it back down from some elaborate twist. The loose hair pooled easily into Ino's lap from where she sat behind Naruto, armed with a brush and half a box of bobby pins. Sakura sat to Naruto's right, a look of calm concentration on her face as she used a small brush to paint the nails of one of Naruto's hands an alarmingly bright shade of orange.

Sakura had a rare day off, and at the end of her last procedure the previous day had been told by the attending surgeon to take a vacation-day. It probably had something to do with the fact that she'd broken her last clipboard into twelve pieces over a particularly whiny patient's head (he was an Anbu, come on, everyone knew they made the worst patients), but she didn't feel a need to share that fact with Ino and Naruto.

Instead, she and Ino had begged and whined until Ino's mother had shooed them out of the flower shop for the sake of her own sanity. Then they'd gone shopping for a new movie and some makeup before spotting Naruto enjoying a midmorning brunch and kidnapped her, each linking their own arm into one of hers and dragging her away from the ramen stand with a third of the bowl left cooling on the bar.

Naruto had been depressed until they promised popcorn. They made it back to Ino's and commandeered her living room, drawing the blinds and keeping the lights low, making it feel like early evening rather than the bright midday it actually was.

They quickly settled down with a bowl of warm, freshly popped popcorn. Ino dumped the bag of their newest toys onto the couch, pretty sparkling bottles of brightly colored paint falling onto the cushions with the quiet tinkle of glass hitting glass. Naruto observed the bottles with a somewhat grim expression as Sakura and Ino exclaimed about their newest treasures. Within three minutes, Sakura had Naruto in a headlock as the blonde vehemently protested that she wouldn't let her nails be "tainted with those vile, sad-looking colors."

"What's wrong with pink," Sakura hissed, tightening her grip.

"Oh my god," Ino sighed dramatically, rolling her eyes, one hand on her hip. "I like, totally, don't know either of you right now," she proclaimed.

Inoichi took pride in being able to keep a straight face as he took in the scene that greeted him as he descended the stairs, tucking some kunai into his belt before heading back to work. "Nail polish, Ino?" he asked in the strained voice, which could only have been developed after years of suffering from futilely arguing with a mostly female household.

Ino gave him a look conveying that she wasn't going to deign to respond to that question.

Sakura abruptly released her victim with Inoichi's arrival, instantly taking upon the classic appearance of the 'good child.' Her eyes were bright and attentive, hands clasped submissively behind her back and a pleasant smile on her face.

Naruto tumbled facedown into the couch at the sudden release, awkwardly turning over and falling
to the floor, guffawing at Sakura's sudden transformation.

Inoichi grimaced and tightened his forehead protector. "Just keep it from getting on the couch. You know how your Mom hates that."

"I'm a *ninja*, Daddy," Ino said haughtily.

Inoichi rubbed at his temples, trying to erase the image of four-year old Ino saying the exact same phrase with the same inflections and posture out of his head as he trudged out the door, muttering something about how "Chouza and Shikaku oughta be glad they never had girls."

Naruto watched his exit with big, worried eyes. "He's not upset with us, is he?"

"Nah," said Ino as she and Sakura descended upon the couch, flipping all the cushions over, changing what had appeared to be a comfortably broken in but still pristine sofa into a still comfortable but brightly spotted polka-dot spectacle that looked like Sai'd been allowed to have at it with instructions to 'make it modern.'

"Huh," Naruto blinked, "That's clever."

"I know, right?" Ino pulled Naruto down onto the couch as Sakura went over to the TV to put on the movie. "We just have to remember to turn it back before Mom gets home. She really doesn't do cleaning, you know, so I'm not sure she knows the couch is actually like this."

Naruto nodded, "Are you sure your Dad won't mind? We could go outside if this is going to be messy."

"We're fine, really," Ino said, reaching over Naruto to grab the remote from the side table. She couldn't quite reach and accidentally pushed it off the table, into the crack of space between the table and couch and wall. She scowled, "Budge over." And with that Ino was climbing over Naruto, who scooted under her and wound up in the middle of the sofa.

"He's just doesn't like nail polish 'cuz this one time, when we were like eight, Sakura and I told him it would wash off with water and he let us paint his nails and he got summoned to the Sandaime and had to go face the Hokage and interrogate some prisoner with pretty glitter rainbow nails. He said the captive found it hard to take him seriously." Ino's voice was distant and muffled, as she awkwardly leaned over the couch to fish for the remote. "He's had a *thing* about nail polish ever since." She pulled back, remote triumphantly in hand. "But really, do try not to spill it on the couch. That shit's harder to get out than blood." She leveled the remote at the screen and clicked some buttons.

Sakura hmmed her agreement as she lined the nail polish bottles up neatly in a row on the coffee table. "You know," said the medic-nin, contemplating the bottles, pulling two of them out of the arrangement and showing them to Naruto, "I bet if I mix the red and the yellow, we'll get orange?"

Naruto gulped a bit, but couldn't say no with the hopeful cast to Sakura's face. "Ok," Naruto finally gave in, lowering her head a bit with a pout.

Sakura lit up with a gleeful energy as she bounced onto the empty spot next to Naruto and quickly latched onto one of Naruto's hands, pulling a nail file out of her pocket and setting it to work.

"Oh," said Ino eagerly, "If she gets to do your nails, I get to do your hair." And Ino suddenly had a hair brush in hand and was tugging at one of Naruto's pigtails. Naruto tried to console herself with eating popcorn one-handedly as she watched the opening credits of the movie flash across the screen, letting Ino and Sakura's light, harmless chatter wash over her.
Which led to their current predicament. Naruto was pretty much a pile of goo. Ino was honestly trying to be gentle with her hair, and it was surprisingly pleasant to have someone else brush her hair. She'd never experienced it before, but it wasn't that bad at all. Although, she was flat out forbidding Ino from trying that 'fish tail braid' thing again, that had been painful.

Sakura released Naruto's hand with a happy hum and Naruto flicked her gaze over to her lazily. "Am I done?"

"No," Sakura snorted, "Let that dry for five minutes and then I'll need to apply a topcoat."

Naruto just blinked. She had no idea what the other girl was talking about, but at this point, she was willing to just roll with it.

"Ah," Ino gave a smitten sigh, "That guy's got such a great ass."

Naruto's mind drew a blank. "What?"

"The hero," Sakura waved a handful of popcorn at the screen, "He's got a great ass. But I have to say I like the sidekick with the arms better."

Naruto tilted her head to get a better look at the movie's leading men. They bounced across the screen with special-effect speed, not ninja, but playing the roles of superheroes to the best of their abilities. Admittedly they were handsome men, but-her contemplation was interrupted by an elbow to the ribs.

Ino smiled at her, all cat-corners-mouse-like, grinning sharply, "What about you Naruto, who are you rooting for?"

The barest hint of a blush graced Naruto's cheeks as she looked back at the screen and muttered, "I don't know, they both look nice."

Sakura laughed, "That's not what she's asking Naruto, she wants to know what you like best about them." Judging from Naruto's vague expression that the blonde still didn't understand, so Sakura tried to tackle the problem from a different angle. "Think about it this way: If you had your choice of going on a date with one of them, which would it be and why?"

Naruto looked thoughtfully at the handsome actors, eventually just shrugging helplessly. "I really don't know, I mean, neither of them are real right? It's hard to imagine myself with someone that's not real."

Sakura rolled her eyes and grabbed Naruto's hand again, this time preparing to apply a clear gloss over the colorful orange paint. "I forget you're not really an abstract thinker," she teased.

"Nope," Ino crowed, gathering Naruto's hair back at the nape of the girl's neck, "I'm not giving up that easy." Her predatory teal eyes narrowed and she considered her friend carefully.

"Let's start with the guy you currently like," Ino began, and then slapped Naruto's arm lightly, "stop that, I can sense you panicking, I'm not going to ask you who he is," she rolled her eyes, "I just want you to think about him for a minute, ok?"

Naruto nodded hesitantly, as well as she could with Ino's secure hold on her hair at the base of her skull, "Ok," she mumbled.

Sakura gave a reassuring, gentle squeeze to the hand she was holding, but didn't do or say anything to curb Ino's inquisitive nature.
"Ok," Ino agreed, "Now, why do you like him? What makes you think that he's better than all the other available studs out there?" She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

Naruto allowed herself to consider Kakashi carefully. It's not like she had a conventional crush on the man, but she did like him. "Well," she took a deep breath, deciding there wasn't any harm if she listed off some of Kakashi's general characteristics and avoided the specifics. "I like that he's smart..." she trailed off at Ino's raised eyebrow. "What?" She said testily. "I can like smart guys!"

Ino opened her mouth but Sakura cut her off by calling the bossy blonde's name sharply. "Of course you can like smart guys," said Sakura amiably, continuing to dab the brush of clear gloss on her friend's fingers, finishing up one hand and laying it down gently to move on to the next. "You're going to need one to get you out of trouble," she added playfully.

Naruto flushed, but agreed nevertheless. "Yes." She nodded, "And he does, get me out of trouble, I mean. I like that. And I like that he thinks of things that I don't. And I like that he's always prepared, because I never am. And I like," she stopped and bit her lip. Boy, she really wasn't good at this.

Tell them you admire his ability to-

If you say anything related to male genitalia, reproduction, or food, I will turn my mindscape back into a sewer and infest it with rats, Naruto thought viciously. And then felt guilty, because really Kurama hadn't deserved that, she was just uncomfortable and taking it out on him. The fox settled down sulkily, only somewhat appeased by the knowledge that Naruto knew she was in the wrong, and Naruto came back to reality in time to notice that Sakura had paused in her painting and was carefully considering her.

"Does he make you laugh?" Her teammate inquired.

Naruto cocked her head to the side, remembering the last time she laughed with Kakashi, which was actually just the other day when he made that sickly face at the thought of Iruka asking why Kakashi's neighbor thought that the academy teacher had strange bedroom habits. "Yes," she admitted with a smile.

That seemed to satisfy Sakura, who went back to carefully painting Naruto's nails with the steady, precise hands prized by those trained to handle complicated medical procedures.

Ino gave a rude sounding *pfft*, forcefully blowing the air past her lips. "Those are all lovely personality traits, but I'm really more curious about your physical preferences," she said bluntly, ignoring Sakura's cough that sounded suspiciously like 'pervert.'

"Is he strong?"

Naruto nodded.

"Like, ninja-trained strong?"

Naruto nodded some more, knowing that trying to lie to Ino would only make the girl more curious in the long run.

"So," drawled Ino, leaning forward, "he must have a pretty good body then, right. Have you seen it?"

Naruto's face was beginning to turn tomato red as she pulled away from the blonde and Sakura barely avoided smudging the topcoat.
"Ino," scolded Sakura, fixing Naruto with a scowl to keep her from fidgeting and then giving an exasperated look to the source of the trouble.

"It's a perfectly reasonable question," protested Ino, sprawling backward into the arm of the couch.

Sakura rolled her eyes and Ino mirrored the gesture in response, muttering something about Sakura being a prude to which Sakura responded with a testy sniff.

Ino tapped her own beautifully painted purple nails against her chin. "Have you slept with him?" Ino came right out and asked.

"No!" said Naruto, with what may have been a shriek.

"Have you even kissed him?" Ino asked, tone a strange mix of desperation and depression.

"No," repeated Naruto, trying to stop blushing, "What does it even matter to you?"

Sakura laughed, "Ino's just trying to live vicariously through your love life because she doesn't have one of her own at the moment to keep her occupied."

"Oh," cried Ino defensively, ineffectively tossing a throw pillow at her longtime friend. "Its not like you have one either!"

Sakura just raised her eyebrows suggestively, a smile on her lips as she finished applying the topcoat to Naruto's nails.

Ino scoffed, "Don't even try that, you're such a tease." She turned to address Naruto, "Sakura's trying to change the subject by nonverbally implying that she's getting some, but she's a lying liar who lies. You're my best bet at fulfilling my drama needs for the day, so you're not getting off that easily."

Naruto suddenly wished her hands were dry so that she could actually open the door and flee without smudging them, therefore inciting instant death-by-Sakura. She looked longingly at the escape route, but quailed under Sakura's knowing gaze and threatening crack of knuckles.

"So tell me," said Ino, swinging her legs up on the couch so that they rested on top of Naruto's knees, pinning her down and keeping the nervous, twitching jinchūriki from bolting. Ino reclined gracefully, looking completely relaxed and in her element. "Do you like his eyes?"

Naruto twitched. Which eye? The grey one that he used everyday? Or the red one that remembered everything and occasionally gave way to tears for the loved ones he'd already lost? "Yes." She said stiffly. She supposed she liked both of them.

"We've established he's fit, so he must have good muscles, right?"

Ino took Naruto's silence for agreement, "Well then," said the nosy blonde, "Sakura's a fan of men with nice arms—"

"That means great hugs!" Sakura huffed defensively.

"—And therefore, we need to know if Sakura should be jealous. Does your man have nice arms?"

Well, Naruto twiddled her fingers together nervously. Now that she actually thought about it, she had seen Kakashi in short sleeves on occasion and he did have nicely muscled arms. He had to have strong arms when his best ninjutsu relied on pushing those arms forward with enough power to thrust through a person's chest. Not exactly a romantic thought, but, "Yes," she said squeakily, not making
eye contact with the other two, "He's got nice arms." And he must have nice shoulders. And good abs. Naruto's train of thought, once fed a bit, travelled forward with a life of its own, rapidly gaining momentum and bringing her mind to a conclusion that stopped Naruto's brain in it's figurative tracks.

*Holy crap*, Naruto thought, epiphany causing her formerly twitching fingers to freeze.

*Kakashi is hot.*

Ino laughed victoriously.

Naruto tried to control her breathing. It wouldn't do to actually have a panic attack at the moment. She was so distressed that she barely caught Sakura's next question.

"And his hugs?" Asked Sakura from behind Naruto's shoulders.

"Eh," said Naruto with a shrug, as soon as she could wrestle the sound from her suddenly uncooperative voice box. At least she felt better giving an answer which didn't make her feel funny and cause all the blood in her body to rush to her face. After all, Kakashi didn't really do hugs unless backed into a corner and glomped, and even then, half the time he shunshined away before she could make contact. When she was successful, it was always an awkward tentative pat. Like a stranger petting a dog to which they'd just been introduced. A forced sort of 'there, there, now,' which he ended as quickly as possible. Iruka gave much better hugs. But those were, like, big brother hugs. Those were the best.

Naruto made a face as she suddenly realized she didn't actually want Iruka-big-brother hugs from Kakashi.

"Oh," said Sakura, sounding disappointed and wistful, unaware of the silent turmoil going on inside the normally loquacious blonde's head. "Well, you'll just have to teach him then."

Naruto's lips twitched. She wondered what Sakura would think if she knew she was telling Naruto to teach Kakashi a lesson on how to give proper, dream-inducing hugs. Actually, Sakura would probably wholeheartedly join and help, albeit for reasons far more innocent than Naruto's. The blush began to creep back onto her face.

"And what about his ass?" asked Ino impatiently.

Naruto made an unintelligible noise.

"Oh look," Ino blinked, "Your face is so red, its ssssoooo cute!" She leaned forward to pinch Naruto's cheeks as her target squirmed and swatted at Ino's hands.

"I don't know." Naruto finally managed to get out with what she hoped was a haughty sniff, "I'm not a pervert. I haven't thought about that." Which wasn't actually a lie. Naruto probably should have been thinking about that given her assignment, but she really hadn't considered it as much as she should have. Oh, God. She needed to assess Kakashi's ass. She was never going to make it through this alive. Naruto buried her face in her hands. It was probably disturbingly perfect and—oh, god. Naruto groaned miserably as Ino cackled in the background.

"I knew it!" Ino crowed. "Naruto totally likes his ass!"

"Ino," Sakura scowled and swatted Ino with the couch pillow.

"Hey!" Ino cried, fighting back with a matching pillow of her own. "Men ogle our asses all the time. And they don't even have the decency to do it discretely. We can totally discuss theirs behind their
backs.”

Ino giggled at her own joke and Sakura muttered something about the maturity level in the room just dropping significantly merely due to the other’s presence. Sakura turned to Naruto, deciding to finally aid the clearly uncomfortable blonde, rubbing a soothing hand down her back. She tried to think of a new question to derail Ino’s more intimate questions.

"What about his smile, Naruto? Do you like his smile, do you make him laugh?"

Naruto pushed her embarrassment down and tried her best to answer Sakura, only to realize that she didn’t really have an answer. "I think," she hesitated, "I think I make him laugh. But he doesn’t really like to show emotion a lot, and," she swallowed sadly, "I’m not sure I’ve ever seen him really smile."

Ino’s brows drew together as she considered the answer; she looked concerned and lost in thought.

Sakura, on the other hand, was more than willing to share her opinion about Naruto’s unexpectedly somber response. "Oh," she seethed, suddenly irritated, "He’s one of those."

Naruto blinked, confused. She wasn’t sure what the those Sakura referred to were, but judging by the amount of killing intent Sakura was suddenly giving off, Naruto was very glad that she herself didn’t fall within the definition.

"Well," said Sakura emphatically, clearing her throat. "You’ll just have to show him what a catch you are." She pinned Naruto with bright green eyes. "Make him see how amazing you are and how easy it would be for you to have any man of your choice. Make him know that he’s going to have to work to keep you, and if he doesn’t," Sakura looked away, head held high, "then you should just leave."

"Leave?" Naruto asked.

"Mmm-hmmm," Sakura said, standing and starting to clean up the mess that they’d made, picking bits of popcorn off the carpet. "If he doesn’t realize how wonderful you are, then he doesn’t deserve you, and you shouldn't waste any more time on him."

Naruto thought the sentiment quite sweet, and it bolstered her courage to hear the other girl say it. Unfortunately, this wasn’t a situation that Naruto could just walk away from. She’d made a commitment, and she was going to see this through. She really didn’t want Tsunade to have to look for a Plan B, for another person to carry out the assignment. The very idea made something in Naruto’s chest twist really funny, like she’d taken a big gulp of sour milk.

Sakura was busy cleaning, lost in her own thoughts, but Ino was watching Naruto closely.

Ino peered intently at her, arms wrapped around her pillow-weapon. "Don't worry," Ino said with a soft smile. Ino leaned forward in a spur of the moment fit of compassion and gave her fellow blonde a hug, squishing the pillow flat between them. "I bet he loves you already. Everybody does."

Naruto arrived home rather late that night, kicking off her shoes as she entered and closing the door behind her quickly to keep the spring insects from following her into the well lit room. Kakashi was reclining on the sofa bed. It was in couch form, but he took up all of it, head on one arm and feet trailing over the edge of the other. He sat up lazily, snapping his book shut and waving a hand in greeting. "Yo."

He had been pretending to read a new novel that Gai had recommended recently about two ninja on opposite sides of a war falling in love and betraying their respective countries, but he was struggling
to get into it. The idea of betraying his country for anything didn't really sit well with him; he couldn't relate to it. And it wasn't that well-written on top of everything else. He found the characters unoriginal and dull, falling into predictable behavioral patterns. It was hardly entertaining to read a book where you guessed what would happen on the next page before you even turned to it.

And since the book wasn't keeping his entire attention, his mind kept wandering to ponder his earlier conversation with Kurenai. He'd wanted her honest opinion, but she'd refused to give him a direct answer to his questions. She said it wasn't her place to tell Kakashi what he should want in life. Kakashi, despite having heard and accepted arguments to the contrary, still occasionally found it difficult to break away from the mindset that ninja existed simply to be tools for their village. This was one such occasion, where he'd much rather the Village and Hokage tell him what he should want. Unfortunately, neither Hokage nor his peers seemed to be accommodating him on this point. Kurenai kept telling him that this was something he needed to figure out on his own.

Caught up as he was in the tangled web of his own thoughts, it took Kakashi a moment to realize that Naruto had paused before the couch, an odd, distressed expression painted across her normally relaxed and cheerful features.

"Something wrong?" Kakashi asked bluntly, absently reaching up to reassure himself that his mask was still securely attached to his face.

"No," Naruto said, voice strange and high and distracted, eyes shifting to stare at the scuffed wooden floors.

Kakashi followed her eyes, expecting to see a bug or something she considered distasteful. Not that he'd ever heard her squeal about a cockroach before, Sakura was loud enough in those circumstances to have drowned out any response Naruto had given, but obviously something was upsetting the blonde. He frowned at the empty floor, failing to note anything of interest, not even a new dent.

After a few seconds, Naruto moved to sit down on the other end of the couch, tensely, shoulders straight and tight, hands clasped in her lap.

Naruto, for her own part, was using every ounce of the frail self-control she'd developed over the years not to blush or giggle inappropriately or fall apart into a stuttering, incomprehensible mess of emotions just because earlier that day she'd been doing her very best to imagine what Kakashi looked like under his mask, and whether the skin on his cheeks might be smooth to the touch, and how it might feel to actually kiss—She gave a strained squeak and tightened her clasped hands, digging her painted nails into the back of her knuckles. *Think boring thoughts. Think unattractive thoughts. Think Gai and Lee in green swim trunks.*

Kakashi eyed her as they wallowed in a tense awkward silence, not sure how to start conversation.

Kakashi felt completely out of his depth, wondering where the normally boisterous girl had gone and what had caused her to turn into this taciturn, nail-biting creature sitting timidly across from him. He kept glancing at her from the corner of his eye, but her gaze remained firmly fixed on the floor.

The copy ninja tried to read his book or continue his earlier thought process, but couldn't relax enough to do either with Naruto so clearly uptight and uncomfortable nearby. Eventually, he sighed, giving his own entertainment up as a lost cause for the night. He tucked the book into his jacket and cleared his throat. Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on his knees and studied the far wall as if it contained the answer to the meaning of life.

"So," he drawled, receiving only a distracted hum for his efforts.
He furrowed his brows. He wasn't used to Naruto ignoring people. Ignoring him. Usually she was so hungry for attention she latched onto any semblance of it that a person was willing to give to her.

"Did you practice today?" He finally settled for asking, not too sure how else to figure out what was wrong with the girl. After all, maybe she messed up a seal and was worried about how he would react to learning she'd been practicing unsupervised. He knew he told her not to do so, but he could hardly fault her for going against his wishes when he'd been purposefully avoiding training her for the past week or so.

Naruto, on the other hand, was still trying to reconcile the discussion she'd had with Ino and Sakura that day and figure out how to live in the same apartment as Kakashi, however temporary the situation. How were you supposed to cohabit with someone when you'd just realized that you kind of liked their eyes, and you were curious about how it would feel to really get a hug from them and maybe you wanted to try and make them smile and you were wondering about how they looked after shedding a few layers of clothes, and it wouldn't be that hard to find out considering the shower arrangements—

*That boy is trying to talk to you,* interrupted Kurama, who'd lately settled on calling Kakashi "that boy" instead of "one of the lesser annoying furless flea-infested, mutt-loving monkeys," a concession to the fact that Naruto was trying to seduce the man and it was kind-of mood killing for Kurama to keep calling him such.

"Oh, no," replied Naruto, distracted, thankful for the fox's interjection, "I spent today with Sakura-chan and Ino-chan. We didn't practice." She focused on stringing coherent sentences together, one word at a time. "We just talked a lot."

"Ah," said Kakashi as if he understood. Which he didn't. Because how did you spend an entire day with your peers and not spar or practice at all? Maybe they were talking about theory or swapping stories about their most recent progress. He supposed this would be one of those times where Kurenai would just tell him to ask. "What did you talk about?" Kurenai said Kakashi needed to try and understand his kid—er, minions, more, that maybe talking with them would give him some ideas about figuring out what he wanted to do. It was eerily similar advice to Tsunade's, but he wouldn't be surprised if the two women shared gossip. He didn't hide the fact that he needed a little bit of social help sometimes. Anyway, it couldn't hurt to give the advice a try, and Naruto usually loved to talk. Usually.

But to his surprise, Naruto's face suddenly turned bright red. Well, more red than it already was. Come to think of it, she'd looked a bit flushed since she came home. Was she ill? She wasn't really one to catch sick. He leaned forward to place his hand to her forehead to check for fever, but she jumped back from his touch as if burned. His brow furrowed, *she doesn't smell ill,* he took a deep breath to check, *she smells,* he paused, *embarrassed?*

Naruto suddenly looked mortified and jumped off the couch, face bright red as she sprinted to the bathroom with a jumbled "I need to take a shower don't wait up I'll see you in the morning," slamming the door behind her with such force that it rattled the clock on the wall.

Kakashi blinked. *What the hell?* He looked around the room curiously; as if the reason for Naruto's strange behavior would be in plain view. A sudden thought made him freeze in horror. *Maybe it's just a girl thing.* He picked up his book and protectively clutched it to his chest, retreating to his room with one last disquieted look over the shoulder at the bathroom door. He wasn't emotionally strong enough to deal with any more weird shit tonight, particularly if it was something he had no hope of successfully dealing with from the start. Naruto was going to have to handle any mysterious female issues on her own.
Naruto woke to the sound of metal objects crashing onto metal, followed by dull thuds that she dimly recognized as cabinet doors closing.

She blinked sleepily, staring at the familiar ceiling fan swinging slowly around on its lowest setting. She didn't get up, merely content to lie in bed, enjoying waking up to the mid-morning sunshine and the smell of food. Wait, *mid-morning* sunshine?

Naruto bolted upright on the pulled-out sofa bed, "I'm late for practice!" She tripped as she tried to escape her nest of blankets and almost wound up face-first on the floor, catching herself with an outstretched hand at the last minute and bouncing back up to the unexpected sound of a woman's laughter.

The blonde whirled toward the kitchen, rubbing at her eyes as she took in the sight of her newest mentor making herself at home in Kakashi's kitchen.

Kurenai waived at her absently with a spatula, beckoning her to come into the kitchen and indicating that the younger girl should take a seat at the table.

Naruto did a double take to make sure that she was still in Kakashi's apartment, but everything looked the same, from the very dusty, ancient television to the burn stains on the microwave that Naruto had put there herself. The only thing wrong was that the owner of the apartment was notably absent. She slowly plodded into the kitchen area and pulled out one of the two worn metal chairs, giving a large yawn as she slouched into her seat.

Kurenai set a plate of pancakes in front of them both before joining her at the table.

Naruto tried very hard to keep from drooling, it smelled *wonderful*.

"Where's Matsu-chan?" Naruto remembered her manners well enough to politely ask the question before spearing three of the fluffy golden cakes for herself, dragging them to her own awaiting plate and drowning them in syrup.

"With Konohamaru-kun," Kurenai answered, daintily cutting up a single pancake for her own brunch. "He's convinced he can teach Matsu-chan the proper way to hold and throw kunai within the month."

Naruto just nodded absently, she thought that was a bit ambitious for the duo judging what she'd last seen of the toddler's coordination, but hey, Konohamaru-kun wasn't one to shy away from setting big goals. She focused on chewing a large mouthful of the sweet bread, having the grace to swallow it before finally getting around to asking about her missing roommate.

"He thought you were sick," Kurenai said with a wry smile, "and he decided to let you sleep in and asked me to come deal with you."

Naruto scowled, indignant, "I don't get sick."

"Kakashi seemed a bit puzzled about it too," Kurenai tapped the edge of her plate with her fork cheerfully. "I don't think he was worried you were ill in the traditional sense, I think he was more concerned that you were having what he referred to as "*womanly*" issues."

"Womanly iss-?" Naruto slowly said the words, and then all at once her brain caught on and she fork falling from her fingers and mouth falling open, "Are you serious?" She let her face drop into her hands. "Please tell me you're joking."

Kurenai laughed loudly. "'Fraid not. Can you think of anything else that would cause him to come
drag me from my home first thing in the morning to deal with one of his subordinates?" Kurenai's smile was smug and amused, "And then excuse you from a day of practice on top of that?"

Naruto just groaned, refusing to remove her face from her hands, food forgotten.

"Now, now," Kurenai said, in between delicate bites of pancakes. "When pressed, Kakashi said you were visibly upset about something last night, refused to talk to him about it, and went and hid in the bathroom for two and half hours." The jōnin's tone implied that she was having far too much fun with this whole situation. "Setting aside Kakashi's inability to deal with anything emotionally more complex than a traditional social introduction in a familiar setting, if that is actually how you usually behave, I would be concerned, so why don't you go ahead and tell me what happened last night."

The chūnin let her arms drop to the tabletop with a heavy thump. "Couldn't he just ask me if something was wrong, like a normal person?" She pursed her lips, and then reached for a glass of orange juice and drank it down all at once.

Kurenai sniffed dismissively, "He's a man," she said with an absent shrug of her shoulders, as if that should explain everything.

"So that just excuses him from asking a simple question?" Naruto ran her fingers through her loose hair, pausing as they got caught in a tangle.

"It means," drawled Kurenai, as she finished the last few bites of her own meal, "That he likes to fix things. And he feels a bit helpless and useless when he doesn't know how to do so."

"But there wasn't really anything for him to fix," said the blonde, attempting to unweave the rats nest that her hair had become in her sleep.

"Yes," Kurenai slid her empty plate forward so that she could rest her crossed arms on the table. "I think you'll find that it's a common problem with men and women. Men like to immediately fix problems, all types of problems, including emotional ones. They solve things with physical action, and if it can't be solved that way, it takes them a while to wrap their minds around it."

Naruto listened attentively as Kurenai continued her explanation. "These are generalizations of course, but women don't see all problems as things that need to be immediately solved, or solved with physical action. Women tend to think about the problem more, and often, they are happy enough simply talking to someone who will listen about the problem. To women, talking about the problem can be just as satisfying as actually finding a solution." Kurenai looked fondly at her pupil. "As you can imagine, it's a very wise, emotionally intelligent man who has realized that the best way to deal with an upset woman is simply to offer her a shoulder to cry on and thirty minutes of his time to listen to her tirade." Kurenai took a sip of coffee. "That's not Kakashi."

Naruto snorted and began to braid now mostly untangled hair in an attempt to keep it somewhat manageable until she had time to properly brush it out and pin it back.

Kurenai gave her a knowing look over the rim of the ceramic coffee cup. "I'm not going to let you change the subject by focusing on Kakashi's ineptitude with the fairer sex, so spill."

Naruto bit her lip and toyed with the end of her braid. "Well," she took a deep breath, bracing herself as if she was about to share one of her darkest secrets, "I talked with Ino-chan and Sakura-chan yesterday."

"Oh," said Kurenai expectantly, "And what did the three of you talk about?"

The blonde tried not to melt into an embarrassed puddle as she reluctantly admitted, "Boys."
"Boys?" Kurenai drawled, "Or men?"

Naruto gulped, face flushing, "Men."

Kurenai smirked, taking another sip of her coffee, enjoying the squirming of her mentee far too much, "Any man in particular?"

Naruto scowled, "You know."

"I'm sorry," said Kurenai, "I know what?"

"No," muttered Naruto, fiercely stabbing at her sole remaining pancake, cutting it into smaller and smaller pieces, "You know who."

"They know you're after Kakashi-san?" Kurenai looked surprised.

"Oh, no," Naruto shook her head, "We were just talking about guys we liked and they wanted to know what I liked about mi-," Naruto stopped mid-sentence, and then hurriedly babbled, "Not that he's mine, as in, it's not like I possess him or anything, but they wanted to know about what I liked about the guy I told them I had a crush on and then they wouldn't stop talking and it was all, 'How nice are his abs?' and 'Rate his ass on a scale of 1 to 10' and, urgg-," Naruto's voice cut off as she buried her head in her folded arms on the table.

Kurenai inspected her nails, "And just what does Kakashi's ass rate on a scale of 1 to 10?"

"Kurenai-sensei!" Naruto's words were muffled, but the pleading tone carried clearly across the kitchen.

"Oh, relax Naruto," Kurenai smiled as she set her mug down and rose to gather the dishes. "It's perfectly normal and healthy for you to have these conversations." She moved to the sink, turning the water on to rinse the crumbs off the plates before setting them safely in the dishwasher. "Now, I want you to answer me honestly," she looked at the sulking blonde over her shoulder, "how do you feel about Kakashi after that conversation?"

Naruto sighed in irritation before scooting her chair back and standing up to stretch. She paced for a few minutes around the small apartment, thinking hard. Kurenai allowed her enough time to make up her mind until she finished rinsing the dishes and putting the extra pancake batter in the refrigerator for another day. She wiped her hands on a dish towel and turned to face the girl, "Well?"

Naruto leaned against the back of the couch, arms crossed, looking a bit miserable. "I," she hesitated, hating the fact that for the past twenty four hours she'd blushed more than she ever had in her life, "I think I kind of, you know, like him."

"Naruto-chan," Kurenai said with a sigh, rubbing at her temples. "You are a grown woman. I believe you are experiencing what we women like to call a 'crush.' It's an infatuation with an individual, where you suddenly start noticing them more and began to consider what it may be like to have a physical, romantic relationship with them."

Naruto just nodded.

"Have you really never liked someone this way before, Naruto?" Kurenai raised an eyebrow skeptically.

The chūnin shook her head, "Not really. I've spent most of my life focusing on getting strong enough to live through the Akatsuki mess. I never really had time to," she paused, before settling on saying,
"I never had time to really notice and appreciate anyone. Not 'till lately." She tilted her head for a moment, blue eyes blinking thoughtfully, "Well, there were probably a few moments where I thought like that about Sasuke-kun." She looked mournfully at Kurenai, "He's awfully pretty," she admitted, tone apologetic.

Kurenai bit back a laugh, managing to simply nod seriously in agreement. "Yes he is. It's the pale skin and dark hair. Especially those eyelashes."

Naruto's lips twitched. "And his abs are nice too."

Kurenai smiled conspiratorially, "And the elegant arc to his eyebrows and deep, soulful eyes."

"Kakashi's are better," Naruto muttered, then blushed, eyes wide, looking like she'd been caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

Kurenai just smiled. "It's good that you think so." She moved to the sofa, pulling off the covers and folding it back into shape as a couch. "Come sit with me."

Naruto obediently took the spot next to her on the couch, Kurenai facing her with her hands folded in her lap.

"Now that I've finally got Kakashi to see you as a woman and not a student, and I've finally got you to look at Kakashi as a man and not a teacher," Kurenai ignored Naruto's indignant splutters, "I need to ask you again: Do you want to go forward with this mission?"

Naruto paused, confused, "Why are you asking me again?"

The jōnin looked at her, assessing the younger woman, "I've had time to observe the both of you now, and while it's not necessarily my job, I've been trying to figure out if the two of you can get through this mission and emerge relatively emotionally stable. I care for both of you, and I don't want either of you irreparably harmed when all is said and done."

Naruto curled her legs up, wrapping her arms around them and watching Kurenai with wide eyes.

"That being said," the older woman continued, "I've gotten you both to the point of no return, and if you keep going forward, you won't be able to back away and return to your former teacher-student relationship. If you keep pushing, Kakashi will break, and I honestly can't tell you if it will be a break for the better or for the worse."

"I don't understand," said the girl in a small voice.

"What I mean is that Kakashi will be forced to redefine his identity, he's going to be forced to restructure his personal goals and even his lifestyle to accommodate your permanent involvement as an immediate family member. Or, he could choose to shut you out completely and pretend that nothing ever happened, but in doing so, he'll completely avoid you, he won't allow you to return to the comfortable camaraderie that you've shared." Kurenai looked seriously at her charge, "One of these is a healthy reaction, the other is unhealthy, but I have no way of knowing which one he will choose. Perhaps the route he chooses will depend on your own actions."

Kurenai locked eyes with the blonde to emphasize the importance of her blunt words. "Additionally, if you don't want this with one hundred percent of yourself, Kakashi is never, ever going to let you in his bed. And he'll probably figure out your game on top of it, be hurt, and still shut you out." Her gaze softened a bit, taking in the upset visage of the younger girl who, although she'd lacked much contact with her in the past, had quickly grown on the older woman.
"Understandably, this is a lot of pressure to put on your shoulders." Kurenai looked compassionately at the blonde, reaching forward to pat the girl's knee gently, "But it wouldn't be fair of me to allow you to go forward blindly without being aware of the potential consequences." Kurenai took a deep breath, "We talked about the possibility of you walking away after this, raising the child independently and still being friends with Kakashi. I no longer believe that's an option, it's going to be an all or nothing situation. Either he'll keep all of you, or he'll want nothing to do with you." The jōnin clasped her hands and dropped them in her lap. "Knowing this, will you go forward?"

Naruto shivered awkwardly and looked to the side. Kakashi had been a constant presence in her life since she'd received her hitaiate. He'd always been there: helping her, encouraging her, protecting her, holding her up, carrying her home. She bit her lip, visibly expressing the extent of her discomfort. The idea that Kakashi might disappear because of her own behavior…It was a hard thought to swallow. She looked at the orange nails that Sakura had painstakingly painted only the day before. Focus on the big picture, Naruto. She mentally scolded herself and tried to divorce herself from her immediate emotional response to Kurenai's words and logically weigh the potential consequences of her options.

I don't understand what all the fuss is about, mumbled Kurama, I thought you'd already decided this.

Naruto had.

Either Naruto did this, or Tsunade would ask someone else to do the same thing. A stranger.

Little insecure ball of fluff has yet to lose her milk teeth, mocked the fox contemptuously. Letting some other vixen edge in on her territory-

No, snapped Naruto, cutting off chakra creature's belligerent words, surprising herself with the possessive force behind her own thoughts.

But that was that, Kakashi was hers. Her protector, her helper, her teacher, her friend…and now she wanted him as a lover. After all, as Pakkun had said, pack was flexible. So much of Kakashi was hers already, what was it to add one more role to the list? And speaking of Pakkun, unless she was completely mistaken, he was an ally on her side. She suspected he had his own selfish reasons for encouraging her affections. He probably wanted puppies for Kakashi to pass his summoning contract to, but that was ok, Naruto was after puppies too—er, one puppy. One puppy at a time. She ignored Kurama's mutterings in the back of her mind about the inefficiency of humans not having litters.

Naruto straightened her shoulders and focused blue eyes snapped open to meet red. "I want him," she said, without hesitation.

Kurenai gave her a genuine, but somewhat dark, smile. "Good. Then listen up, it's time start seriously playing the game."

Naruto adopted her attentive student posture, hanging onto Kurenai's words as the woman elaborated upon the next phase of her plan, patiently answering all of Naruto's questions and making sure the blonde understood how she was to behave the next few days to both push forward her own agenda and avoid arousing undue suspicion on the part of someone who was considered to be one of the most intelligent ninja in Fire Country.

"And just so you know," said Kurenai sweetly, pausing with her hand on the door frame as she got ready to leave, "As someone who has fought next to Kakashi-san for over two decades, and been through more close calls, wars, and missions gone bad than I'd like to recall, I'd rate Kakashi's ass at an 8.5, it's just a tad too pale for my tastes to be rated in the 9's."
Naruto refused to blush, and just looked darkly at the woman.

Kurenai laughed, "Of course, I only know that because I had to dig a shuriken out of it one time and stitch it up, not that Kakashi would ever willingly admit to that occasion in public." She patted the blonde on a head with a condescending chuckle as Naruto grit her teeth and escorted her out the door.

Chapter End Notes

Beta(s): Crystalline X and ElectraSev5n
The Double Date that Wasn't

Chapter Summary

A fox and a hound walk into a bar.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Naruto took a deep breath and exhaled sharply, watching her cheeks puff out in the bathroom mirror. She tsked, slightly irritated as she tried to arrange the few styling accessories she owned on the minimal countertop space in Kakashi's bathroom. She carefully picked all the bobby pins out of the mess that was her hair and set them back down on the ceramic sink, getting ready to try one more time to put her hair up in a passable attempt at one of the style's Ino had shown her.

Fortunately, knowing Kakashi, Naruto still had another two or three hours before the man ambled home. Plenty of time for her to put her hair up and figure out how to appropriately wear one of the girly outfits that she and Ino and Sakura had purchased the previous month.

Tonight she and Kakashi would be going on a date. Not that he was aware of this, of course.

She picked up the hairbrush and ran it swiftly through her long locks. The she dabbed a little-bit of the no-frizz hair lotion Ino swore by onto her palms and ran her hands through her hair to smooth down the fly-away strands with an intense look of concentration on her face.

Kurenai believed that Kakashi had become comfortable with the idea that Naruto was an attractive young woman, but what the man was struggling with admitting was that Naruto was attractive to him. The blonde wasn't as certain about the eccentric jōnin's state of mind as her female mentor, but she was willing to trust the older woman on the issue.

The chūnin put the last pin in her hair and considered her reflection critically with narrowed eyes. It looked like it would hold. She just needed it to stay up for one evening, that was all. The idea was to start putting Kakashi into situations where he would be forced to publicly acknowledge that Naruto was attractive, and thus start thinking about what that meant in regards to her relationship with him.

Fortunately, Naruto already had an assignment which required her to develop the skill set of 'being pretty in public.' And Kakashi had helpfully, if unwittingly and a bit reluctantly, volunteered his assistance with the project. Naruto was fully prepared to capitalize on that.

Blue eyes scanned the small room as she tried to remember where she placed the hand mirror—ah! There it was. She leaned over to pluck it from its' resting place on the edge of the bathtub. She held it behind her, like Sakura had taught her, so that the image in the front mirror was the hand-held mirror's reflection of the back of her hair. Everything looked good as far as she could tell.

She relaxed a bit, cheerful grin creeping back on to her face as she decided the hairdo would do for now. It certainly wasn't as neat as Ino's, but, eh, Naruto wasn't a perfectionist. She'd originally been a bit worried about the upcoming evening, as her acting skills weren't the best. However, as Kurenai had pointed out, Naruto didn't need to act. After all, she wouldn't be lying when she told him that she needed his help for a mission.
Now to find the dress, and those flimsy heeled shoes with the funny woven straps. She turned on her heel to go scrounge for her bag and as her bare feet made the transition from tile to hardwood flooring, the left half of her carefully pinned up hair fell gracelessly down her shoulders.

"Not again!" Naruto gave an exasperated, frustrated huff and spun back around to the bathroom.

You know, drawled Kurama, all smug and condescending as Naruto struggled to balance holding the handheld mirror and remove all the bobby pins stuck in the back of her hair, You could just summon a bunshin and this wouldn't be nearly that difficult.

Naruto froze for a moment, and then simmered a bit scowling. "That would have been a lot more helpful if you'd mentioned that idea the tenth time I tried to do this!"

But darling, purred the fox, It's just so much fun to see you try so hard.

Kakashi paused in the doorway of his apartment. A petite blonde girl in a brightly colored sundress was daintily sitting on his scruffy couch reading a book. He took a step back to check the plaque on the door and make sure he hadn't momentarily lost his mind and entered the wrong unit.

Nope, this was his place, according to both his sight and his nose. He shrugged and walked inside, the girl looking up at the sound of the door closing behind him.

The familiar whisker-marked cheeks were only slightly reassuring.

"There you are! I've been waiting forever," Naruto said impatiently, snapping whatever book she'd been reading shut and tossing it carelessly to the other end of the sofa. "Come on, I'm starving." She popped to her feet and advanced toward the jōnin, hooking her arm in his and trying to pull him back outside.

Kakashi was an unmovable pillar. "What?"

"I'm hungry," growled Naruto, "and I was waiting for you to come home so I could go get dinner because there is no way I'm going outside by myself dressed like this." The chūnin gestured broadly at her current attire.

Kakashi blinked, "I feel like I missed something—"

"You did," said Naruto testily, "lunch, and now it is almost dinner and I'm really, really hungry."

"Wait," Kakashi persisted, "Why," the copy ninja struggled for the words and eventually settled for waving with his free hand to the dress and describing it as, "this?"

Naruto eyes widened in concern and she looked down at her dress, "is there something wrong with it?" She reached a cautious hand to the hair piled on her head. "I did what Ino told me to and I know it's kind of messy but I think I've seen other girls wear it this—"

"It's very nice," said Kakashi, because over the years he'd learned that was the exact phrase he should use whenever any woman asked about her outfit, "but what makes you think I'm going out to eat with you?"

"The dress is because while you may have let me out of practice this morning, Kurenai-san has not. She says I need to start getting used to behaving more like a normal young woman, or, err," the blonde bit her lip before reluctantly admitting, "one of the phrases she used was act a 'bit more mature'." Naruto shrugged off the comment like she didn't quite entirely understand the situation
herself, but was just going to follow orders. "Apparently part of that means trying to dress like a civilian every once in a while and work on passing myself off as just a pretty girl out on the town for a night. She gave me homework: dress nice and go out for a while."

"As you can see," Naruto said testily as Kakashi's brain worked to absorb the information, "I've accomplished step one as well as I can without Ino or Sakura interfering, but now I've got to go outside." She eyed the door with trepidation. "And I'm not going alone."

Kakashi observed her with a critical eye, trying to discern why Naruto would not go outside by herself. She did look very, well, pretty in the orange halter strap sundress with the heeled brown sandals. The color choice was bold, but by now to be expected, and it didn't look that strange against her tan skin. It wasn't exactly a practical look and, yes, she had painted her nails to match. Her hair was piled messily on top of her head in a bun. He had no idea how it was held together but he wasn't curious enough to ask. The overall effect made her look uncomfortably delicate.

Maybe she was nervous because she couldn't hide any weapons in the outfit and felt vulnerable and exposed. She looked vulnerable and exposed. Kakashi wanted to go find a chūnin vest and zip her up in it.

"I don't remember volunteering for escort duty," the jōnin replied, not feeling very sympathetic to the girl's plight. She'd accepted this mission on her own, completely independent of his advice, after all. Blue eyes narrowed at him dangerously and he resisted the impulse to pull out a book and hide behind the pages.

"Oh, no," said Naruto, in a tone of voice that left no room for compromise, "You're not getting out of this. You totally owe me for ditching me during training all last week."

Kakashi did feel a bit guilty about that, but surely he could come up with some other excuse. "I just finished training myself and should really clean up—"

"Don't even try that," sniffed Naruto, "I'm standing right next to you and you don't smell dirty. You just sat there and read your book while you let Sakura womp on Sasuke because you made it a taijutsu only day."

Kakashi didn't know how she knew that, but yes, that was exactly what he'd done. Sakura had clearly needed a punching bag today and Kakashi didn't feel like volunteering as tribute.

"I'm not that hungry," Kakashi protested, only to be immediately betrayed by a growling stomach. Naruto folded her arms under her breasts, still not cognizant of the physical consequences of such an action in a low-cut dress. "You're coming with me, or you're teaching me how to cook tonight, which means we have to go get groceries anyway."

Kakashi, not knowing quite where to look and in the midst of trying to decide if it was more appropriate to stare at her face or the wall, found himself being pulled out the door, down the stairs, and out of the residential district.

"No." Kakashi said, as soon as he came to his senses enough to remember and act upon the knowledge that he wasn't a teenager and couldn't be controlled by the sight of really nice cleavage. It helped that he suddenly realized where Naruto had decided to drag him to for dinner. "Absolutely not."

Kakashi stopped walking and dug his feet in the ground, causing Naruto to jerk to a stop as well, unable to pull the man any further on the familiar route.
"But," Naruto sputtered indignantly, "I always go to Ichiraku—"

"Exactly," said Kakashi, "you *always* eat ramen. Didn't Kurenai tell you to try a more mature approach to life?"

Naruto frowned, "having ramen for dinner is not *immature.*"

Kakashi gave her a bland look, while Naruto managed to keep hanging from the crook of one arm despite Kakashi having both hands shoved firmly in his pockets.

"Fine then," Naruto eventually murmured with a bitter scowl, scuffing the dirt with an impractical strappy sandal that looked much less sturdy than her usual footgear.

Kakashi made a mental wager with himself on whether the fragile shoes would last the night exposed to the level of abuse the girl's attire normally endured.

Resentful, impatient blue eyes locked with his own single grey eye. "Well, where are we supposed to go?"

*Oh,* Kakashi blinked, he hadn't actually thought farther than refusing to eat ramen for the umpteenth time that week. His head swiveled as he looked around. *Ah,* he thought, spotting the familiar paper lanterns and worn, red canopy of an establishment he'd patronized on an occasion or two. *That'll do.* He ambled forward, Naruto trotting alongside obediently.

He gently batted away the curtain obscuring the entry way and stepped to the side, giving himself a moment for his eyesight to adjust to the dimmer lighting.

Naruto surveyed the scene into which Kakashi had escorted her, unimpressed. "This is a bar."

Kakashi glanced down at the top of her head. "Technically, it's an izakaya."

"Whatever," Naruto's tone indicated that she didn't consider the correction an improvement. "Can you even get a good dinner in a bar?" Naruto asked doubtfully as she observed the stained tables.

The izakaya was a mash-up of seating arrangements, with high stools at the bar, tables scattered throughout the main room, and what looked to be a few side rooms which offered more traditional seating for larger parties. It was a little early for its' usual crowd, and the handful of people scattered throughout the place looked as worn down as the tables.

This suited Kakashi just fine, tired people were generally respectful of other's privacy and personal boundaries. They didn't go out of their way to engage strangers in unsolicited conversation, they just wanted to drown their own woes with liquor.

"Mah," Kakashi drawled, "so judgmental."

Naruto's blue eyes slid up to his own, her pink lips parted for a retort when her gaze suddenly darted away in distraction and she immediately bolted forward, propelling Kakashi along as her fingers dug sharply into his arm. "Oh look, its Ten-chan!"

Kakashi's eye widened as he took in the couple in the farthest booth in the back corner. Sure enough, Gai's student had her back to the wall and looked quite cozy sitting next to Genma, ever present senbon drooping from the corners of his mouth. They'd both taken the prime positions, backs to the wall next to the kitchen exit, where they could each see whoever entered through every door in the establishment. It was an untraditional sitting arrangement for a couple, but they didn't appear to be bothered by it, rather preoccupied with some type of card game.
However, the game wasn't engaging enough to mask Naruto's approach. *A full scale invasion couldn't mask Naruto's approach,* Kakashi thought to himself, unsuccessfully trying to subtly indicate to Naruto that they should leave the couple alone.

Naruto was having none of it, and instead bulldozed her way through the maze of tables despite Kakashi's firm grip on the back of her dress as he tried vainly to tug her backward. *This was so much easier when she wore that hideous jacket,* he thought, slightly vexed.

A dark-headed ninja sitting at the bar turned at the mild scene they were creating as Naruto gleefully yelled greetings to her peer that could probably be heard three blocks away. The stranger raised an eyebrow at Kakashi's failed ploy to trip the girl into a chair at a different table. The man looked mildly familiar, they'd probably had a mission or two together. His amused gaze met Kakashi's frustrated one and the man grinned, raising his glass in a salute and tilting his head toward Naruto in a manner that was both suggestive and congratulatory. Kakashi grimaced (not that anyone could see) and internally bristled, but before he could identify why the man's actions upset him, he was at Naruto's destination.

Tenten temporarily vacated her seat to embrace Naruto, looking genuinely happy by the girl's arrival. Kakashi looked tiredly at Genma, who dipped his head in a nonchalant 'hello' as he considered the newcomers thoughtfully.

"—And then I made Kakashi come to dinner with me, but actually I'm surprised he's still here because normally he's vanished by this point and left me dragging around some poor civilian caught in his shunshin, and he said we should go here, but I don't know why 'cuz I've never been here before, is the food good?" all came out of Naruto's mouth in one big rush as she peered intently up at the taller weapons mistress.

Tenten laughed, used to Naruto's behavior, "Well it's not exactly Konoha's highest-class dining experience, but I think you'll enjoy it well enough. I'm so glad to see you, I haven't had the chance to talk with you in ages, especially since I moved apartments. It's more frustrating than I realized, to be on the complete opposite side of Konoha, even if I'm now closer to the training grounds. And it's good to see you too, Hatake-sensei," said the girl with a small formal bow.

"Yo," said Kakashi, hands gesturing for her to stop the formalities, feeling uncomfortable and put on the spot, "I think you've earned the right to be a little less formal, not even Naruto calls me sensei anymore."

Brown eyes looked puzzled at that, which struck Kakashi as odd, was it that unusual for Naruto not to call him sensei anymore? Sasuke never had, but the habit was deeply ingrained in Sakura, who was probably the most formal child he'd ever met save the Hyuuga brats. Well, except when Sakura was angry, then it was his full name sans any honorific at all. Which actually was quite often, now that he thought about it.

Whatever Gai's student found odd about the statement, she didn't pursue it, and instead she gestured to the bench opposite her own. "Would you like to join us?"

It was probably one of those social niceties that people were expected to ask upon meeting acquaintances but didn't really expect to be taken up on, as Kakashi couldn't imagine Genma wanting interference on his date, but Naruto was as oblivious as usual and quickly slid into the vacant seat, arm darting out to drag Kakashi down with her.

Kakashi sat stiffly, uneasy with his back to entryway and glared darkly at Genma who hid his own smile at the jōnin's clear discomfort behind a hand holding tattered red playing cards.
Tenten didn't seem too put out by Naruto's acceptance of the obligatory invitation, jumping into some high-pitched chatter about Naruto's hair and then the Yamanaka girl that Kakashi wasn't interested enough in to try and follow. He looked glumly at Genma, who was taking his time to think up a question that Kakashi might actually answer. Kakashi could practically see the cogs slowly turning in the other man's brain as he thought. Genma wasn't unintelligent, he just generally liked to take life at his own pace, so as best to enjoy it. Only, Genma's own pace was several times slower than the average man's unless a fight was on hand.

A waitress who looked far too put-together and chipper for the environment stopped by their table to take their orders.

"What can I get you two?" she said with a smile, plucking a pencil out of her brown hair to take notes on a tiny spiral bound notepad.

"Food," said Naruto, blue eyes big.

The waitress giggled politely, "Well, we do have some of that."

"Good," the blonde nodded seriously, "Bring me whatever you recommend that is really tasty, I'm starving. And when you think you have put together enough to feed me, double it. I'll seriously eat it all."

Kakashi didn't doubt that; Naruto ate like she had ten stomachs, and he knew she'd spent the whole afternoon in his apartment, which wasn't really well stocked with groceries. Despite having company, the jōnin hadn't adjusted his grocery shopping. Her self-led adventures in cooking were apparently more hazardous than unsupervised sealing practice. And he kept having a flashback to when he was five and Minato-sensei was telling him that no, he couldn't feed the cat, because it would follow them home and Kushina-san would never let them get rid of it. He shook his head to chase the old memory away. Naruto wasn't a cat; what a strange thing to think of while ordering dinner. It was probably a little late for that strategy to work anyway. He blamed Pakkun, the pug should have known better than to give the girl an open invitation to help herself to someone else's fridge.

The waitress looked a bit out of her depth, leading Tenten to step in and give some guidance.

"Why don't we just do the all-you-can-eat," the brunette said helpfully, "that is," she paused to look specifically at Kakashi, "if everyone has the time for it?"

"Yes!" Naruto agreed eagerly, "that's perfect!"

"No problem here," Genma said, picking up all the cards lying about and reshuffling them into one hand.

Kakashi just slouched further in resignation.

Not hearing any opposition, the waitress bobbed her head, "Alright, do you want to start with some sushi or edamame?"

"Sushi," Naruto said without hesitation, "a little bit of everything, please."

"And to drink?"

Naruto shrugged, "Water is fine."

"Water?" asked the woman, surprised more by the choice of drink than the blonde's original
extravagant demands to be fed. "Don't you want something a little stronger, dearie?"

"Nah," Naruto waved her off, "Alcohol really doesn't do much for me and Sakura is always telling me I need to hydrate more, so water's good."

The waitress, blinked, bemused, but simply drawled, "Alright-y then," in a sing-song voice before turning her attention to Kakashi. She eyed him appreciatively, but clearly thought better of vocally flirting with him with in his present female company. Kakashi could feel the assumptions she was making, *civilians are so transparent*, but he couldn't bring himself to care enough to clarify matters. After all, he rationalized, ultimately the opinion of one civilian waitress was of little significance. He sighed, "Go ahead and bring me a 'Death in the Afternoon."

The waitress raised an eyebrow, but otherwise didn't comment on his choice.

Genma was not so polite, but made an effort anyway, trying to cover up his laugh with coughing.

"What's wrong with you? You didn't swallow your senbon, did you?" Tenten said with a frown, reaching over to whack him on the back.

"I've never heard of that drink before," Naruto commented, raising a hand to re-pin a stray strand of hair behind her ears. "What was it?"

"Something exceedingly alcoholic," mumbled the copy ninja.

Genma finally managed to get his wheezing laughter under control, "Starting a bit early today, huh, Kakashi?"

Kakashi didn't let the barb get to him. He rarely indulged in liquor, only when the rest of the company was mostly sober, and even then, he knew his limits and refused to drink past them, but he was going to need a good drink to get through this meal. "It's happy hour," Kakashi said calmly.

Genma guffawed, but Tenten cut him off before he could let loose with a customary wise-crack.

"We were playing poker earlier, would you like to join us?"

"Oh," cheered Naruto, "I love that game. What are the stakes?"

Tenten and Genma looked taken aback by her unexpected enthusiasm. Kakashi didn't know why they would expect a different answer from a girl who'd been spending an inordinate amount of time holed up with the Hokage lately.

"Great!" Tenten smiled as she and Genma quickly recovered their composure. "We really were just playing for spare weapons, but why don't we change it up now so that whoever wins the most hands doesn't have to split the dinner bill?"

Kakashi tried to input, "I'm not sure that—"

"Great," said Naruto, smile looking especially fox-like as she slapped her hand on the table. "Deal me in."

"Excellent," Tenten purred with an equally predatory grin.

Genma, at least, had enough sense to pick up on Kakashi's hesitance and look a bit uneasy.

Five rounds later, the senbon-chewing man understood exactly why.
"I win again!" Naruto crowed, spreading her hand out across the table in no particular order, the Queen of Hearts in her royal flush ending up nearest to Kakashi.

Genma blinked, "So you do," he said with a regretful smile, laying down his own hand, which while quite good, three jacks, one away from four of a kind, his missing card with Naruto. "Lucky girl," he drawled.

Naruto just beamed and munched on her eighth stick of yakitori.

Tenten's fist tightened on her own hand as she looked on in disbelief. "It's not statistically possible for you to win this much!" She had a forced smile on her face, but was beginning to develop a nervous tick in her left eye.

"Mmm," agreed Genma, eying the blonde in a manner that inspired Kakashi to take another sip of his second drink. "I'd accuse you of hiding cards up your sleeves, but you don't have any, sleeves that is."

"Nope," said Naruto, popping the 'p.' "I don't need to cheat."

Genma laughed outright at that, as if it was the best joke he'd heard all evening. It probably was, considering that when ninja played poker, everyone cheated. That was the game.

Kakashi tipped his head back to rest against the back of the booth. He had long ago learned that Naruto had some strange power of skewing luck her way which went into overdrive in games of chance and had known who the winner of the night would be before the first hand was even dealt.

Tenten reached forward to grab Naruto's winning hand, physically examining the cards to see if she could find something off about them.

"I just win by sheer awesomeness," Naruto said smugly, beaming happily.

Tenten grumbled her discontent, looking skeptically at the chnin.

"You have to admit," drawled Genma, "there's not a lot of places she could hide spare cards in that outfit."

"Yeah," agreed Naruto, nodding, "it's kind of hard to slip things in here."

Kakashi cleared his throat, interrupting the comment Genma was obviously dying to make, "Naruto, didn't you say you wanted to use the restroom as soon as this round was over?"

"Oh yeah, I did. And I do." She pushed at Kakashi to get up and let her out of the booth, and slipped past him.

"I'll go with you." said Tenten, following the blonde to the restrooms hidden down a hallway on the far side of the room. "Be right back," she called over her shoulder.

Kakashi took his seat again with a put upon sigh.

"Why do women do that?" Genma mused idly as he collected the cards.

"Hm?"

"They always go to the restroom in pairs," Genma elaborated, "It's like they have secret society meetings in bathroom stalls."
"I'm not sure men are meant to understand all the mysteries of the female gender," was all Kakashi could bring himself to answer, "And I'm not about to start holding your hand next time you feel the need to heed nature's call just because you want to find out."

"Aww, Kakashi, so sweet of you to think of me," the jōnin's words dripped with sarcasm as he reshuffled the cards, "But I can think of better company to keep with my pants down."

"I'm sure you can," the silver-haired ninja drawled, not really wanting to give Genma the opportunity to elaborate on that company; he had no desire to hear anything about Genma's relationship with Tenten.

"What have you been up to?" Genma put the cards into his vest and took the senbon out of his mouth so he could try some of the kushiyaki that Naruto had yet to inhale. "I hear you're stuck in the village for a while, but I've not seen you out around town."

"Personal things." the copy ninja murmured.

"Mah," the tokubetsu jōnin waved a hand dismissively, "everything is personal with you."

Kakashi took a drink in lieu of responding and the other ninja gave a dramatic sigh. "You never want to talk about you. Fine then, we'll talk about your girl," Genma's eyes took on a mischievous gleam, "When did she get so cute?"

The copy-ninja stiffened, "She's not my girl—"

"Man, I remember her dad," said Genma, waxing nostalgic, "he'd be having kittens right now seeing her in that dress. He would have been one of those super overprotective ones, I just know it." He put down the mostly eaten stick of food and folded his arms behind his neck to stretch a little. "Bet that's all fallin' on you now? How're you holding up?"

Would Sensei have said something about the dress? Kakashi was a bit confused as he couldn't recall Sensei ever saying anything about Kushina's attire, but he also remembered at least one occasion where Rin had described Kushina-san as fashion-challenged. Minato-sensei probably wouldn't have liked Naruto's current outfit if it drew unwanted attention, although he couldn't imagine Sensei saying something like that with Kushina in the room. He was so lost in his own thoughts that he barely caught the last of Genma's questions, "What?"

Genma gave Kakashi a knowing grin. "Need to go dig out the tantō yet to beat the boys sniffing around her back?"

Kakashi's eye widened, surprised. "It's not like that…" It really wasn't. Kakashi had never imagined himself taking the role Minato should have had for Naruto; that was given to Jiraiya by choice, and the Sandaime and perhaps Iruka-san by circumstance.

"No?" Genma raised an eyebrow. "'Cos I could have sworn I saw Hachirou-kun checking her out when you all walked in and I thought you were going to skin him alive for giving her a good look."

"I was not," said Kakashi defensively. Although now he was glad he knew the other ninja's name.

"Good." Genma said with a teasing laugh. "Then you won't mind if I take her out to dinner next time then, since you're obviously a miserable bastard of a dinner companion. I'll show her what a fun time is."

"You—I," Kakashi spluttered, caught off guard at the inappropriateness of the comment, "shouldn't, you," he shook his head. Genma had a girlfriend, he should leave Kakashi's alone. Er, his minion.
that is, not that Kakashi had any romantic interest in the girl. Sure she was pretty, and clearly growing up and coming into her own, but—he just needed to stop thinking. He settled for glaring darkly at the other man. "Go play with Tenten."

The dark-haired jōnin gave a bellowing laugh, "I do, thank you very much, we play every Tuesday and Thursday. We make excellent sparring partners," he was practically purring now, grin sharp and predatory and senbon back in its usual place in his mouth.

So that's what they call it nowadays, Kakashi thought darkly, before throwing his head back and finishing off his drink.

"You know," Genma continued thoughtfully, tone serious, "you and Naruto really should join us some time. It gets boring doing the same thing every time. I mean, we have our toys, but we could use some more variety to spice things up, keep things lively. There's nothing like adding a new dynamic to keep it fresh."

Kakashi choked on his drink as his mind boggled at the implications.

Meanwhile, in the bathroom, Naruto was washing her hands and a glance in the mirror showed Tenten approaching her with a frown.

"Here," offered the other girl, reaching up touch Naruto's hair, "let me fix your hair, it's falling down in the back."

"Dammit." Naruto hissed, irritated. She thought she'd done it well enough to last for an hour or two at least. She smiled at the older girl, "Thanks."

"No problem," chirped Tenten.

Naruto watched Tenten's hands move with purpose as she skillfully re-pinned the blonde locks. "How'd you get so good at this?"

Tenten had a bobby-pin in her mouth, so instead of answering verbally, she just gestured at the two buns on top of her own head.

"Oh, right!" Naruto slapped her face lightly in a 'duh!' gesture, Tenten had worn her hair in buns since Academy, of course she would know how to pin up hair and get it to stay.

"So," began Naruto nervously, wanting to ask the question that had been on her mind all evening, "are you and Genma?"

"What?" Tenten blinked, then caught on to what the younger girl's question implied. "Oh, God no!" She giggled, "Darn it, you made me drop the bobby pins!"

"Ah, sorry!"

"No, don't bend down, stay standing, it'll all fall out if you move!" Tenten cried in dismay, but a few seconds later, all the bobby pins were retrieved and Tenten quickly went back to work repairing the sheepish Naruto's hairstyle. "Genma and I are just training partners. He's teaching me how to use senbon and he likes testing his taijutsu against mine because though I'm trained by Gai-sensei, I'm not nearly as, well, overwhelming, I suppose."

"Oh," said Naruto, trying not to sound disappointed. She was hoping the older girl might be able to relate a little to her own current predicament. "You two just seem to get along so well."
"Yeah," nodded Tenten calmly, "that happens after you spar with someone consistently for a while. I'm not surprised you think that though," continued the brunette with a rueful sigh, "Gai-sensei gets a little overexcited every time I spend any amount of time with someone of the opposite gender who doesn't wear green spandex. I've heard the strangest things about my love life lately," muttered the weapons mistress.

Tenten put the final pins in Naruto's hair and the blonde admired the final, neater look in the mirror.

"But," Tenten looked slyly at the blonde as she put a hand to the restroom door, stopping just before she pushed it open, "what about you and Kakashi-san?"

"What?" Naruto exclaimed, gulping in surprise. "No!"

"Is that a blush?" Tenten leaned closer to peer at the girl, who took some embarrassed steps backward. "It is!"

Naruto waved her arms and a dozen protests tried to leave her mouth all at once.

"Don't be like that," scolded Tenten, rolling her eyes, back now to the bathroom door, keeping them both from leaving. "You'd be cute together. Besides he's like, one of the hottest men in Konoha. He's been dream fodder for all the girls our age since we hit puberty. Haven't you ever talked with Ino or Sakura about him?"

Naruto vehemently shook her head.

"Man, you're missing out," she said, sounding mournful, dramatically opening the bathroom door and sauntering into the dimly lit hallway.

"Don't look like that," she said, noting the conflicted look on the blonde's face with exasperation. "He's hot, it's an indisputable fact of life."

Naruto looked slightly ill.

"Bwahaha," Tenten laughed, before continuing in a softer voice as they approached the main room, "I shouldn't find your face so funny. After all, I'd probably feel the same way if you were telling me you had a crush on Gai-sensei——"

Both girls froze in shock at the idea and Tenten grimaced. "No, I'd definitely, definitely feel worse."

"I don't think I can un-think that now," said Naruto, face green, pushing forward, wanting nothing more than to get back to the table and steer Tenten into less awkward conversational waters.

"I'm so sorry," Tenten sincerely said.

As the girls approached the table, Naruto immediately noticed the slightly horrified-nauseous expression on the silver-haired jōnin's face. "Kakashi? What's wrong with you?"

Kakashi looked up and noted Naruto's similarly tortured facial expression. Surely Tenten wouldn't have propositioned her in the bathroom? That's it, Kakashi'd had enough for one day. This is what happened when people exceeded their normal tolerance for socialization. "We're leaving."

"What?" Naruto blinked, startled, turning toward Genma for an explanation, only to find the man looking just as surprised as she was by the copy-ninja's attitude.

"Now," said Kakashi, standing, brushing past both girls, knowing Naruto would follow.
"Wait!" The blonde shouted at his back. She hastily turned toward their friends and gave a hurried bow. "Uh, bye guys, see you later!" She whirled around and ran to catch up with Kakashi.

She reached him by the door, where a crowd was gathering, waiting to be seated, as the time was much later and the restaurant's regulars were out in force to enjoy the now lively, charge atmosphere.

"Kakashi—eep!"

Several things happened at once: Kakashi slowed down, both due to the fact that he didn't want to mow down the crowd in his exit and because he felt Naruto's chakra close behind him, Naruto caught up to Kakashi and reached out to latch onto the sleeve of his uniform, and an unfortunate unnamed drunk civilian thought, Wow what a cute ass, and reached out to cop a feel from a blonde he'd never seen flying by him in a pretty orange summer dress.

While Naruto had never personally been harassed in such a manner, she'd seen Sakura be a victim of such an incident. Naruto's slap wouldn't leave quite the same impression as one given by the medic nin, but she had confidence that she could defend herself against such behavior and impart a piece of her mind in the process. However, as she turned around and raised her arm in the air, she realized the opportunity had been stolen from her. The drunk offender had been pinned against the wall with the full force of an agitated jōnin bearing down upon him, members of the crowd cowering back in fear at the unexpectedly aggressive behavior. The civilian whimpered as he was released just as abruptly, quickly retreating as he nursed what was most likely a fractured wrist.

Naruto just blinked as she stared at the tense line of the back of Kakashi's shoulders. She lowered her hand and opened her mouth to speak, but was cut off as the man turned, grabbed her by the elbow, and quickly pulled her from the building.

Genma and Tenten observed the unusual exit from their booth in the back.

"What was that all about?" Genma turned to Tenten, confused.

Tenten, who was still standing, shrugged, "I dunno, he was fine when I left him with you." She narrowed her eyes at her training partner. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything," Genma protested, "I swear, we were just talking."

"Huh," Tenten blinked. She slid back into her former seat with a sigh, "well, who knows." She grimaced in slight embarrassment before sharing the next piece of information with the man. "It sounds like Gai-sensei's been spreading rumors again. Naruto thought we were a couple."

"Really?" Genma gave a frustrated groan, "The man's like a brother to me, but if he doesn't stop butting in—wait," Genma stopped talking, suspicion beginning to dawn in his mind about what Kakashi may have thought that Genma meant during their private conversation. "You don't think?"

"Think what?" Tenten asked idly, waving their waitress over for the check.

"That Kakashi thought that—?" Genma grimaced himself, not needing to verbally finish the sentence with that we were a couple.

"Oh, he totally did," said Tenten with a sniff. "But I'm sure Naruto will set him straight." Or maybe she won't, thought Tenten, it's not like it matters that much in the grand scheme of things.

Genma chewed on his senbon, that alone wouldn't explain Kakashi's reaction, unless…His wide-eyed gaze turned to Tenten. "You don't think that they-?"
"Oh, they totally are," said Tenten with a knowing nod, feeling slightly vindicated at starting a rumor about someone else's love life for once.

"Shit." Genma ran a hand over his face, "Why don't you tell me these things before I put my foot in my mouth?"

"Well," his female companion drawled, "I just have this relentless optimism that you're socially intelligent enough not to say something irredeemably stupid." She finished off her own drink as their waitress approached. "But then you open your mouth and I remember we're only friends because you have excellent aim with sharp pointy objects."

The waitress gave the pair an amused look upon catching the end of their conversation as she handed Genma the bill.

"Goddammit." Genma glared at the offensive piece of paper. "Neither of them paid their part of the bill."

"That's unfortunate," said Tenten blandly as she polished a kunai she'd gouged into the tabletop in a fit of pique the third time Naruto had a winning hand. "I guess you're paying then."

"Sure-wait?" Genma looked confused. "Why do I have to foot the bill?"

"Because you make more than I do," said the brunette practically. "And if you don't," she waved the kunai under his nose in a manner that would be deemed threatening by any civilian observer, but which to a ninja came across as merely playful. "I'll tell Gai-sensei that you're cheap during the next team practice."

Genma looked unamused, but pulled out his wallet all the same. "You see, this is why he thinks those things," he muttered, laying down a wad of cash with a harsh slap to the tabletop. "There, that ought to cover it." The two slid out of the booth and began to make their way outside. "By the way," Genma turned hopeful eyes to his female companion, "my apartment's laundry facility is on the fritz again, someone came back from Suna and now there's sand clogging all the pipes. Can I come do laundry at your place?"

Tenten put her hands on her hips. "You're such a moocher," she said, sounding unimpressed.

"Please?" Genma said with a touch of a whine, "I know I'm a guy, but I really don't enjoy going around with clothes I haven't washed in a month."

"Fine." Tenten said, already making plans. "I'll make hiyayakko if you bring the sake."

Genma's eyes widened appreciatively. "I love you."

"But I get to pick the movie this time," the girl said authoritatively, knowing that if Genma got his way, they'd be watching some boorish comedy while waiting for his clothes to go through the washer and dryer.

The tokubetsu jōnin scowled, "You're going to make me watch some touchy-feely movie again, aren't you?" *Who would have thought the weapons mistress would have such a weakness for chick-flicks?*

"Yes," Tenten freely admitted, "but this one has vampires, I'm sure you'll like it."

"Seriously?" Genma perked up a bit. "So there'll be blood and violence, then? Do they eat people?"
"No," said Tenten, smiling somewhat viciously, "they sparkle."

Genma's shoulders fell, "Goddammit, Tenten, the guys will never let me live it down if they hear about all the movies you've made me watch."

"Don't be such a girl," said Tenten with a snicker, not ready to reveal the fact that she only made him watch those movies to hold it over his head as social blackmail should the occasion ever present itself.

On the other side of the village, Kakashi was nearing his apartment, but still hadn't let go of Naruto, although by now he was gripping her wrist rather than her elbow.

"What was that all about?" Naruto finally gathered the courage to ask, sensing Kakashi had calmed down enough for her to prod a bit.

Kakashi didn't answer, and just continued to determinedly stride forward. Naruto had to take two steps for every one of his just to keep pace and she mentally cursed herself for being so short. Or him being so tall. One of the two was at fault for this scenario.

"Will you at least let go of my hand?" The blonde sighed, resigning herself to the strange ending to what otherwise had been a pleasant evening.

"Maybe when you're thirty," Kakashi muttered under his breath.

Chapter End Notes

Beta(s): CrystallineX, ElectraSev5n, Ladywinterfic
Toiletries

Chapter Summary

In which the bathroom is paid an undue amount of attention.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_We really need to stop having these meetings_, thought Kakashi, slouched in a chair across from Tsunade, giving serious consideration to the idea of taking out Icha-Icha Revolution if Tsunade continued to simply review her paperwork after expending the effort to order ANBU to drag Kakashi away from his usual preoccupations. Just as his fingers twitched toward his vest, the tired-looking leader straightened her stack of papers and set them down with a grunt.

Honey colored eyes observed the copy ninja curiously, but the Hokage's otherwise neutral expression gave no indication as to why he'd been summoned this time.

Finally, the woman drawled. "Do you feel like a naughty child yet? Because I'm beginning to think with your recent behavior that I'm just going to have to put a sign on that chair that says, "Time-Out,' and stick it in the corner of my office for you to come sit in for thirty minutes every other day."

"I'm not sure that was called for," sniffed Kakashi, offended and uncertain about what he'd done to earn her condescension this time.

The Hokage snorted, unimpressed, "The first thing on my office desk this morning was a military police report, claiming a civilian has filed a formal complaint against you, alleging that they were undeservedly manhandled last night at some restaurant."

_Oh, that._ "It wasn't entirely undeserved," muttered the jōnin.

"You broke his wrist."

_Good_, Kakashi thought, a tad vindictively as he clasped his gloved hands together and set them in his lap.

"He's got at least five unrelated witnesses who testify they didn't see him do anything to provoke you." Tsunade said, tone becoming impatient. "And of course, the military police want nothing to do with it because you've made yourself such a notorious pain-in-the-ass to everyone and it apparently takes more man power for them to _find_ you than your actions usually deserve. Unfortunately this means that anything they get with your name on it automatically gets booted up to me and becomes my problem."

Kakashi let the room fill up with a strained silence, not feeling very generous in his commentary this morning.

Tsunade groaned and rubbed her temple with her fingers. "Look," she said flatly, opening her eyes to spear Kakashi with a stern gaze, "We both know that this was unusual behavior for you and you're going to get off with a slap on the wrist if anything, but I still need to be able to give the Civilian Council a reason why some snobby rich guild leader's spoiled grand-brat isn't getting any
recompense for your scandalous misbehavior. So," Tsunade took a deep breath and gave a tense smile with teeth, "Will you please tell me what germ of insanity infested you last night and made you think it was a good idea to physically strike out a man who, I'll give him the benefit of the doubt, has about a tenth of your mental and physical prowess?"

Kakashi, despite feeling deep down that his behavior of the prior night was justifiable, was also beginning to feel the first twinge of sheepishness about the whole ordeal. He cleared his throat and shrugged. "I don't know."

"You don't know," repeated the Hokage, clearly displeased with the answer.

"Mm-hmmm."

Tsunade turned an imploring gaze to the ceiling. "Somebody save me from ninja," she muttered bitterly. "Alright," struggling for patience, Tsunade reached into her shirt. Kakashi politely averted his eyes as she pulled out a small bottle that she uncorked, pouring some of its contents into the cup of tea on her desk. She cradled the porcelain cup with both hands and tossed back her head to drink the entirety of the beverage in one practiced gulp. Once finished, she set the cup firmly down on the desk and locked eyes with Kakashi. "Here is how this is going to go," she leaned forward, "You and I are going to figure out what happened last night, and why, so you can promise me it won't happen again, or," Tsunade hiccupped, and struggled to maintain her serious expression, "or, I'm giving Psych full license to put you in group therapy sessions and I will assign Gai to make sure you attend and participate."

Tsunade felt a smidgeon guilty about continually using the psychology division as a threat of punishment, thus further enforcing negative connotations with what should be a positively embraced method of healing, but well, with some ninja you had to get creative. Or just use the only thing you know to work, she amended, willing to concede that using the same threat on multiple occasions with slight variations probably didn't count as being creative. "Do we understand each other?"

The sudden intense stillness that settled over Kakashi indicated that he took the threat seriously, but she only allowed herself to relax when he gave a stiff nod of the head.

"Good," Tsunade said, licking dry lips, and pouring another cup of tea for herself. She wouldn't bother to try and be polite and pour one for company, not when she already knew that the man was ready to kawarimi with the nearest warm body and get the hell out of her office the moment he sensed he could leave without being tracked down. "Let's try this again, what happened last night?"

"I attacked a civilian."

"Alright," Tsunade closed her eyes and mentally counted to ten. *It's like pulling teeth from a mule*, she thought grouchily, already feeling a tension headache forming around her forehead and knowing that the hardest part of the conversation was yet to come. "And what were you doing when you attacked the civilian?"

The jōnin's brows furrowed, "He executed the offensive conduct with his right hand. I secured and disabled the body part responsible so such an attack could not occur again. Once I determined that that subject was properly restrained and would not repeat the behavior, I released the offender and resumed my original exit strategy."

Tsunade, elbow on the desk and chin resting in the palm of one hand, couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry at the detached, clinical report. She expected this kind of thing from operatives like Sai, not from Hatake. What in the world had happened to upset him so much that he was reverting to formal reporting language rather than social conversation as a defense mechanism? She struggled to
keep her amused frustration from bleeding into her expression. "And what was the original offensive conduct that you deemed to be a threat?"

The only sign of discomfort from the man sitting across from her was a subtle shift in weight. "He attacked my teammate."

"Attacked?" Tsunade raised an eyebrow and re-scanned the report; no one had mentioned anything about the civilian attacking another person, let alone another ninja. Tsunade didn't put a lot of trust in her civilian population, other than the trust she put in them to be a pain in the ass, but generally they had enough sense not to poke the paranoid trained assassins among which they lived.

"Well," Kakashi raised a hand, scratching at his temple with one finger, "assaulted."

Tsunade looked baffled.

"Maybe it was just harassed," Kakashi amended with a low mutter.

Tsunade was not going to laugh. She wasn't. She covered her mouth with a manicured hand and pretended to smother another hiccup. "So, what did the civilian do exactly? And to whom? A teammate, you said?"

Kakashi ran a hand through his wild hair and rolled his shoulders, adjusting his posture.

The Hokage waited for him to find his words.

"Ah," Kakashi leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and interweaving his fingers again, "He may have sexually harassed Naruto-chan."

_Not. Going. To. Laugh._ Tsunade used decades of willpower to remind herself of her vow and was quite proud her voice remained steady. "Sexually harassed how?"

"The civilian may have purposefully and inappropriately touched Naruto without her consent."

"So," Tsunade drawled, after a few moments of awkward silence, "A drunk man pinched Naruto-chan's ass and you had a small psychotic break, broke the man's wrist, and terrified another half-dozen civilians into wetting their pants?"

Kakashi had the grace to appear embarrassed, but still gave her a huffy look.

"Just clarifying," Tsunade murmured softly, making some notes on her paperwork and trying not to break into hysterical cackles at the idea of Hatake Kakashi finally potentially connecting with his inner possessive, besotted teenager. He was twenty years late, but better late than never.

She accidentally let slip a giggle and Kakashi leveled a mutinous look at her with his single eye. She ignored him and chewed on the end of her pen. She didn't feel too bad; it was the simple pleasures in life that made all this paperwork shit bearable.

"Well," she cleared her throat loudly and clapped her hands, "now that I know what happened, let's talk about why it happened so we can make sure it doesn't happen again." She tried not to sound too condescending, but it was a natural state of being for her and judging by Hatake's expression she wasn't trying hard enough. "Go on," she made a waving motion with her hands implying that Kakashi should elaborate.

The copy ninja just shrugged. "I may have been upset."
"Oh, really?" Tsunade's voice dripped with sarcasm, "Why were you upset?"

Kakashi's apparent confusion seemed sincere and the tiny sliver of compassion that remained in Tsunade's heart pinged just strongly enough for her to take a modicum of pity on the boy. "Answer me this: Is Naruto strong?"

Kakashi blinked slowly, but readily admitted, "Yes."

"And who trained her?"

"I did," the copy ninja said quickly. "And Jiraiya-san," he thought on it some more before expounding on his answer, "Iruka-san, Kurenai-san, her peers, you."

"Yes," Tsunade nodded, "And do you trust all these people?"

"Yes."

"And they care about Naruto?"

"Yes."

"So all of these incredibly strong people, who you trust, and who care about this girl, took it upon themselves to teach her to be strong?"

Kakashi's puzzled face was testament to the fact that he still didn't see where this was going. "Yes."

"So," said the Hokage, in an effort to lay this out as simply as possible, "If some of the strongest, most powerful people in your world put their hearts into making Naruto one of the strongest kunoichi known to man, and you believe that she has accomplished this," she narrowed her eyes and pinned Kakashi with her focused gaze, "Don't you think she could handle a drunk civilian giving her an unwanted caress on the ass without your intervention?"

Kakashi stiffened, and then forced his shoulders to relax. "Probably," he reluctantly admitted.

"I think she probably could have taken care of it on her own too," said the woman dryly. "Did she tell you she could have taken care of it herself?"

The barely perceptible flicker of a memory crossed his face. "Something like that," he said uncomfortably.

"Well," said Tsunade lightly, accentuating her words with a shrug, "If you stepped in to take care of something we both acknowledge Naruto is fully capable of handling on her own, it must have been a trust issue, right? You just didn't trust her to handle herself in that situation?"

"No," Kakashi quickly protested. "I trust her."

"No you don't," Tsunade dismissed his response with a flippant wave of her hand. "You don't trust her to handle a drunk man trying to push his unwanted attention on her, and you certainly don't trust her to be able to handle her current assignment effectively. I wonder if you aren't giving her a complex about it."

Kakashi speared her with a dark look. "Stop it," he bit out, looking a tad ruffled, which for him meant he sat up straight and spared enough energy to look cross and attentive. "Don't exaggerate the consequences of something so simple."

"But you don't let her handle the simple things," Tsunade pushed back. "How is she supposed to feel
when she's handling the big things?" Kakashi's physical shrink was minute, even to Tsunade's observant gaze, but it tasted victorious all the same. "You are one of the most important men in her life. Don't you think she values your trust and respect in her as a grown woman over your efforts to protect her from the realities of life, like you might treat a child?"

Kakashi remained silent, but his body was tense and his gaze introspective. "It wasn't like that," he finally admitted. "Not really. I just," he looked sadly at the Hokage, "I just don't like people paying her attention like that. I don't like people not showing her respect after all that she's done." His gaze returned to the floor. "I don't know what to do about it."

Tsunade felt an overwhelming desire to give the boy a hug, a reward for sharing his emotions, but was well adjusted enough to realize that to Kakashi, a hug from her would be seen as an insult, pity, or, at best, undue attention which would send him into hiding for a few weeks. Ninja with Kakashi's mission history didn't survive as long as they did by drawing undue attention to themselves. So she restrained the sudden maternal impulse and promised herself that she could go cuddle Ton-ton as soon as this was over. "So you want Naruto to be respected? And you don't want men to hurt her?"

Kakashi nodded, but didn't raise his head.

"I think you can accomplish both of those things without treating her like a child, don't you?" Tsunade's voice was soft, and she gave the boy with the bowed head a few moments to absorb her words. "You can start by letting her take care of bitch-slapping the next man that grabs her ass without permission on her own, agreed?"

The silver head of hair dipped in another nod.

"Good." Tsunade bit her lip, wondering if she should push forward or if her next comments would be to forward. Ah, hell with it, she thought, better to just be blunt with this one. "That doesn't mean you can't give the man a glare, but you're not her father, or her brother, and that's not what she needs you for."

Kakashi's head raised slowly, single gray eye cloudy with confusion. "What does she need me for then?"

_Checkmate_. Tsunade carefully schooled her expression, not wanting to give any hint of the self-satisfaction she was currently basking in, "She needs you to trust her." Tsunade said calmly. "And that doesn't mean that you have to take a hands-off approach, and remove yourself from her life. She needs you to be there, to watch her back, to offer help and encouragement. But most of all she needs you to trust that she's capable of going out in the world, kicking butt and taking names, and when she comes back she needs you to tell her that you knew she could do it all along."

Kakashi blinked, soaking in the advice.

"Does that sound too complicated, Hatake-kun?" Asked Tsunade, trying to lighten the mood.

"No," said the copy ninja, turning to look out the window.

The Hokage tapped her cheek as she observed him, noticing that he didn't assert that this was a role of which he was capable of performing. _Oh, to be in his head for one hour_. The Hokage snorted, she was just going to have to trust Kurenai to work him through the rest. "Then you won't be attacking any more civilians from now on, right?"

"Right, Hokage-sama." Kakashi sounded relieved to be agreeing to something that he was confident about succeeding in, "It won't happen again."
"Then you-re dism—" Tsunade pursed her lips together as the man before her blurred away before she had finished the word. In his former seat a painting of 'The Eight Minute War' perched awkwardly between the wooden armrests.

The door opened and Shizune slipped into the room, Ton-ton cradled in her arms. "Tsunade-same we need to talk about your sched—Where did that come from?"

Tsunade held her arms out for her pig, "I don't know. And now it's your problem. You can figure out where Hatake pulled it from and put it back. I'm taking an hour to go somewhere dark and quiet with a bottle of sake and pretend the most difficult thing I'm responsible for taking care of is a pig."

Shizune opened her mouth to speak and Tsunade cut her off with a wave of her hand. "Let's both pretend I actually have some authority for one hour." Tsunade brushed past the bewildered girl, leaving Shizune standing in an empty office.

Shizune checked her clipboard for the older woman's daily agenda. "Hmmm," she muttered thoughtfully to herself as she moved to pick up the painting so she could dump it on a secretary, "Disciplinary Review, Hatake Kakashi—" Shizune paled, "I don't even want to know."

Her reluctance lasted for twenty seconds. She was a ninja, after all. "Ok, maybe I do." Giving into temptation, she went over to the Hokage's desk and looked at the standard military police complaint and Tsunade's discussion notes. "Cleared because…defending honor of virtuous maiden?" Shizune rolled her eyes and went back to the painting, "We really shouldn't be keeping written records of Hatake's excuses." She hauled the strange painting out of the office, muttering under her breath about buying into soldier's insanities and the correlating increase in administrative ineptitude.

Naruto gazed around the apartment with critical, but tired eyes.

Is this subtle?

Did you do it? Retorted Kurama.

"Don't be mean," Naruto said aloud, running her hands over the couch and adjusting the cushions once more. "Kurenai-san said I needed to start leaving a more visible presence in the apartment. That I needed to do things that would remind him I lived here even when I wasn't physically here."

The last time I checked, the thing wasn't so handicapped that he'd lost his nose. I don't think he can forget your stake in the den anytime soon.

"Yeah, well," Naruto draped an orange sweater over the kitchen chair and then set about arranging her recently rescued house plants (carefully snuck out of her former apartment in the dead of night to avoid an encounter with the easily irritable health inspector), "Kurenai says the best thing right now is to make it so that it is absolutely impossible for Kakashi to live in denial, which means I need to find sneaky ways to make sure that he is thinking about me as often as possible." Naruto paused as she poured a bit of water into a particularly droopy basket of bougainvillea that she still hadn't found a good home for yet. It'd go best in his room by the big window, but I kind of feel like I should ask permission about that first. Anything else you can think of, Fox?

She decided to put the flowers on the kitchen table in the meantime and gently set the large pot down on the worn wooden surface. It wouldn't get much natural light here, so she'd have to try and move it later.

You could always pee on something, Kurama contributed grudgingly.

Naruto jerked back, shocked at the earnest suggestion, knocking into a chair at just the right angle to
send both human and chair to the floor with a thud.

I don't remember your dam being this clumsy.

Naruto pouted and stood, rubbing her abused rear. "I bet you didn't say such random, strange things to her either."

You asked.

"For a serious suggestion!," Naruto insisted with huff.

I don't know why you're so worried about it, said the fox, sounding bored. It's not like he's here most of the day.

"No," Naruto ran a hand through her hair, still mussed from sleep, "no he's not." It was still relatively early in the morning, but Kakashi made it a habit to be gone from the apartment before she woke. She was fairly certain that he was coming and going from the big window in his bedroom, as she would like to think she would wake if he was using the front door for ingress and egress.

Left alone, Naruto typically began to return to consciousness around eight or nine in the morning and liked to take her time waking up. She'd make a bowl or two of instant ramen, run a load of laundry, start the dishwasher, make the beds, and check her weapons, polishing and sharpening them from yesterday's practice before stumbling into the shower and officially starting her day.

Kakashi, on the other hand, seemed happy to let Naruto handle most of the chores and fled the apartment at inhumanly early hours to, well, Naruto really didn't know where Kakashi was exactly when he wasn't training. She supposed he went to the Memorial Stone.

A knock on the door drew her away from her inner musings.

Who is that? She paused and focused on merging with Kyuubi briefly, letting him enhance her nose and chakra sensing abilities. Yamato. She took a deeper breath. Not injured, calm, relaxed. They easily disassociated and she rubbed at her tired eyes. She'd stayed out late the night before to rescue her plants and hadn't fallen asleep until around four in the morning. I'm glad he's back, he's been away for a while.

Does it look like I care? Kurama snorted, and Naruto got the clear impression that he was burying his head in his tails and was returning to sleep now that the visitor had been identified and classified as a non-threat. Naruto trotted over to the door, narrowly avoiding tripping over the bag of pile of clothes she'd haphazardly strewn across the floor in the midst of her morning project. She cursed and kicked the lacy nightgown her feet had gotten tangled in off to the side. The knock came again, a bit more impatient.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Naruto opened the door in the midst of talking and held up a hand to cover a large yawn. "Good morning, Yamato-san!" She greeted the surprised jōnin cheerfully, "I missed you! When did you get back?"

Yamato stared at the blonde, hand paused mid-air, frozen, poised to knock again. "Uzumaki-san?"

"Naruto-chan," corrected the girl with a smile, "I've told you before, I'm not going to answer you if you keep up with the Uzumaki-stuff."

Yamato made a strained sound, his voice caught in his throat, eyes wide, "Is that," he looked Naruto over from head to toe, "is that your shirt?"
Naruto frowned, beginning to feel a bit self-conscious. She looked down, _Oh, I guess I did put on that old shirt of Kakashi's when I came in last night._ It was the same shirt that Kakashi had given her to sleep in when she first stayed the night. He hadn't asked for it back, and it had been comfy, so she kept it and used it to sleep in every once in a while. She smoothed down the fraying edges with nervous fingers. It was just as long as some of her other nightshirts, the skirt she wore to train in was shorter, so she didn't think it was indecent or anything.

"No," she looked back at the other jōnin, who seemed to be in a mild state of shock for some unascertainable reason. She felt Kurama stir, attending to the interaction with a lazily, partially opened, slitted eye. _"Kakashi let me borrow it to sleep in."_ When Yamato remained frozen she opened the door wider, "Are you ok, do you need to come in?"

Yamato's gaze was drawn to something behind her and his eyes grew even bigger, which made Naruto quite concerned because she hadn't thought that physically possible. _"Yamato?"_ She repeated his name a bit louder and his attention snapped to her.

"Ah," he gave her a tentative smile, _"Sorry about that,"_ he rubbed his head sheepishly, _"I was just surprised?"

Naruto scrunched her face in confusion. Why was that a question? Was he not sure he was surprised? How odd. _"Are you sure you are alright? Maybe you should sit down for a minute."

She reached out to take hold of his arm and escort him inside but he stepped back and waved his hands reassuringly, _"No, I'm fine, really. I just stopped by to see if Kakashi-senpai was in and try and set up some training time with him. Is he here?"

Naruto shook her head and smiled apologetically, _"Sorry, you've missed him, he left before I woke this morning. He's usually back shortly after sunset though, do you want me to tell him you stopped by?"

Yamato made a strange squeaky noise like something was caught in his throat again. _"No, I—"_ he stopped himself and shook his head ruefully, _"I'll find him. It's good to see you again,"_ he let his shoulders drop an inch and then blushed as Naruto moved forward to give him a hug, interpreting the admission as permission to show physical affection.

_"If you can't find Kakashi, I'll train with you,"_ she chirped brightly as he patted her back awkwardly.

_"Umm,"_ he firmly gripped her shoulders and pushed her back a foot, not rejecting her, but restoring them to a safe, respectful distance. _"That sounds good, thank you,"_ he gave her the same forced smile, cheeks still a tad pink, _"but maybe you should get dressed first."

She laughed and waved goodbye as he shunshined away.

_"Well,"_ she said, smile fading as she reflected upon the strange encounter, _"That was odd."

She softly closed the door and returned to straightening the apartment, picking up the lace nightgown from the floor and stuffing it into her bag along with the other clothes she'd thrown about the place. She set the chair back upright as Kurama laughed maniacally in the back of her head, refusing to share what he found to be so funny.

_"So, I brought all the stuff,"_ Naruto elegantly dumped the bulging knapsack in her arms upside down, letters and assorted papers pouring out and cascading over Tsunade's already disorganized desk.
"Thanks," drawled Tsunade, voice heavy with sarcasm as she watched a few of the envelopes slide across the smothered desktop and fall to the floor.

Naruto hopped about to retrieve them and put them back in the pile before dragging a chair from across the room and settling down right next to the Hokage. "You're welcome," she chirped.

"That was not," the older blonder snapped her mouth shut and scrunched her eyes shut, biting back a scathing remark, "nevermind." They had too many things to do today to get sidetracked in what would be an ultimately ineffective lesson about Naruto's inability to detect sarcasm. *Which might not be so much an inability as a purposefully cultivated obtuseness to anything remotely insulting,* Tsunade reflected, bitterly noting that she couldn't see any of the tabletop anymore, as buried as it was under paper.

"Is there any more of this shit?" Tsunade eyed the pile as if she expected some of the papers to spontaneously catch on fire or start replicating. *At this point, I don't know which would be worse.*

Naruto huffed and crossed her arms. "It's not shit, these are nice people!"

"Yeah, yeah," Tsunade waved her hand dismissively. "I thought you said you were going to sort through it some way?"

"I got busy," Naruto tugged on one of her pigtails, winding the long strand around her wrist.

"And I'm not?"

"You'd just tell me I did it wrong and make me do it a different anyhow."

Tsunade pursed her lips, but didn't correct the girl, instead, she called for help. "Shizune," she bellowed.

"Well, we're not going to make any headway with it all like this, so dig in," she got up and walked toward the door. "Shizune!"

"Wait where are you going?" Naruto called, looking up in alarm.

"I'm right here, you don't have to yell," Shizune grumbled, slightly exasperated as she slipped in the doorway.

"I have productive things to do, help her with that mess," the Hokage flipped her hair over her shoulder and shooed her oldest student toward the confused looking younger blonde at the desk.

"Wait, what?" Shizune blinked apprehensively at the mess.

"You said *you'd* help!" Naruto jumped to her feet and made several passionate, but slightly rude, hand gestures.

"That was before I knew how much work it would be," admitted the Hokage freely, undeterred. "Just put it into piles by villages, you're going to want to try and notice travel patterns, and you'll be able to do that if you start reading reports of similar activities in congruent physical locations."

"I don't even—" Shizune tried to interject with trepidation.

"Have fun," Tsunade said hastily, "Have to see a man about a tree."

"A tree?" Naruto just looked even more bewildered.
"Tsunade-sama," Shizune called in exasperation, a hint of unarticulated threat lacing her tone, but the Hokage was gone. She turned to Naruto, "I'm sorry Naruto, but I really don't have—"

Big, blue well-honed puppy-dog eyes looked at her, "Oh please, oh please, Shizune-nee-san, I have to go through all of this and I really, really don't want to do it by myself!"

_That gaze should be classified as a weapon_, Shizune thought grudgingly. "Well," she hesitated, but the puppy-dog eyes only grew more intense and wobbly. "What is it?" She finally asked weakly, bracing herself.

Naruto's face brightened. "Oh thank you, thank you! It's my letters from all my pen pals that I made when I went travelling with Jiraiya!" Naruto picked up a cluster of envelopes and thrust them into Shizune's arms. "They send me letters and stuff and tell me all that's going on, and I write back, but Granny wanted to hear what they had to say and help me write back to all of them this time."

"Pen pals?"

"Yeah, I mean, life has been a bit crazy, but I've managed to stay in contact with most of them 'cuz Ero-sennin said it was important to have friends in lots of places. Only, Granny figured out what I was doing and said she wanted to help me 'develop my network.'"

_Oh God_, Shizune suddenly realized, _This is what's become of Jiraiya's spy network_. She looked back to Naruto, who was busy pulling apart letters and sorting them into piles.

"And this is from Sora-chan, she's this really funny daughter of this chicken rancher in River Country, and she tells great jokes that are about, like, farm things. Want to hear the one she wrote about a bacon and egg breakfast? The chicken was involved, but the pig was committed! Isn't that funny?"

Tonton gave an offended grunt and left the room.

Shizune rubbed her forehead and tried to figure out if there was any code in that.

"So, nothing?"

Kakashi had known that the Hokage was watching him from the entryway of the medical file room for some time now, but hadn't seen fit to react to her presence until she decided to make her purpose known. He gave her a bored look, "Exactly."

She pursed her lips, crossing her arms and leaning against the door frame. "You've looked through everything?"

Kakashi hadn't exactly been hiding his search of the medical records, he'd decided to take the public search approach and see if anyone paid him attention. It was still slightly disconcerting that Tsunade had known when he'd be finishing the last file. He hadn't noticed anyone observing him to report to her. _I wonder if she finally mastered Sandaime-sama's crystal ball jutsu?_ The last time he'd asked her about using it to check on some ninja, he'd been audience to quite a colorful repertoire of cursing and he'd noticed quite a few suspiciously spherical holes in the wall for the following several months.

Tsunade frowned pensively, lost in her own thoughts.

Kakashi snapped the file he was holding shut and returned it to its' rightful position on the metal shelf. "Is it possible Root had their medical services performed elsewhere?"
"Yes," The Hokage sighed, "But not completely, the medical ninja would have noticed had medical records been completely absent for any ninja. And I went through and revised and enforced new record-keeping practices when I came back here. We’ve been doing thorough semi-annual medical examinations on all active ninja, including bloodwork analysis, ever since I was inaugurated."

Kakashi put his hands in his pockets, adopting his usual posture, "Then why are there no records that Sai ever had blood drawn here?"

"I don’t know," snapped Tsunade irritated, "There should be. But without the records, we can’t identify if there are any vials of his blood in the storage sealing units." Tsunade tapped her chin with a finger idly. "Did you check for bloodwork records on the other known Root members?"

"Yes," Kakashi said, letting his gaze rove over the several thousand files contained in the massive medical archive. "It was hit or miss, and there is no apparent pattern as to why I found bloodwork records for some, and not for others."

The Hokage bit her lip. "Are we missing bloodwork records for anyone else, any ninja not known to be Root?"

Kakashi shrugged. "Possibly, but if you want to find that out anytime within this century, you’re going to need to assign a couple of genin teams to look through all these." That Kakashi wouldn’t be expending the effort to check hundreds of thousands of records himself went unsaid.

Both the Hokage and Kakashi looked a bit depressed at the idea of actually combing through all of the records contained in the room. "Well," said Tsunade finally, "I had been trying to come up with something to keep Sensei’s grand-brat and his teammates busy."

"Oh?"

"Mhmmm," Tsunade ran her fingers over the spines of a group of files on a shelf, "they switched the men’s and women’s restroom signs in every public facility one night last week. It’s caused an incredible backlog of paperwork for the military police because of all the harassment complaints. Apparently there isn’t a single woman in this village who believes a man would honestly accidently walk into the wrong bathroom." She sighed, "Although, ironically enough, not a single man has lodged a complaint about the issue. I’d probably laugh about it if I didn’t have that stuck-up Hyuuga ass-hole who is currently heading the military police in my office every other day complaining about the abuse of public facilities and the necessity of instilling boundaries in our rebellious youth." She paused, and then added, as if sharing a fond afterthought. "Little shits."

"Ahh," said Kakashi knowingly nodding his head, secretly grateful that he’d narrowly avoided having to be responsible for more than three inventive genin in his lifetime.

Kakashi was relieved that Naruto was gone when he got back to the apartment. He still wasn’t entirely comfortable with his temporary roommate, although he was now more or less adapting to her presence. He still liked the few moments of privacy he could steal for himself, when he didn’t have to worry about another person. He was used to a bachelor lifestyle, and not at all accustomed to sharing quarters with someone of the opposite sex outside mission parameters.

He was disgruntled to realize just how quickly his own habits had adjusted to accommodate the girl. The first few nights (after he’d reluctantly returned to the building), it’d been difficult to get to sleep in his own home. Lately, he’d found himself waking up from his normal nightmares and having to search out her chakra and reassure himself that she was fine before getting back to sleep. She was becoming something of a security blanket. That was going to be a pain in the ass to get used to when
she went back to her own place. He'd probably be a creepy-stalker for a week or two, and have to go check and make sure that she was safe in her apartment in the middle of the night if he wanted to get a decent measure of sleep.

He began to pull off his vest, intending to get a shower and wash all the dust off from the archives he'd been browsing. He felt like a thick coat of it had settled over his skin, and his hair especially. It seemed to stick to his hair as if it was magnetic.

He slowed down as he wandered from the bedroom, where he'd come in through the window, to the living room. Something was off about the apartment. It was subtle, whatever it was, but everything smelled like—Kakashi stopped walking into the bathroom and backtracked a few steps. Flowers. Everything smelled like flowers. Probably because there was a humongous overflowing clay pot of orange blossoms on his kitchen table. And other colorful plants were now placed sporadically throughout his kitchen, giving the normally masculine, minimalistic décor a lively, slightly feminine vibe.

He put his hands on his hips and considered the change. It wasn't that he had anything against flowers. But he wasn't sure how he felt about all of it. It felt a little bit like his space wasn't entirely his anymore, in a more permanent way. It was still Hatake Kakashi's apartment, but now it was also hers.

He shook his head. What odd thoughts, he needed to stop analyzing things through canine instincts. It really wasn't like Naruto was trying to pee on his territory. His pack would laugh at him. And probably eat the flowers. Besides, the flowers would be gone soon enough and his apartment would go back to smelling entirely of dogs and metal, old blood, and a little bit of soap. The soft, comforting smells that Naruto brought, with her flowers and fruit-scented shampoos and strange cooking experiments would all be gone. He was most likely reacting oddly to everything due to nostalgia, because the last time he'd been anywhere that smelled like this on a semi-frequent basis had been when he'd been 'living' with Sensei and Kushina-san. But his heart hurt when his thoughts wandered down that road, so he was just going to drown himself in the shower now, thank you.

Kakashi didn't notice the bra hanging on the bathroom doorknob until he was stepping out of the shower. He lost his balance for a moment, startled, and had to quick-step to catch himself on the ceramic sink. He scowled at the offending garment, hanging innocently off the back of the shut door, mocking him with quiet pastel hues completely at odds with the bright colors its' owner favored for her outer garments. He couldn't keep the blush from his face, unable to stifle the natural progression of thoughts that went from simply seeing the bra to imagining what it looked like on its owner.

He reached out his hand and paused as it dawned on him that if he was going to leave the bathroom, he was actually going to have to touch the bra.

He stood and stared at the door, shifting his weight uncertainly. He wasn't sure what to do next. Normally, he liked to go get dressed before towel drying his hair. That was his routine, as he didn't like the feeling of vulnerability that came with a lack of clothing, and he didn't like breaking his routines. But if he was going to leave the bathroom he was going to have to touch...it. His eye twitched and he dropped his hand to his side, turning to pull another towel from the cabinet. It wasn't like he'd never handled a woman's undergarments before, but he was still trying to pretend that Naruto hadn't developed enough to need such things. This was obviously futile, as he'd had the evidence of such literally flaunted before his eyes for a couple of weeks now. But still, he'd just, umm, hmmm. He'd deal with it in a minute.

He dried his hair as best as he could, the humidity in his bathroom working against him. He checked the mirror, the bra was still there. Well, he'd just have to throw the towel over it and pretend it didn't
exist, and politely ask Naruto to keep her clothes in a tidier manner from now on, but first, he'd just go ahead and brush his teeth since he had the time. He popped open the medicine cabinet roughly, and several objects fell out, his hands flying forward hastily to grab them all. He blinked in surprise at the assortment of makeup and hairclips he was now holding.

He hastily shoved them back, but couldn't get them all to fit right. Did she put a time-space seal on this thing? This was absurd, it shouldn't be that hard to get all this crap to fit back into a cabinet. If Naruto could organize this so it all fit, surely Kakashi could figure this out without too much effort.

Five frustrating minutes later, Kakashi was ready to tear his hair out or rip the cabinet from the wall, one of the two. Every time he thought he got it all to fit something else popped out and fell into the sink. In the midst of growling at the bathroom fixtures and seriously considering shredding a scrunchie and blaming it on the dogs he spotted the brightly colored plastic box squirrelled away behind the sink. Relieved, he bent down to retrieve it, propping it on the small sink and popping it open. He stared at its contents, slightly bewildered. Why did girls need all this stuff? She didn't even wear makeup, not that he'd noticed at least. He picked up a small, glass orange sphere and curiously rolled it in his palm.

What was this?

He was jolted from his thoughts by the slam of the main door rattling the apartment walls and Naruto's loud greeting. He turned quickly and the edge of his hip caught the box, knocking it off the sink and sending it hurtling to the floor. In the split second he reached forward to grab the box he lost his grip on the glass bottle and it fell to the floor with a harsh crack, liquid contents spilling out onto the floor, his nose immediately assaulted but the overwhelming scent of oranges and bananas and a flower-orhcid?-and mangos and his brain was going to explode it was so strong. Who put so many smells into a bottle? What insanity was this? His eyes started watering and he sneezed several times. His sight blurred and he stumbled with the force of his sneezes, stepping in the liquid puddle on the floor and slipping, hands thrown out trying to catch himself on something, anything, and managing to grab the damn bra, which didn't stop his downward progress at all. He hit the floor with a harsh thud, landing uncomfortably on some vials of mascara and gripping the bra so hard it made a large ripping sound, the sudden give of the fabric letting him know he'd broken the wretched thing.

Perfect. He refused to look, settling for simply sneezing, still slightly shocked by everything that had happened in the span of a few seconds and trying to make sense of it all in his head. Infamous, Legendary Kakashi of the Sharingan, Master of a Thousand Jutsu, Elite Ninja of Konoha, Former Division Commander of the Allied Shinobi Forces, failed in thirty seconds by a particularly potent bottle of perfume and a bra. He sneezed once more, rapidly blinking his teary, irritated eyes.

A timid knock sounded on the door. "Kakashi?"

In the main room of the apartment, Naruto plastered herself to the bathroom door, ear flat against the wood as she tried to make out what was going on inside. She'd heard an odd crash and now Kakashi appeared to be having some sort of allergic reaction to something, neither of which was normal behavior for the copy ninja. She knew she probably shouldn't go in, but her imagination was kicking into overdrive the longer she went unanswered. She bit her lip and tentatively placed her hand on the brass doorknob.

Kakashi sneezed again, as the knock came louder, Naruto repeating the call of his name through the door.

Kakashi thanked every potential god in existence that he'd thought to lock the door, and then nearly had a heart attack when he realized, no, he didn't lock the door, because if he had he'd have seen the goddamn bra from the start and avoided this nightmare.

"Kakashi," the voice sounded stronger, more concerned as the door knob seemed to turn in slow
motion, "What did you do? What is that smell? Are you alright?"

"It's fine," he yelled back, lunging for the door just as it opened the tiniest sliver, promptly slamming it shut with his shoulder in a feat of ninja-swift reflexes. He heard Naruto give a startled squawk at the sound of Kakashi colliding with the door, but she didn't appear to be making a move to open it again. He raised a hand to rub at his itching eyes and gave a pinched yelp himself when he realized he was still holding onto the damn bra. He scowled and his fist clenched around the pieces.

He took a moment to compose himself, securing the towel around his waist, and kicking the various bottles littering the floor into one corner of the bathroom. He straightened, wiped his running nose on some tissues and threw the door open with a grimace, revealing a concerned Naruto fidgeting on the other side.

Naruto's eyes widened as she took in Kakashi. Despite clearly having recently showered, he looked disheveled and disgruntled. What was even more shocking was that he was only wearing a towel. Which was doing something really funny to her stomach, only, not really to her stomach because whatever was twisting, it was lower than her stomach, more like her gut. And she could feel the red, heated flush spreading across her face because he was just in a towel, as in, there was an excellent beautiful bare chest on display about a foot in front of her, criss-crossed with an interesting silver network of old scars over well-toned muscles, and, as she gulped and forced herself to raise her eyes, he wasn't wearing his mask. No mask. No mask at all. And he definitely didn't have fish lips like she and her teammates had jokingly theorized when they were kids.

Kakashi realized he wasn't wearing his mask about the same moment Naruto did, but the impending sneeze fest he felt his body seizing in preparation for made him not care that much.

"I believe this is yours," he deadpanned, thrusting the garment into the girl's flustered hands and brushing past her to his bedroom, the fruity, floral smell that was emanating from him undermining his intimidating glare.

Naruto, stunned stupid for the moment, froze in place for ten seconds before suddenly doubling over in a hysterical fit of giggles, practically crying for breath as she clutched the destroyed garment tight in her fist, so overwhelmed at the absurdity of the moment that she hadn't yet realized that Kakashi had somehow managed to ruin her favorite bra in the simple process of taking a shower.

Kakashi stiffened. Was she giggling? Yes. Yes, she was giggling.

Dammit.

He slammed his bedroom door shut behind him.

Yamato found Kakashi brooding by the memorial stone.

"Senpai," the younger man greeted cheerfully.

Kakashi blinked sleepily back at him, "You're back then?"

Yamato frowned, "Well you don't have to say it so enthusiastically."

"Ah," the copy ninja shrugged apologetically, "sorry, it's been a weird couple of weeks."

"Weird?" Yamato raised an eyebrow, "that wouldn't have anything to do with your new living arrangements, would it?"
Kakashi seemed to deflate a bit, "So you've heard about that, huh?"

"Well, witnessed it, is more appropriate," Yamato said wryly.

"Oh," Kakashi said, sounding morose.

"Oh?" lines appeared in Yamato's forehead, "You don't sound really thrilled with it."

"It's just a temporary thing," Kakashi noted absently, studying the dark obelisk.

Yamato tried to wrap his mind around the idea that he'd been gone for three weeks and Naruto and Kakashi had decided to move in together for a temporary fling. "She's not staying?" That seemed so strange, Naruto typically attached herself like a limpet to anyone that showed her affection.

"She's just using me," Kakashi nodded, turning on his heel and ambling off to the training grounds where he and Yamato routinely sparred whenever the other turned up recovered from their most recent mission.

The copy ninja paused when he realized he wasn't being followed by his most devoted fan. He looked back over his shoulder, "Are you coming?"

Yamato started, brain temporarily out of working order, trying to realign his world view to one where the adorable Naruto was a manipulative man-eater and his idolized senpai was just fine shacking up with his favorite student for a few weeks and having what seemed to be furniture-toppling, bodice-ripping, ehrm, encounters.

"Coming!" He trotted after the other man, but only after casting a quiet 'kai' to make sure that this wasn't some meddling chūnin's bizarre idea of a joke in which he was stuck.

"Has twenty-four hours shed any light on the matter?" Tsunade drawled from the doorway, sipping some tea as she observed the pair of women at work at her desk. This delegation thing is kind of nice, she thought, hiding her smirk behind the porcelain cup.

"It's shed light on several things, Tsunade-sama," Shizune said sounding strained, straightening from her stooped position over the desk and rolling her shoulders, "Including how atrocious Naruto-san's letter writing skills are—"

"Hey!" Naruto puffed her cheeks out, indignant.

"Keep writing, Naruto!" Shizune snapped at the girl, no longer making any effort to appear to be in good humor.

"Eeep!" Naruto squeaked and turned her attention back to the responses she was carefully penning under Shizune's diligent direction.

Tsunade laughed, "I'm sure she has an excellent teacher!"

Shizune crossed her arms, "When you said you were going to start training Naruto, I didn't realize that you were volunteering me as the trainer."

"You make it sound like I'm a pet," the younger blonde complained.

Without turning her baleful gaze from the village leader, Shizune stuck out her hand and pushed Naruto's head back down toward the letters littering the desk.
"I get it, I get it," the blonde muttered resentfully, continuing to pen out the responses Shizune had dictated to her, making minor alterations whenever the other woman was distracted.

"Well, you do such a good job supervising me, I thought I might give you an early start with getting Naruto into good habits."

Shizune just huffed and yanked a scroll of notes off the desktop, walking toward the older blonde and holding it out purposefully to the other woman, shaking it meaningfully.

Tsunade tightened her grip around the teacup and eyed the document suspiciously, "Do I have to?"

"Yes," Shizune bit out, thrusting it toward the other woman, engaging in an exchange of items as the Hokage surrendered her drink to her assistant and unrolled the scroll so she could read Shizune's notes.

"Naruto-chan, go find that lazy, perverted Sensei of yours and haul his ass up here," Tsunade advanced toward her desk and chased the younger blonde out of her chair with shooing motions.

"Kakashi?" Naruto stopped chewing on the edge of her pen. "Why do we need him?"

"Because I said so," snapped the Hokage, cringing at the maternal phrase and how old it made her feel to use it.

"Fine," said the chūnin, propping a hand on her hip, "but how am I supposed to find him?"

"Seriously?" Tsunade raised an eyebrow at the girl, "Are you a ninja or not? Use the fox, or your frogs, or your damn feminine wiles for all I care, but find Hatake Kakashi and drag his sorry ass to my office!"

"Ok, ok!" Naruto cringed and headed for the nearest window.

"Wait," Shizune reached out and snagged the girl by her collar as she balanced on the windowsill, ignoring the subsequent squawk and flailing arms. "Tsunade-sama, this really would be quicker if you would just check with the crystal ball, please?"

"Oh." The Hokage blinked, "I keep forgetting I can do that now."

"What?" Naruto twitched curiously and twisted awkwardly in Shizune's grip.

"Come see my new toy," said Tsunade with a smug grin as Naruto trotted obediently to her side.

"It only took her five years to figure out how to make it work," muttered Shizune under her breath.

"I heard that," but any ire was drowned out by the woman's focus on a glass ball she pulled out from a drawer.

A faint glow appeared around the instrument as the Hokage channeled her chakra into it, and all three women peered closely at the images forming within it.

"How does it work?" Naruto asked, squinting.
"You have to know the subject's chakra signature fairly well—"

"There he is!" Tsunade preened. "He's having a tea party with Yamato and Genma. Go fetch. Tell them they can talk about their love lives and paint their nails on their own time, when they're dead."

Naruto rolled her eyes and bounded over to the window. "Yeah, yeah Grandma." She ducked out of ingrained habit, a large glass object sailing past her head as she hit the ground and took off toward the training grounds.

"Goddammit." Tsunade scowled, "I liked that one." She peered accusingly up at Shizune. "You should have stopped me from doing that. Go get me a new one."

"We have to special order those things you know, they aren't cheap."

"Why not? They obviously aren't that well-made if they can't even survive one half-hearted toss out a window," argued the blonde, crossing her arms. "Besides, if I don't have one I'll go back to personally checking on the critical care patients instead of just monitoring them all from my desk."

Shizune stood her ground, "I'll put a rush order in, but only if you finish signing the rest of the Sunagakure sub-contracts by five today. And you have to behave during those negotiations with the caravan merchants, no alcohol, no matter how shoddy you think their tin is."

Tsunade weighed the pros and cons, and came down on the side of wanting to play with her new toy now that she figured out how to work it. Especially since it made avoiding Shizune much, much easier. "Fine," she acquiesced.

Shizune didn't mention that she had ten of the balls stockpiled in the supply closet. Tsunade-sama was predictably hard on office supplies, but Shizune had learned to take advantage of opportunities for productivity when they presented themselves.

His training ground was occupied when he finally meandered into the main clearing.

"I thought I might find you here!" Genma waved cheerily and the senbon in his mouth tilted upward with his smile.

Kakashi frowned, "You were looking for me?"

"Genma-san," greeted Yamato, "are you going to spar with us today?"

Genma blinked, "Well I could, no problem, but first I just wanted to clear up a misund—"

Kakashi stiffened, "That's unnecessary." He really didn't want to re-hash their conversation of a few nights ago.

"Oh," Genma looked relieved. "You talked with your girl then?"

"She's not my girl," repeated Kakashi, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

"Senpai says it's temporary," Yamato contributed helpfully, glad to find someone else with whom he could discuss his idol's new relationship.

"Temporary?" Genma frowned, "I just wanted to make sure you knew I wasn't hitting on her."

"You were hitting on Naruto-san?" Yamato stared at the other man, crossing his arms.
"No!" Genma defended, before sheepishly rubbing the back of his head, "But it might have looked like that. Anyway," the tokubetsu jōnin focused his attention on Kakashi, "what's this about it being temporary?"

Kakashi shifted his weight, "Are we going to stand around and gossip all day, or actually train?"

"Trainings good." Yamato said, recognizing that his senpai was reaching his limit for social niceties.

"Why not both," Genma wiggled his eyebrows suggestively, then yelped and vanished as Kakashi let loose a barrage of kunai in his direction.

"You didn't say start!" Genma called from behind some bushes.

Kakashi snorted and took to the trees while Yamato frowned in disproval in the general direction of the interloping third party.

"Two against one," called Kakashi from the higher ground, "Genma-kun, since you're clearly out of shape, I'll let you have Tenzo today. Come after me in ten." Kakashi stepped back and melted into the foliage, going deeper into the training ground to set up some obstacles.

Genma slouched out of the bushes with a mournful sigh, "Always so serious."

Yamato pulled out his weapons pouch and redistributed some kunai. "I think he's just in a," the younger jōnin paused, the right words not coming to him. "I think he's in a mood," he finally finished awkwardly with a 'what can you do?' expression.

"A mood," drawled Genma dubiously. He sighed and waved Yamato over, "Give me some of those senbon, I wasn't actually thinking I was going to land my butt in a training session today."

"Then maybe you shouldn't come to training grounds uninvited," Yamato said with a sniff, a smidgeon resentful that he was having to share his bonding time with the other man.

Genma rolled his eyes at the childish comment, "Tell me about this 'temporary' thing he's got going with Naru-chan?"

Yamato rubbed his head. "I don't know, I mean, I stopped by his place just yesterday and she seemed pretty permanently moved in and happy. It didn't seem like they were fighting." He looked off in the direction in which Kakashi had fled. "But then today he's being all," Yamato tilted his head to and fro, searching for the right adjective, "broody."

Genma tapped his chin thoughtfully, "maybe he's just having trouble coming to terms with being with someone so much younger. I mean, it's not that big of an age gap, but still, he'd be the type to make a big deal out of something like this and be all 'she should be with someone her own age' angsty."

Yamato hummed, slightly distracted, not ready to commit to what his own thoughts were on the subject. He was jolted out of his own reverie by a strong clap to the, sending him stumbling forward a few steps.

Genma smiled, "we should make sure he knows that we support the two of them, you know, that we just want them to be happy." The senbon-chewing man tipped his head considering, "You especially, you should let him know you're ok with this, 'cuz he cares about what you think."

Yamato scowled, "Maybe I should make Senpai and Naruto-san go work it out on their own and not drag me into their problems."
"Haha," Genma chuckled, grinning slow and sly, "You sound like Kakashi's making you the other woman."

"He has not," snapped Yamato flustered. *See if I save his ass when we find senpai.* He started off toward the deeper part of the training grounds, stomping indignantly.

Fifteen minutes later, Genma was pinned to a tree trunk with an 'accidentally' mis-aimed mokuton attack, chewing on his senbon thoughtfully as the two former ANBU dodged and weaved, ninjutsu temporarily discarded in favor of getting some taijutsu practice in. *I probably should be a bit miffed about Yamato taking me out of the action, but it's actually a relief not to be caught up in this lover's spat.*

"You're very aggressive today," Kakashi commented, tone mild in contrast to the force Yamato was putting into his punches and kicks.

"I have a lot of excess energy," bit out Yamato, sweeping his back leg out in a powerful front kick, which Kakashi easily sidestepped.

"Well it's making him sloppy."

The soft critique sounded from next to Genma's ear and the man jumped slightly, well, as well one could jump when cocooned in hundreds of pounds of tree bark.

Genma eyed Kakashi speculatively, "That's just mean. How long has he been fighting a bunshin?"

"Three minutes and forty seven seconds."

"Senpai!" Yamato's aggravated exclamation alerted the pair to the fact that Yamato had just now realized he wasn't fighting the real Kakashi.

"Well," Kakashi shrugged, leaning idly against Genma's prison, "destroy them and I'll come back."

"Them?" Yamato blinked, cursing and flashing away as two more Kakashi-bunshin popped out of the forest, cornering the man.

Kakashi took a step back and eyed the knotted mess of roots that Genma was trapped in, clearly thinking about how best to remove the other ninja from his containment. Finally he shrugged and popped back his wrist, lightening crackling into existence around his fist.

Genma gulped and paled. "You really don't have to—"

But then with a loud crack and a spray of woodchips Genma was falling forward, tripping over his own feet. He would have fallen on his face had Kakashi not caught the back of his jacket and begun dragging the man after Yamato. Genma meekly came along, the serious, lost-in-thought expression on his peer's face intimidating him into silence.

Suddenly, Genma caught a whiff of something strange. He crinkled his eyes in confusion, and tried to lean closer toward Kakashi, surreptitiously sniffing. *Yup, he does.* "Kakashi," he asked, not entirely certain he wanted the answer to this question.

A single grey eye glanced at him apathetically.

Genma put a few more inches between them as they walked just in case Kakashi got upset at the forthcoming inquiry. "Why do you smell like flowers?"
Kakashi stopped, lazy eye unnerving Genma by staring at the man without blinking, and then the copy ninja just as suddenly stiffened and stalked forward, jaw clenching beneath his mask.

Genma hastened his step to keep up, "Just curious!" He finally reached Kakashi right as the other man sat down on a partially rotten log, just on the edge of a clearing in which Yamato was sullenly trying to dig himself out of a mudpit, the remnants of a last-ditch attack of a dying bunshin armed with some unusual explosive seals.

"Does Tenten leave her underwear out around the apartment?"

Genma's breath hitched, and he choked on his senbon, quickly removing it from his mouth and looking at the other jōnin in bewilderment as he perched next to him on the log. "Excuse me? What in the world does that have to do with why he smells like a girl?"

Kakashi just rubbed his forehead wearily as an equally tired Yamato finished his own fight and trudged over to them.

"I mean," Kakashi said gesturing toward Genma, "is it normal for girls to just leave their clothes out all over the apartment? Are they really that messy? I thought they were supposed to be the neater gender."

Genma actually had to think about this one for a moment. When he'd gone over to Tenten's before, she generally had the place nice and tidy. However, he was such a nosy, rude guest that it hadn't taken him long to figure out that she was just sweeping up all her dirty clothes and dumping them in the empty bathtub when he came over, pulling the shower curtain shut to hide the mess. Out of sight, out of mind. She'd laughed when he'd called her on it, and admitted something to the effect that girls were just as messy (not dirty, just messy) as men, but were better at pretending they weren't. So, drawing from that omission, "Yeah, I guess she does. Throw her clothes around and leave them, I mean."

Kakashi's shoulders slumped and his chin dipped to his chest, his face one of deep introspection.

Yamato slid down to sit cross-legged on the grass in front of them. "Is there a reason we're talking about Gai's student's clothes? Because I'm not sure that's a safe topic," he said in a stage-whisper.

Genma just raised his hands in a 'clueless' gesture.

"She's taken over my bathroom," Kakashi finally admitted, sounding very put-upon.

Yamato and Genma shared a look.

"I'm sorry?" Genma finally offered, tentatively.

"Her stuff's everywhere," Kakashi muttered miserably, "clothes on the doorknobs, hairbrush on the table, flowers in my kitchen windows, bobbypins on the bathroom floor and poking into you when you sit on the couch, everywhere." The copy ninja was beginning to look distressed, causing a similar expression to appear his comrades' faces.

"Well," Yamato cleared his throat, bravely deciding that someone was going to have to be the adult in this situation. "I think that's just part of living together, Senpai. She probably finds some of your habits equally annoying. But if it really bothers you," he shot Genma a nervous look, requesting backup, "have you tried talking to her about it?"

Genma caught the request and tried to tack on his own advice, "Yeah," he nodded knowingly, trying to appear like he was an old hand at this relationship shit (hell, in this group, he probably had ten
times the experience handling the opposite gender), "everybody that suddenly finds themselves with a roommate has to deal with stuff like that, but it's nothing you should end a relationship over. I mean just talk to her. That's what I'd do."

Kakashi seemed to be reflecting on their words.

Still curious, Genma leaned in to re-ask his original question, not noticing the alarm on Yamato's paling face and the sudden, subtle jerks his hands were making.

"Does your bathroom smell like flowers now or something?"

Kakashi gave a muffled groan, running his fingers through his hair and looking off into the woods to the right, away from both his companions, and ignoring Yamato's coughs.

"The flowers are everywhere! On the table, in the windows, and all the makeup in the bathroom—it's all in little breakable glass bottles, one slip up and smash, you've basically exploded an entire can of scented air freshener in the place. And it lingers. You can't wash the shit off. She doesn't even use half of it, it just takes up space and falls on you when you open a cabinet door. I'm beginning to feel like I'm going to be ambushed by enemy makeup every time I open one of my cupboards, it's like its' there just to annoy—"

"Oh, really?"

The two older jōnin jumped at the angry feminine voice and slowly turned around to face the intruder while Yamato attempted to melt into the forest floor.

Naruto stood tense and flushed, hands on her hips, tapping her foot in anger against the mossy dirt floor.

Kakashi felt the muscles in his shoulders tighten in a fight or flight reaction, alarmed when he realized that what he was focusing on was the way her eyes were sparking with anger, the way her chest was heaving in that low-cut top as she took in a particularly deep breath to yell—

"You know, Tsunade-sama—"

Kakashi flinched, knowing exactly how angry the girl had to be to refer to the Hokage by her proper name.

"Tsunade-sama told me the three of you were sitting around gossiping like little girls, but I didn't believe her!"

It was taking every ounce of Naruto's self control to reign in how much her body wanted to shake with anger and embarrassment. She'd really not expected to come out here and find Kakashi making fun of her living habits. She felt betrayed, and embarrassed, and angry. And she kind of wanted to cry in frustration, but at the same time she didn't 'cuz she felt like that meant Kakashi'd won. What he'd win, she didn't know, but she knew if she'd cried he'd won something.

Genma held out a hand, trying to placate the blonde clearly building up some serious steam, "He really didn't mean any harm—"

"I'm sorry," Naruto snapped, "Did I say you could talk?"

"Er—no," Genma twitched and hunched his shoulders in, quailing under a strange sensation of deja vu, flashing back to once upon a time when he was guarding a blond Hokage being berated by his fear-inspiring, spatula wielding wife for not taking the cookies she'd made the night before into
"It's not exactly like you've been the world's greatest host you know!" Naruto stalked forward jabbing her finger in Kakashi's face. "In case you haven't noticed, I've been doing all the grocery shopping, and the dishes, and the dusting, and the laundry, and I don't think your floor had been mopped in years before I got there—I've basically been you're fucking live-in maid the past two weeks and have you said so much as thank you? And did you know how much dog hair was on your couch cushions?"

Kakashi mistakenly tried to reply, but Naruto bulldozed right over what would only have been vaguely educated guesses while Yamato and Genma watched the tantrum with wide eyes and bated breath.

"I don't think so! So you can just suck it about my plants in the kitchen and my shit in the bathroom. You don't even put the toilet seat down half the time which is just, like, the most basic etiquette thing in the book." She stopped her rant, chest heaving and cheeks flushed, to gesture irately toward Genma, "Am I right?"

There was an awkward pause where Genma's brain had to take a moment to catch up to the fact that now she actually a verbal answer. "Oh, umm, yeah, maybe, kind of," the senbon slipped out of his mouth in his haste to agree and he gave an apologetic shrug in response to Kakashi's betrayed expression.

Naruto threw her hands in the air, "And then there's the whole thing with the toilet paper roll, you're always putting it on backward on the spool thingy that connects to the cabinet," Naruto's tirade was now punctuated with exaggerated gestures that just made Kakashi more confused.

"There's a right way to put toilet paper on the-" Kakashi's brain blanked on the word, as he rose to his feet unsteadily, backing away as Naruto continued advancing.

"Yes," she hissed, pulling furiously on one of her pigtails, "You're supposed to put it on the holder so that it unwind over the roll and you're always setting it up so it unwind under the roll and it's just driving me crazy."

Kakashi took another step back at the slightly manic glint in the girl's eyes. He thought he'd be better able to defend himself on his feet when she inevitably launched a physical attack, but he was caught off guard by the evolution of the argument into one about the proper orientation of toilet paper when installed on a horizontal axle for ease of access.

Naruto seemed to realize she'd gone off the deep end a tad, and took a deep, relaxing breath, before straightening and regarding the copy ninja with an intense, but no longer borderline psychotic breakdown-ish, stare. She cocked her hips and deadpanned, "And you so owe me a new bra."

Kakashi's spine stiffened and his brow furrowed, "Now wait just a minute—"

"No, you broke it, you buy it," Naruto bit out, grinding her foot into the dirt and leaning forward. "And it was my favorite."

"I didn't break it—"

"You tore it in two with your bare hands!"

Yamato coughed politely, "Maybe you two should talk—"

"Butt out!" Snarled Naruto, posture seething aggression, her own yell slightly louder than the
adamant "Not now, Tenzo!" coming from Kakashi as he finally rallied the willpower to defend himself from the absurdity of the latest accusation.

"Ok," Genma said with false cheer, swiftly rising to his feet and pulling Yamato up along with him by a solid grip on the back of the younger man's jacket, "Clearly, The Honeymoon is over and I think it's time for us to go!" He waved cheekily at the two. "Bye now!" Both he and Yamato vanished in a swirl of leaves.

Kakashi was feeling slightly silly about the argument now that he'd scared off two men who, at least on paper, were more emotionally stable than himself, but wasn't allowed to dwell in his thoughts as Naruto leaned forward and snatched his hand.

"Come on," Naruto bit, blue eyes still tight with anger, "Granny wants you in her office, like, yesterday."

"What's wrong with you two?" Tsunade eyed the two ninja that reported to her office and immediately took up defensive positions on opposite sides of the room. These two are never like this.

"Kakashi's being a jerk." Naruto stated from her position by the windows, lips pursed.

Kakashi remained slouched in his usual posture, stoic and silent, and as physically far away as possible from the blonde currently having a hissy fit.

Naruto didn't react well to the lack of response. "And when I say jerk I mean he's being an arrogant asshole," she said, feeling compelled to elaborate on just how offended she was at Kakashi's behavior.

Shizune watched the exchange with a fascinated grimace.

What an awful expression, thought Tsunade, quickly schooling her own and praying that it didn't look nearly that ridiculous. "Well," said Tsunade, making an impulsive decision in an attempt to salvage several goals, "you're just going to have to take the time to work through his ass-hole-ness together, because your current separate assignments may have collided." Although, now that she thought about it, the anger could be a good thing. It was going to take strong emotions to spur Naruto into action, and to influence Kakashi enough to develop a new perspective regarding the girl. His current skillset for dealing with enraged women was to switch places with the nearest potted vegetation and play hide-and-seek for a few days. Naruto wasn't going to let him pull that with her, and Kakashi was going to have to learn new social tools for successfully dealing with the girl. This could be a very good thing, she rationalized.

"No," said Kakashi, flat and decisive.

Tsunade blinked at the man, "Excuse me?"

The copy ninja shifted, slightly uncomfortable, "I will not be assisting Naruto to," he stumbled and mumbled the rest of the words, "seduce someone else on a mission."

The Hokage opened and closed her mouth, momentarily flabbergasted until she recalled that Hatake was under the impression that Naruto's current assignment was to undergo training for a seduction mission. Then she felt like slapping her head in disbelief, but she'd long since learned that it was much more satisfying to slap someone else. "That was not exactly what I had in mind."

"Oh," Kakashi said, voice small and scratching the back of his head sheepishly.
Naruto blushed and continued silently fuming on the other side of the room.

Tsunade cleared her throat, "What I meant is that some of Naruto's 'pen pals' have unintentionally discovered some disturbingly familiar occurrences, that I think might be related to your research project, Hatake."

Tsunade tossed a scroll to the silver-haired jōnin, who deftly plucked it out of the air promptly unfurled it, scanning its contents with a professional air.

Naruto continued to brood, but inched a bit closer to his corner of the room out of curiosity.

Kakashi snapped the scroll shut, slipping inside his vest. "I agree it demands investigation, but this can be accomplished on my own." His eyes flickered briefly to Naruto's inquisitive posture. "Accompaniment would only be a hindrance in this."

Naruto threw her hands up in the air and stalked back to the window. "And we're back to the lone ninja routine!"

Tsunade rolled her eyes, "I'm not sure he ever left it."

Kakashi looked unperturbed.

"Which is why," the older woman continued, undaunted, "since time isn't the essence, and this will both be a good learning opportunity for Naruto and allow her to reinforce some of her connections, she will be read in on your mission and included in your investigation."

Kakashi seemed torn between belligerence and resignation.

"Stop it," scolded the Hokage, rubbing at her temple, "Don't look so put out. It's not like you'll be leaving tomorrow on a mission that's going to last months. I'm going to need some time to make arrangements for your travels. The two of you are going to have to get pretty nosy in foreign territory and I don't want to ruffle any feathers the wrong way or make it seem like we're at fault for this mess."

The two newly teamed ninja continued to look about as happy at the arrangement as hungry cats stuck in the rain.

"Good lord," muttered Tsunade, putting her hands on her hips and regarding the two wearily, "I don't have time for this shit. You've got two days to fix," she gestured to the air between the two, "whatever this is and figure out how to work together. You're both adults, damn it, deal with it." She huffed and clapped her hands together. "Dismissed."

Naruto turned on her heel and stomped out the door, slamming every door down the hallway loudly in her wake.

Kakashi cringed a bit at the jarring noises, rubbing at the back of his head. He looked up and caught Tsunade staring at him in an expectant fashion.

"Well," drawled the woman, as Shizune continued to watch from the background, far too intrigued by the new developments to make a polite disappearance. The Hokage snapped her fingers to make sure she had the man's attention. "What did you do to the girl?"

Kakashi looked like he was going to maintain his silence for all of fifteen seconds. "I apparently put the toilet paper in upside down and left the toilet seat up."
The two women remaining in the room looked at him incredulously.

He wilted a bit. "And I maybe never said thank you for doing the laundry and implied that she was storing too much crap in my bathroom."

Kakashi didn't know how to interpret the strange silence settling over the office. Were they just as confused as he was at the situation, or had he missed something that should be glaringly obvious and committed a grievous social error?

"I'll go get some sake," Shizune finally said, stirring herself and walking out in a semi-daze.

"Just." Tsunade floundered, eventually deciding to jab her finger rudely in the direction of the window, "Go home. Now." She shook her head as Hatake fled outside, eager to follow familiar orders.

The blonde Hokage slid into her chair. "I don't get paid enough to deal with this shit," she sighed, resting her arms on her desk and burying her head in them.

Naruto lay on her back, sprawled out on the couch and examining the ceiling, arms curled back under her head.

_Do you think I over-reacted a little?_ She bit her lip, finally forming the question that she'd been batting about vaguely in her mind and purposefully projecting it toward the fox.

_Oh I don't know,_ Kurama mumbled, not even bothering to open his eyes, _I think it's a perfectly normal reaction for females to start hissing and have random, territorial tantrums over the arrangement of human bathing quarters if I'm judging the standard of human social norms by your mother's behavioral patterns._

_It sounds so petty when you say it like that,_ Naruto thought, pouting.

_Small minds think alike,_ retorted the fox.

Naruto groaned and rolled over, burying her face in a pillow. _I'm actually kind of embarrassed I snapped at him like that. I just saw him talking about me and my stuff to his friends and it felt like he was making fun of me and I just, I just—_ Saw red? The Kyuubi rolled its eyes and started licking one enormous paw. _You're not going to make any progress explaining yourself to me. I really couldn't give a flick of two tails,_ said the chakra creature contemptuously.

Naruto sighed and raised her face from the pillow, looking mournfully in the direction of the closed bedroom door. "Right," she stated, getting to her feet and nervously making her way to the closed wooden panel she knew Kakashi was hiding behind. She'd sensed him enter the apartment not long after she came back herself, and he'd stayed closeted in the room for the rest of the evening. She timidly knocked on the door, "Kakashi?"

On the other side of the door, Kakashi registered the soft knock and lowered the book he'd been pseudo-reading as he'd stiffly reclined on his bed. The Hokage had told him to go home, so he had. Only, he really didn't know what to do once he got home, Tsunade-sama hadn't given him further directions. So he'd sat uncomfortably slouched on his bed, until he reluctantly determined that he was going to have to wait for Naruto to make the first move and react from there.

It'd taken Naruto two and half hours to come to the same realization, and in the meantime he'd
reviewed the days' events over and over in his head, trying to decide if he'd actually done anything wrong and whether he should apologize or he should be apologized to by Naruto. Tsunade's and Shizune's reactions hadn't helped any either, he still couldn't determine if they'd been shocked by an inappropriate or ignorant behavior on his part or the absurdity of the subject matter of his disagreement with Naruto.

Ah, well, in the end, the only way this was going to be resolved was if he actually let the girl in to talk to him. Which meant he was going to have to acknowledge that she existed, and that he was in his room. He clutched the book tight, "Yes?"

His door popped open and cautious, calm blue eyes peeked through the inch wide opening. Upon seeing Kakashi and not sensing any hostility, the door opened more and Naruto slipped into the room, padding across the floor and perching on the edge of his bed.

Kakashi blinked, tensing. He hadn't known that 'yes' meant 'please come into my room and sit with me.' He should have seen that coming. He subtly inched back on the bed, hitting the wall, which only gave Naruto more room to make herself comfortable. She pulled her bare feet up onto the bed and tucked them under her.

She nervously fidgeted with the end of a pigtail draped over her shoulder, eyes focused on the hands working through her hair in her lap, and she missed Kakashi's flinch at the intrusion into his personal bubble of space. He unobtrusively tugged a pillow between them, trying to create some kind of barrier.

"I'm sorry," Naruto finally blurted out, steadily gazing at her hands clasped tight in her lap. Kakashi froze, and then set his book to the side. "What?"

The girl turned to look up at him through wide, sad eyes. "I'm sorry about this afternoon. Earlier. I kind of over-reacted. Maybe."

Kakashi relaxed, Oh good. It felt nice to know that he wasn't alone in thinking her behavior had been a bit of an abreaction.

Naruto bit her lip and gazed back down. "I just was embarrassed." She shrugged her shoulders. "I came to get you on Granny's orders, and was kind of excited to be able to talk to you about what I was doing, and I found you talking with Yamato taichou and Genma-san and I just—they looked away, shoulders hitching inward, making her seem smaller, "I was embarrassed because I felt like you were making fun of me."

And didn't Kakashi feel like a giant heel at that admission. He studied the far wall for a moment before giving a sigh and rubbing at the back of his head. "I'm sorry too then, that wasn't my intention."

Naruto gazed back at him, eyes large and liquid, wavering, "then why were you saying those things?"

Kakashi felt trapped, and panicked, at the intensity of her expression. It held a multitude of emotions, not one of which he was capable of handling on a good day. He desperately wished he could evade this discussion, or come up with some way to distract her, but some part of him recognized this as playing a part of those 'trust issues' between Naruto and he to which the Hokage had been alluding.

What would Kurenai say? Kakashi thought hard on how to properly word his response, so as to both make himself understood and convey that it wasn't really something that was Naruto's fault, it was
just yet another occasion in which Kakashi was too broken to react appropriately to the social circumstances.

"This whole roommate thing," Kakashi waved a hand and leaned back against the wall, "I'm not very good at it. I value my privacy," he thought briefly of his conversation with Sai and the reference to privacy as a commodity in which Kakashi was wealthy. Well, now I'm back to being a pauper in that regard. "And I'm not used to having to share," he settled for saying, "space."

"I'm sorry," the blonde mumbled again, ducking her head.

"I'm not saying that to make feel guilty," Kakashi sat up, alarmed. "You've been a good house guest, for the most part." He wanted to see her smile again and stop being so uncharacteristically droopy. It was making his chest tighten uncomfortably. "Aside from setting my kitchen on fire."

He did get a smile out of her on that, albeit a very small one.

"This is just a temporary circumstance, and you should be able to rely on your teammates to help you in situations like this." Kakashi firmly believed that, he just tried very hard to make sure he was the least likely one on which others chose to rely. He'd almost perfected that life choice between his strategies to be physically or emotionally unavailable. Only Naruto would think to crash at the apartment of the man who spent half of his time staring morosely at a gravestone and the other half with his head buried in a book of porn.

"I could probably ask Iruka-sensei, he should be back now," Naruto tentatively offered a solution.

"No," said Kakashi quickly, immediately wondering why he'd just said that and feeling like a hypocrite. One second I'm telling the girl I'm happiest as a loner, and the next I'm telling her not to leave? That doesn't make any sense. He seemed dumbfounded at his own response, and tried to quickly work through his own thoughts to determine the origins of this impulsive 'no.' It's just because I'm used to her sleeping here now. Iruka actually would notice if I was being a creepy stalker for a few days, and I'm going to need to get proper rest if I'm leading her on a mission into an unknown situation in foreign territory within a few days. The reasoning sounded weak to his own ears, but he couldn't take back the answer as she was now beaming happily at him, mega-watt grin back to its full power.

"Really?" She asked, eyes sincere and hopeful.

"Really," he said weakly, and even though that answer wouldn't have been convincing to a first-day interrogation apprentice, it didn't stop the blonde from launching herself at him, throwing herself against him with enough force to make his head hit the wall with a dull thunk.

Oww. Kakashi belatedly reminded himself to relax and breathe, bringing his own arms up, one to lightly pat Naruto on the head and the other to gently push her away, which would have been the proper fulfillment of her portion of the script.

"No," said the blonde, instead snuggling closer, pushing her face against his jacket.

What? What now, Kakashi's thoughts blurred together, his breathe quickening with the prolonged contact, he quickly pushed down the panic attack, recognizing the irrationality of his discomfort with the innocent gesture. "Naruto," he said, sounding strained.

"Five minutes," Naruto said. "I know that's asking a lot, but it's been a bad day, and I want a good hug. And both Sakura-chan and Kurenai-san say that hugs are good for you and something to do
with boosting oxy-cotton and I really don't know, but they're good for you and I haven't had one in
days and I know you're long overdue so shut up and deal." She wound her arms around him a bit
tighter. "Five minutes," the words were muffled as her face turned into his jacket, but the tone and
the fingers clutching tightly at him were pleading.

Kakashi listened to her light-hearted rambling with half his mind, the other debating whether to give
in or run for it. Eventually, he forced his shoulders to loosen and let his own arms relax and rest on
top of shoulders. There was no one here to witness it so what was the harm in humoring the girl for
five minutes? Besides, if she really got into a mood, she could chase him down and probably tackle
him for the same length of time anyway. Only it would take twice as much time and energy and be
ten times as annoying. And with his luck today Gai would witness the entire thing and decide it
needed to be a daily game.

Besides. It had been a long day. And now that he'd gotten his breathing under control and pushed
down the panicky feeling, he was kind of sleepy. The sooner this was done, the sooner they both
could get a good night's sleep and start preparing for the upcoming mission.

And she smelled nice. And looked nice in his arms like this, all content and calm.

He let one of his hands fall from her shoulders to rest on the small of her back and he sank a bit more
comfortably into the pillows at his back. He felt a bit strange when he realized he was touching the
skin of her back because of the way her shirt had ridden up, but she didn't flinch away from his
fingers and the oddness soon faded into just the pleasant feeling of warm, soft skin under his
fingertips. The gentle rise and fall of her chest confirmed that she really was relaxed with this
arrangement and not nervous about hugging a man who had more kills to his name than days in a
year.

She wiggled a bit so that she was resting slightly higher on his chest and her weapons pouch wasn't
digging into his thigh.

He relaxed a little more and gently dropped his chin to rest on the crown of her head.

Three minutes and forty eight more seconds.

His eye began to droop shut, and eventually he let it.

Chapter End Notes

Beta(s): Ladywinterfic & ElectraSev5n
Kakashi removes his head from the hole in which he'd stuck it.

"And then you just left?" Kurenai put her hands on her hips, regarding the blond teenager across from her with fond exasperation.

"Well, yeah," Naruto flicked a pigtail over her shoulder, "I mean, I wasn't exactly dressed for bed and I didn't expect him to fall asleep like that and it was kind of awkward what with Kurama getting all 'don't ask me about the mating habits of furless two-legged mutants, mortal,' on me."

Kurenai had to take a minute to process that last statement. In the meantime, Naruto slipped from the couch to the floor, and joined Matsu-chan in playing with paper and crayons.

The jōnin sighed and took advantage of the temporary, free supervision of her toddler to fold laundry on the kitchen table. "Did he mention it this morning when he got up?"

"Nope," said Naruto, stretching out flat on her belly, legs kicking in the air. Matsu-chan mimicked the older girl's posture by the blond's side on the floor. "He just left before I woke up like he usually does."

"Well," Kurenai said thoughtfully, scowling at an uncooperative tunic, "when will you see him next?"

"Umm," the teenager stuck her tongue out the corner of her mouth, focusing intently on the paper before her, "I guess later today. We should be having a team practice."

"That's not really an ideal time to do anything," Kurenai muttered softly, deep in thought as she tried to analyze the situation from the eccentric copy ninja's perspective. "He was probably uncomfortable, but I think it's a good step forward. Just keep trying to push him into personal conversations and you've got to find a way to keep him from running away from awkward situations. I think by now he knows that he's attracted to you, he just doesn't want to consciously acknowledge it."

Naruto sighed and traded her orange crayon for Matsu's green one. "Are you sure about that? I still feel like he sees me as this kid sister he has to look out for, not as a grown woman."

"Are you still treating him like a teacher or like a man?" Kurenai responded wryly, eyeing the mismatched socks left on the table and wondering where the rest of them had gone. *I swear I start the month with the same number of socks and four weeks later I'm missing half of them.*

"Oh, definitely a man," Naruto said the words quickly, not really thinking them through, and then gave an embarrassed squeak and buried her head in the coloring book, much to Matsu's annoyance.
"Oh?" Kurenai came around the table to better see the girl on her floor, "What happened to inspire that comment?"

Kurenai couldn't catch Naruto's grumbled response, voice muffled as it was in the coloring book pages. Matsu loudly protested the situation by banging small fists on the blond's head.

"I'm sorry, can you repeat that?"

Naruto raised a beet-red face, "He had a towel!"

"What?"

"I mean," Naruto rambled, still clutching the coloring book tightly, "He was still wearing a towel but I kind of caught him coming out of the shower and it was really hot and my stomach did funny things and it was kind of hard to breathe and then I laughed and realized he tore my bra and broke the perfume bottle and it smelled."

Kurenai blinked. "That makes absolutely no sense."

"Everything smelled like flowers and he told Genma and Yamato-taichou it was my fault," Naruto wailed dramatically and rolled on to her back, catching Matsu in her arms, and spinning the squawking, grumpy toddler around with her.

Kurenai rolled her eyes at the pair.

"Men are such needy gossips," Naruto said with an exaggerated sniff, focusing her attention on tickling Matsu and turning grumps to giggles.

"The worst kind," Kurenai nodded indulgently, smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

"And then I may have yelled at him about the toilet paper," admitted Naruto, bounding to her feet and swinging Matsu into the air, turning circles around the apartment.

"You realize I still have no idea what you are talking about," Kurenai called absently after the pair as Naruto spun them into the kitchen, making whooshing noises modeled off of some of Konohomaru's prior antics, which incited the excited child to squeal louder.

"You make my kid sick, you clean it up," Kurenai said the words with the long-suffering, practiced calm common to every mother of a three year old child, before bending down to pick up the abandoned crayons and coloring book so little feet wouldn't trip on them.

She stopped in surprise and when she got a good look at the papers in her hands. "Naruto," she called out with a pained expression, "Please tell me you weren't trying to teach my child how to draw explosive seals!"

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"I'm going home." Sasuke promptly declared, spinning on his heel and preparing to return the way that he'd come, discarding the idea of training after spending two seconds in the clearing and observing the blond bouncing around excitedly in a manner reminiscent of a recently popped helium balloon.

"Don't you dare," snarled Sakura, reaching out to snag the back of his collar with a gloved fist, snapping him about-face with a tug reinforced by Tsunade's strength techniques.

"Somebody gave her sugar," Sasuke said with a scowl, "I will not be responsible for the
"Bimbo denies partaking in any energy-enhancing supplements," Sai dutifully informed, and was just as dutifully ignored by the other brunet.

"I think she's just happy about something," Sakura said softly, sounding pained as she watched the antics of the woman she would one day refer to as Hokage.

Naruto continued to bounce obliviously about the clearing, engaging in some strange, incomprehensible dance with pieces of paper that made absolutely no sense to her three onlookers.

No one interrupted her bizarre routine, as they all knew from experience that the explanation for the behavior would be even more disconcerting than the conclusions that they were drawing from their own observations.

Eventually, Naruto tripped and face-planted in the middle of the forest, which seemed to slightly diminish her effervescent enthusiasm.

"Gracious, Moron," said Sasuke, applauding the performance with a slow clap.

Sai mimicked him, thinking this was the appropriate behavior until Sakura snatched his hands and scolded him for being rude. Which didn't clear up his misconception, but at least he was spared a piercing look by the blonde girl sprawling inelegantly on her stomach in the grass.

"Shut up Asshole," she pushed herself up into a cross-legged sitting position, rubbing at the back of her head, fretfully, "I just can't seem to get this seal thing to work."

"Seals?" Sakura perked up and prowled forward to more closely examine the pieces of paper haphazardly slapped on the nearby tree trunks. "I thought you were just being taught explosive seals?"

Sasuke and Sai shared an alarmed look at the idea of Naruto being purposefully taught to make explosives. Sasuke's quickly morphed into a look of horror as he realized the two were actually sharing a thought. Sai's faded back to his standard non-expression, but he was mentally pleased for the same reason.

"No, I'm way past that now," Naruto waved a hand absently, not noticing how her comrades paled and Sakura subtly stepped away from the tagged trees.

"I'm trying some space distortion seals but they just don't seem to be working," she admitted, pushing her lower lip out in a pout, sauntering closer to the tree trunk to observe her handiwork.

"That would actually require that you be able to grasp complex physics when you've clearly shown time and again that you can't even grasp the basic concept of gravity," Sasuke sneered, irritated to be spending time on what he considered to be a fruitless endeavor.

"Why you're positively chatty today, Sasuke," said Naruto with a smile that showed too much teeth as she collected the seals from the clearing. "Want to volunteer as the test subject for my next batch of seals since you're so confident that they won't work?"

She beamed victoriously at Sasuke's telling silence and was so distracted that she stumbled over a loose tree root and dropped one of the seals.

"Oh," she blinked, bending down to it up.
Sai's head followed the curve of her spine as she bent over to retrieve the paper, carefully contemplating what he was beginning to realize was an aesthetically pleasant view, until a slap upside the head had him automatically defaulting to an 'at attention' posture. Sai stared as Kakashi slipped past him, the older man clearing his throat.

"Mah, what's on the agenda today?"

Sai frowned, disoriented and wondering at the purpose underlying the man's corrective behavior, but he quickly shrugged off the oddity, filing it as something to examine at a later time, and obediently trotted into the clearing to fall in line next to the copy ninja's other students.

"Is it really wise to be teaching the Moron how to blow up things?"

"Stop being a jealous dickwad, Sasuke" Sakura said with a roll of her eyes and a hand on her hip. Naruto and Sai blinked at the unexpectedly aggressive exchange.

Sasuke bristled in offense. "Maybe you should put that spine back where you found it before someone reports you for theft."

Sakura straightened her shoulders, tossing her hair haughtily in a move that could only have been taught by Ino. "Maybe you should think up insults that sound like they weren't thought up by a twelve year old gi—"

"As fun as this is," Kakashi interjected, "maybe we should skip the flirting and focus on training." Kakashi slipped his hands into his pockets as the parties in question instantly turned aware from each other and glared in opposite directions. "Unless, of course, you'd like to go join Gai on his morning jogs again?" Kakshi offered generously. "Because that will be the punishment for anyone on this team engaging in unsanctioned public displays of affection."

Sakura gaped, "That was not affection!"

Kakashi shrugged, "I have a very broad definition of P.D.A." He paused, and then added as an afterthought, "Today that is."

Sakura simmered, but settled into grudgingly glowering at her instructor.

"Such a cheerful bunch," Kakashi mumbled, slouching a bit and scratching at his temple with a finger. He was met with the faces of divided forces; two blank and two resentful.

"Right then," Kakashi strolled over to a tree, settling comfortably against it before giving instructions. "Something different today." His audience perked up with the promise of potentially interesting playtime. "Naruto will be with me, and the three of you will be an opposing team."

Naruto perked up gleefully at those words and Sasuke scowled, while the other two members appeared unaffected by the announcement.

"I want you three to go set up a 'base' and trap and defend it as if it's the most secret, important thing in your lives. I'm giving you a full hour to prepare, so I expect defenses to be excellent," Kakashi continued, having long since mastered the art of surviving the Uchiha death glare. "Your goal will be to prevent Naruto and I from discovering the base, from collecting information from the base, and from leaving with that information." Kakashi closed his eye and rested his full weight against the tree, only popping his good eye open when he didn't sense his subordinates obediently moving away to do his bidding. "Well," he intoned gravely, waving a hand in a shooing motion, "go."
Sasuke's jaw tightened as he regarded his assigned teammates, wrinkling his nose in distaste, but he eventually followed Sakura without complaint as she faded into the woods, Sai falling in behind them.

Which left Naruto alone in the clearing with Kakashi.

Who had apparently decided to spend the next hour with his eyes closed pretending that she didn't exist.

*Not if my name is Naruto Uzumaki.* She grinned at the challenge, intent to take advantage of Kurenai's advice to corner and captivate Kakashi whenever the opportunity presented itself. Certainly, he was a captive audience at the moment, and her whisker-marked face looked especially mischievous and as she crept closer to invade the man's personal bubble.

"Hey-hey," she said, an inch away from the copy ninja, which put her eye-level with his shoulder. The jūnin remained unresponsive, seemingly content to ignore her.

She scooted closer, rising on her tiptoes so that her nose was a centimeter away from touching his long-sleeve shirt, "Ka-ka-shi," she drew out the name in an annoying, melodic voice.

Kakashi opened his eye a smidge, unamused, "Yes, Naru-chan?"

She brightened, registering the tiny sliver of his attention as victory and latching on to his arm, executing one of her new favorite gestures.

Kakashi twitched faintly, and then just dropped his shoulders with a put-upon sigh, wondering just what he had done to make Naruto think that he was 'cuddly.' And then he flinched, because, *oh right, that would have been last night.* And he told his brain to stop right there, please.

"Personal space, Naru-chan," he said lightly, without much force, or effect, as Naruto only grinned and tugged him away from the tree.

"Come help me with this seal-y thing I've been working on."

"Wouldn't you rather let me explain the upcoming mission?" Kakashi asked, letting Naruto pull his limp weight forward into the clearing.

"Well, yeah, you could do that too." She tilted her head as she stepped back to kneel in the grass, clasping her hands in front of her attentively.

"Thank you for your permission," Kakashi said dryly as he settled down across from her. "What has Hokage-sama told you about what I'm doing?"

Naruto shrugged. "Nothing, really." She pulled absently at a few nearby strands of grass. "Just that some of what my pen-pals have been reporting may have something to do with something she gave you to investigate."

The jūnin hummed thoughtfully, "That is all true in a way, but what Tsunade-sama has actually asked me to do is to track down whatever happened to Root and make sure that it is quite thoroughly extinct."

The blond pulled her knees up to her chest and chewed on her lip as she mulled over the implications of Kakshi's words. "So, since we're looking at recent activity outside of Konoha, that means you think Root is still active out there, don't you?"
Kakashi nodded. "Yes, from my research, it appears that there may be a handful of Root members still unaccounted for, although what their goals are without Danzo's leadership is anyone's guess."

"You don't know how many people we're looking for?"

"No," Kakashi said calmly, hands resting on his knees.

"And you didn't know where they possibly were before my letters," Naruto looked intently at the copy ninja, "What makes you so sure this is Root stuff then?"

Kakashi shook his head, "I'm not certain that it is related to Root, but the reports have an eerie similarity to some past incidents. Root never been a particularly inventive bunch strategy wise, especially when separated from their head. They tend to be firm believers in recycling." Kakashi tilted his head and considered Naruto, "Besides, no matter the abductors' identities, isn't it for the best that we find who our kidnapper is and stop the disappearances?"

Naruto straightened, "Believe it!" She leaned forward, curious, "So, practice today, it's like preparation for our mission right?"

The copy ninja smiled with his eyes closed, "Something like that."

"Then I can try the new stuff we've been working on, right?" Naruto's voice rose in excitement as she scrambled to her feet and brushed a few twigs off her shorts.

Kakashi had to force his head up after an awkward few seconds in which all his brain seemed capable of noting was just how long Naruto's legs seemed today. "If you want," he finally managed to say with a casual shrug, rising to his own feet smoothly.

Surprisingly, the 'base' was harder to find than Naruto thought it would be. A number of factors that contributed to the difficulty could be blamed on the blond, but mainly, this was due to the fact that Kakashi took on the passive role of tag-along observer, content to simply follow several dozen Narutos as they blindly charged through the heavily wooded training area.

"I don't understand," muttered the original crossly, narrowing her eyes at a particular row of trees that they had passed for the eighth time. "They smell strongest here, they should be here." Kurama had enhanced her sense of smell for tracking purposes, and the clones temporarily channeling their inner blood hound were adamant that Sasuke, Sakura, and Sai had hunkered down in this spot.

Kakashi gave a noncommittal grunt, only because very vaguely, he was aware that such a noise was expected from him. He'd checked out his current book on Genma's recommendation, and while not quite brilliant enough to make Kakashi's top ten list, it was at least novel enough to keep him amused while Naruto played hide-and-seek and tried to hunt down her prey.

It really isn't that hard. Kurama's voice echoed with a distressed patience, as if he was struggling very hard not to descend into his natural state of contemptuous fury.

I don't get it, Naruto thought back at the creature. They should be right here, or at least, something should be here, but I don't see anything.

Are you a ninja or not? The Kyūbi growled, several tails thumping harshly against the 'floor' that existed in the chūnin's mindscape. What's more reliable, your nose or your eyes?

Ummm...Naruto paused, considering her answer carefully. This is a trick question.

No it's not you mewling, beetle-brained excuse for a toothpick.
Naruto wasn't sure that insult made sense exactly, but straightened indignantly all the same.

Kurama didn't even pause to roll his eyes, *Which of your senses is currently enhanced by my own superior abilities? At the very least, you should know that two minds are better than one, thus, the natural conclusion is that the combination of two sets of senses are more reliable than one as well.*

"Wait," said the blond, aloud, "So they are actually here?"

Yes, please go ahead and announce your awareness of the enemies' locations, that's always the strategy guaranteed to extend your lifespan. Kurama did roll his eyes this time. *Think, you meely, half-witted squirrel-spawn, who are you facing?*

Naruto promptly sat down on the ground in a sulk, "I'm not going to talk to you about anything if all you're going to do is call me names." She sniffed huffily and turned her head to the side, ignoring the fact that she was in a battle simulation.

Kakashi glanced at her briefly over the top of his book. *And she wonders why the Council still hesitates to promote her,* he thought, the slight exasperation he was feeling overshadowed by the amusement that bloomed with the familiarity of the girl's piqued expression. By now, Kakashi was well accustomed to Naruto going down a rabbit trail in the middle of an assignment, whether it was to argue with her bijū or because she'd unilaterally decided the enemy was really just misunderstood and in bad need of a hug. Oddly enough, the tactic seemed to work for her, as it had yet to cost her a limb. His eyes crinkled with fond memories, and he turned his attention back to his book, for now content to let Naruto gnaw at the puzzle in her own strange way.

*I wouldn't have to call you names if you would put that puny lump of grey matter you call a brain to work for once and didn't require your betters to spell out the solution for you,* Kurama spat with a snarl, fur fluffing up around his neck and posture implying that if he could he'd grab the girl by the back of her scrawny little neck and shake some sense into her.

Naruto stiffened, *That's just mean and uncalled for, I'm trying to work with you, but if you want me to figure it out on my own I don't have to waste time. It's just that things aren't adding up and I wanted a second opinion. If you don't want to give it, I won't ask you anymore!*

*That's not what I was saying!* Kurama circled, seething with irritation inside her head, tails lashing out in aggravation. *You should have that oh-so-illustrious leader of yours check your ears for obstructions, I swear you never listen. I tell you to focus on the best sense and you try to argue in favor of the one that's been compromised, you mite-infested, half-

"Oh," Naruto said, throwing a hand in the air in frustration as she sat cross-legged on the ground, "Why didn't you just say it was a freakin' genjutsu in the first place you moth-bitten furball!"

With that exclamation, one of her cleverly hidden opponents decided to launch an attack prior to Naruto's dispelling of the illusion, and Kakashi tensed reflexively as the well-sharpened projectiles flashed through the air.

He needn't have worried. Naruto would have recovered within minutes even if the senbon had actually struck her, but instead, in her shock at the abrupt appearance of the weapons, Naruto had lashed out instinctively with a thin, yellow whip of chakra, an actual physical manifestation of gathered energy which intercepted the attack and deflected the senbon in various directions.

For a moment, the forest was silent, Naruto and Kakashi both blinking dumbly in response to the event.
Then Naruto took a deep breath and shrieked and Kakashi quickly braced himself because he knew what was com—

"Kakashi!" The blond launched herself at the older man in a full body hug, arms circling tightly around his chest. "Did you see? Did you see?"

Naruto jabbered with untamable enthusiasm as Kakashi patted her on the back in an automatic, well-conditioned reaction, holding his book high above the chaos to keep it from becoming a casualty of Naruto's celebratory triumph; it was on loan after all.

Sasuke let the genjutsu he created disperse, relaxing the fingers that were clenched tight around the hilt of his katana, blood-red eyes fading to black.

Sakura looked uncertainly at the two brunets she was wedged in between up in a tree branch. "Do either of you know what that was?"

"No." Sai said, sounding unperturbed, the significance of Naruto displaying a skill that neither Sakura nor Sasuke had seen the blonde girl display prior to the day lost on the maladjusted young man.

"No," agreed Sasuke eyeing Naruto's squealing display of joy distastefully, before muttering slightly bitterly, "But I think that should count as P.D.A."

Sakura elbowed him (lightly) in the ribs, "Shut up, they're sharing a moment."

Sai's eyes widened in sudden comprehension and he raised an eyebrow speculatively, "I was not aware that Senpai was romantically attached to Bimbo."

"Not that type of moment," hissed Sakura, flustered and waving her hands in protest, "I mean a friendship-y, celebratory, student-pleased-to-make-teacher-proud and teacher-proud-of-accomplished-student moment."

Sai frowned, "Is that not the culmination of affections expressed as the central plot line of Icha-Icha Seducing Sensei?"

Sakura gaped and slowly edged back from the inquisitive boy, red flush spreading across her face.

"We wouldn't know," said Sasuke flatly, schooling his face in a neutral expression.

"Again," said Kakashi, turning a page in Icha-Icha as he reclined against a tree. He wasn't paying as much attention as he probably should have been to the scene before him; rather, he was reflexively repeating the word every time he heard the crunching sound of wood breaking under too much pressure.

"Senpai—" Yamato cut off with a yelp, hastily propelling himself backward as one of Naruto's 'chains' went a little wild.

"Sorry!" Naruto called out after the retreating man, too carried away in the euphoria of obtaining a new skill to worry about aiming carefully.

Yamato scowled at her briefly, but quickly let it fade into a sigh, unable to keep up his air of disapproval when faced with such buoyant enthusiasm. He brought his hands together and 'grew' another ten posts for her to whack at with her newfound ability.
Naruto's chakra 'chains' resembled whips more than the chains after which they'd been named. It was only when one closely examined the yellow cords that one could tell the rope was actually a very fine chain.

Frankly, it baffled everyone, because the general consensus between the three of them was that it should be harder to make a smaller, tightly-linked chain than the larger ones that Naruto's mother was so well known for deploying in battle. And the links seemed to be just as strong as the infamous Uzumaki technique with which Kakashi was familiar. However, Kurama made it very clear that he wasn't going to play guinea pig to test that idea, so they tabled determining whether the chains were bijū containing capable for another day.

Naruto proposed that perhaps her chains were smaller because she had started to form them at a very basic level, and moved through Kakashi's methods with such precision that she'd gained better chakra control when using the technique. Yamato and Kakashi had exchanged dubious glances at that, but didn't have a better theory to contradict her, and so kept their thoughts to themselves.

The jinchūriki scrunched up her face in concentration and carefully constructed a new chain, pulling it out of the deep well of her own chakra reserves and wrapping it around one of the posts that Yamato had been dragged into practice for the sole purpose of creating (and because, as Naruto insisted, if he cooperated, she'd "love him forever").

Kakashi had started Naruto practicing on trees, but after she'd killed about ten of them in five minutes, they'd decided to circumvent Tsunade's inevitable orders to replant the training field by enlisting the aid of someone who could make Naruto's targets a more easily renewable resource. Yamato had just shrugged, bemused, and allowed himself to be spirited away to the training field.

Naruto clenched her hand in a fist, but was careful not to apply as much force to the tension she controlled on the line, so as not to explode the post again and send the chain wildly flying into the faces of her spectators. She approached the chain carefully, Yamato cautiously trailing at her shoulder.

"Eh," she squinted at the glowing yellow rope, "I don't think it's getting any bigger at all."

"I agree," said Yamato, after a moment of studying the phenomenon, "It still looks like the same size to me."

Naruto straightened up, flexing her arms above her head in a stretch, "Well, at least I'm getting better at controlling the force behind the thing."

"That's debatable," muttered the mokuton user under his breath.

"What was that?" Naruto eyed the jōnin with pressed lips.

"What was what?" Yamato asked quickly with a disarming smile, "Have you been trying to make more than one?"

"Yes," Naruto looked off into the distance with a frown, "I think I could do it, it's just," she broke off to glance back at Kakashi, still leaning against a tree in calculated disinterest. "It's like I'm this close," she held her fingers an inch apart to demonstrate her words, "to getting them to split in two, but it's like it's not thick enough." Confused blue eyes turned toward Yamato, "I think maybe if I can make them bigger, they'll be easier to split into two or three and duplicate. I think whatever the answer is to making them bigger will help me to make more of them, too."

Her eyes grew hazy as she tried to poke Kurama into contributing his two cents.
Fuck if I know, said the Kyūbi with a yawn, scratching at an ear with a detached air, before curling up with practiced indifference.

Very helpful, You Magnanimous Mouse Muncher. Naruto gave a huff back in the real world, perching her hands on her hips and returning her attention to the chain wrapped around the post with a focused scowl.

Yamato noted the girl's sudden mood swing, from good cheer to internal fuming and could only scratch at the back of his head. He'd never seen Kushina Uzumaki in battle, so he had no idea what they were trying to get Naruto to recreate, and the one who did seemed to have washed his hands of the matter for some unknown reason.

Actually, Yamato thought, eyes darting quickly between his two sometimes teammates, this is exactly how he acts when he doesn't know how to respond to a social situation, or he is feeling socially awkward. I wonder what happened between them, I thought they were getting along well? Yamato rubbed a palm tiredly over his face. I wish they wouldn't drag me into their fights. "Senpai," Yamato tossed a meaningful look in Kakashi's direction, crossing his arms over his vest, "what do you want her to try next?"

"Hmm?" Kakashi raised an eye lazily over the edge of his book, blinking in feigned surprise. "What now?"

"He asked what you thought I should try next," dutifully repeated Naruto, without turning away from the chain wrapped tightly around the post. She reached forward to touch the glowing links, pulling her hand back quickly, expecting it to burn or shock or something. When it didn't, she pressed her hand forward more confidently. She tried to pry the rope away from the post with her hands, but it wouldn't budge unless she relaxed the tension on the entire chain, at which point it slid to the earth with a strange hiss of air.

She bent over to pick up the end of the chain, letting the strange material flow through her fingers. She wondered at the eerie sensation. It's solid, but not like a metal, it has more give than that. And it tickles! She let it fall back onto the grass and squatted down to poke at it. It feels like it's alive, like it has its own energy. But it doesn't burn or hurt or anything.

Kurama grumbled something in the back of her mind about being able to change that if she'd let him out to play, and she had to acknowledge that adding the Kyūbi's volatile chakra to the chain rather than relying entirely on her own probably would make it dangerous to physically touch. What would happen if I tried to make one entirely of nature chakra in sage mode? Or if I add elemental chakra to it, could I run wind chakra through the links? What would that do? She pondered the matter curiously, but snapped to attention when Kakashi finally decided to join the conversation.

"Well," said the copy ninja, scratching his chin thoughtfully, "We've seen how long she can make one, tried to make multiple chains, determined that she can't yet manage to make the chain through a kage bunshin, and since she didn't just melt her hand off by touching it," added the jōnin wryly—

"I'm right here," insisted Naruto, sounding slightly exasperated, "and if I'd melted my own skin off I could have grown it back!"

Yamato raised his eyes heavenward and stuffed his hands in his pockets, biting back the lecture he sorely wanted to launch into, but Kakashi continued, apparently used to Naruto's constant testing of the phrase 'curiosity killed the cat.' I suppose it would have to be 'killed the fox' in this case, he contemplated idly, fingers tapping thoughtfully at the cloth covering his chin.

"As I said," continued Kakashi, undaunted, "since she hasn't imploded, melted her hand off,
sustained various cuts, poisoned herself, or broken out in boils," he ended the list when it looked like
Naruto was about to use her new toy on him, "I suppose the next thing to do is to practice using the

"Wait, what?" Yamato jumped, the faintest tremor of terror stirring in his heart after spending the last
half hour watching Naruto explode her targets from exerting too much force. He speared Naruto with
a wary gaze, but thankfully, for once in her life she didn't seem to be chomping at the bit to try
Kakashi's instructions. "Why am I the target? Why can't you be the target?"

"I'm the supervisor," pointed out Kakashi diplomatically, "As the most senior officer, it makes since
that I clinically observe the process and make note of the results for further development of the
 technique."

"Bullshit," cried Naruto, stomping a foot for emphasis and alarming Yamato into taking a step
backward. "You can't supervise squat if you're reading a book the entire time."

"Well," said Kakashi, turning a page, "It's not going to do you a lot of good to hunt down a target
that refuses to move."

Yamato and Naruto both took a second to register the implication that Kakashi would actually go as
far as refuse to participate in the plan he'd created rather than let Naruto practice her technique on
him. Naruto gave a strange growl from deep in her throat, but Yamato beat her to delivering a
response that was communicated in actual words.

"That's ridiculous, Senpai," he set his shoulders and turned to face the man head on, "What's this
actually about? Did you and Naruto-san get into a fight? Because I really don't appreciate getting
dragged into the middle of lovers spats. You should keep those between yourselves."

Naruto and Kakashi both turned to look at him as if he'd grown two heads.

"What in the world are you talking about?" Kakashi seemed thoroughly confused, book lowered and
forgotten; staring at his cute little kōhai as if the other man had committed a betrayal of egregious
proportions.

Naruto emitted a faint squeak.

Yamato swayed backward, suddenly uncertain, both about what he'd said and at doing something
that made him the center of attention for two disturbingly focused, powerful ninja. *I now know what
prey feels like when it realizes it's being stalked*. He stood his ground though, supposedly he'd
learned early on that he wouldn't get anywhere with either Naruto or Kakashi if he let them walk all
over him like a spineless jellyfish. Sometimes he was really jealous of jellyfish. He took a deep
breath and tried to appear like he knew what he was talking about, "I understand that you're a couple
now, and that you have a social life that extends beyond the practice field, but when you're upset at
each other, don't bring me into the middle of it." He said his words firmly, with pride that he'd
managed to get them out without flinching. *Take that Genma, the other woman indeed."

Kakashi grew pale and looked slightly nauseous, while Naruto repeated the strange squeaking noise
and blushed.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Kakashi said, gathering his thoughts, "Are you saying that
you think that Naruto and I," his single grey eye darted over to the blonde red-faced girl and then
back to Yamato, "that we," he gave an awkward semi-shrug with his shoulder, "that you think that
the two of us...?" He trailed off, gesturing between them with his book, seemingly unable to
verbalize his thought process.
"Um," Naruto said, face still bright red and eyes firmly locked onto the ground, "we're not together, like that," she shook her head and ducked her face more, "It's not—"

"Why do you," the silver-haired man choked on a word and had to start again, "Where did you come up with that?" The copy ninja finally managed to convey a question coherently, posture tense and eye darting to the side like he was considering bolting at any second, book falling limply from his twitching fingers to the ground.

Yamato felt his jaw drop open and his mind went blank. "Wait," he said, shaking his head to clear his thoughts, taking a few steps back to more easily swivel his head to look between the two, "You aren't together? But—but," he stammered, "you're living together!" He knew pointing was juvenile, but some occasions just called for the use of the impolite nonverbal gestures.

Kakashi's face grew pinched, eyes conveying pain, "Her apartment has mold in it, she's staying at my place until her landlord fixes it."

Yamato felt like his world had tipped upside down, yet again. "But the—" he stopped midsentence trying to string his thoughts together to make some kind of sense from the circumstances—The nightgown on the floor and the mess in the kitchen that was probably typical of how Naruto usually lived. "And the," he demonstrated with his hands, pantomiming outlining a body, and making a stressed garbling sound, "she was wearing your shirt—"

Naruto tugged on her pigtails nervously, "I needed to do laundry and he gave it to me to wear," she protested, managing to come across as nervous and sheepish at the same time, trying to justify her actions to both Kakashi and Yamato.

Yamato clapped a hand to the back of his head, "But then with the toilet paper and the makeup and—and-and, Genma said!" His words came out in a rush and he ended his rant with an emphatic shout, flustered and now more than a little embarrassed that his assumptions had been so wrong, but still!

"That was my fault," Kakashi admitted, "I shouldn't have been so upset about her storing things in the restroom, but again, she's just living with me temporarily. And she has been doing more than her fair share of the chores, I was being overly sensitive to the bathroom issue and shouldn't have complained about it."

Yamato made an unintelligible sound, fisting both hands in his hair in disbelief.

Naruto was worrying her hair so much that she looked like she was about to strangle herself with a pigtail, but suddenly she paused, dwelling on Yamato's earlier words, "What did Genma say?"

Yamato blinked at her, and then shut his mouth with a click. Oh no, I'm not digging this hole any deeper.

"Genma shouldn't be saying anything," Kakashi intoned darkly, "he's with Tenten."

Yamato spun around to face Kakashi again, "Wait, what?"

"He and Tenten are the ones who are in a relationship." Kakashi repeated, giving the other man a look that implied Yamato's intelligence was in question for not understanding the previous statement.

Naruto focused on advancing on Yamato, unconcerned at correcting Kakashi's incorrect assumptions as A) Tenten could take care of herself, and B) she wasn't entirely sure the older girl had been telling the truth anyway. She yanked impatiently on Yamato's arm once he was within reach. "No, really, what'd he say?"
Yamato snapped back to face the blond, unsuccessfully trying to pull her off his arm, "I don't," her grip just grew tighter. "It's not," he jerked in alarm as her eyes narrowed dangerously. "Not really that important," he finished in a choky, high-pitched squeak as his arm began to burn painfully within her tight grasp.

He was relieved to find that Kakashi was suddenly at his other side, pulling Naruto off of the brunet with a cajoling, "Whatever he said, you shouldn't give it much weight, Naruto-chan."

She released Yamato easily enough at Kakashi's prodding, but the scowl remained on her face.

"Besides," Kakashi continued, "he's not known for appropriate behavior."

Naruto moped for a minute as Yamato maneuvered himself so that the copy ninja was between the two. He was doubly relieved to have done so when she perked up and spun around, pigtails flying, turning accusing eyes on Kakashi.

"Wait, are you saying his relationship with Tenten is inappropriate?"

"I—that's not," Kakashi's eye widened and his hand flew up in an attempt to pacify the blond who was suddenly inches from his face and on the verge of a Class A Hissy Fit. We just went through this the other day, thought Kakashi desperately, racking his brain for a way to deflate her furor.

"Well, then," Naruto crossed her arms and drew herself up to her full height, "What are you saying?"

Kakashi looked imploringly at Yamato, only to find the other man on the complete other side of the clearing shaking his head with an expression that implied the copy ninja was on his own in this matter. "I just meant that it maybe wasn't the best idea," Kakashi tossed out the excuse, imagining shunshining away from the situation with longing, but as his hands twitched to form the familiar gesture, he found them intercepted by Naruto's own. She deftly threaded her fingers through his and tugged his hands down to keep him from escaping her inquisition by jutsu. Kakashi felt his eye twitch from the stress and his shoulders shuddered, but he didn't actually want to hurt her, at all, ever, so—

"Why would it be a bad idea?" Naruto asked earnestly, bewildered, and stubbornly refusing to let go of the man's hands.

Kakashi tugged at his fingers futilely, "It's just," Naruto's hands followed the movements of his own and he shifted his weight awkwardly, feeling a panicky feeling creep up his spine at his inability to escape.

Naruto's perplexed blue eyes didn't register the claustrophobia overwhelming the copy ninja as he valiantly attempted to free himself without using an aggressive amount of force. "It's just not really done," he finished lamely, finally wriggling one hand loose and immediately setting in to pry Naruto's other hand free from his own, one finger at a time.

Naruto huffed, "Well that's just stupid." She abruptly let go so that she could gesture broadly around the clearing, "I do things that are 'just not done' all the time and it's freakin' awesome."

Kakashi massaged his hands in relief upon freeing the important digits. He bent down to retrieve his book while he had the chance.

Naruto blinked when she realized how far away Yamato had gone, and stalked over to retrieve the man and drag him back to the conversation. "Besides, are you saying that if I was in a relationship with someone older, like Yamato," she pushed the man forward for emphasis, "it would be wrong?"
"Wait a minute!" Yamato hastily threw his hands up, trying to back away but finding his efforts thwarted by Naruto's continual push forward. "I don't want to be involved in this!"

"Why would you be in a relationship with Tenzō?" Kakashi rolled his eyes at the preposterous proposition. He wasn't going to waste his time entertaining Naruto's hypotheticals.

"This is exactly what I—"

"What's wrong with Yamato?" Naruto snapped, interrupting the man in question mid-sentence, who immediately latched onto her train of thought as well.

"Right," the dark eyed jōnin crossed his arms, mirroring the girl's posture as they both faced off against Kakashi. "What's so wrong with me then?"

The twitch in Kakashi's visible eye became more pronounced, "There's nothing wrong with Tenzō, but well," the copy ninja gave a dismissive shrug, "why would you be with Tenzō?"

"Why wouldn't I be with Tenzō?" The blond tossed her hair saucily and turned an assessing gaze upon Tenzō.

"Yeah, why wouldn't she—" the mokuton user blanched as his mind completed that phrase ahead of his mouth and he leveled shocked eyes on the girl, "I mean, not that I, err, am interested, I mean," he rushed to continue, "you're very pretty, but I don't think of you that way, not that nobody else would, or does, or doesn't, but, I mean, you're like a little sister, not that I mean little as in short, just little as in that at least when I think of a sister—"

"Stop talking, Tenzō," Kakashi finally said, curtly rescuing the other man from his own hysterics. "What is with the sudden fixation on Tenzō?" He graced Naruto with a weary sigh and tried to put an end to the situation with logic. "You wouldn't be with Tenzō, so I don't see the purpose in furthering this exercise," said the copy ninja bluntly, tucking his book inside his vest with an air of finality.

Yamato, while relieved to have been saved from his earlier word-vomit, was apparently not interested in returning the favor for Kakashi. "I think what she means to ask Senpai, is that if she was involved with someone similarly situated to you or I, what would your issue with that be?"

"Exactly," Naruto declared, exasperated that it'd taken the two men this long to figure out what she was talking about, "I swear it's like neither of you understand people at all when they're talking about non-ninja shit."

Kakashi wanted to point out that as a ninja, learning to talk about 'non-ninja shit' wasn't high on his to-do list, but decided he could only take one Naruto-diatribe a day and wisely avoided taking that bait. "It's not that I'd have an issue, it's just that I can't imagine you being well-suited for anyone comparably situated to either Tenzō or I."

Naruto mouthed the words 'well-suited' and 'similarly situated,' clearly stumped on what exactly the copy ninja meant. Kakashi carefully looked at Tenzō out of the corner of his eye and saw a similar expression of befuddlement, so he grudgingly elaborated. "We're too old for you Naruto, you should be with someone your own age." There, I don't think I can get clearer than that.

Bizarrely, both Naruto and Tenzō were offended by that statement.

"I'm not that old!" Tenzō snapped.

"So what, I'm like a kid?" Naruto was centimeters away from Kakashi, which might be more intimidating if her natural height allowed her to do more than barely brush his chin.
"Why would you say something like that? Would you say that to Genma-kun?" Tenzō was channeling his inner Iruka-sensei, which wasn't helping his argument at all.

"I've been an adult for ages! What do I have to do to make you see—" hissed Naruto, hands flying about erratically.

"Senpai! Really, that's the most ridicul—" the brunet's words overlapped the blond's.

"I'm a grown ass-woma—"

Was Naruto getting louder? Kakashi's could barely discern who was speaking anymore.

"I can't believe you're implying we're old—"

Beset on both sides, Kakashi froze for roughly twenty five point two seconds, and then came to the realization that he was a ninja.

The potted plant that appeared in his stead crashed roughly to the ground, yet another tragic victim of gravity, ceramic container cracking.

Naruto and Yamato wobbled forward unsteadily, tilting in the vacuum of air left in the copy ninja's wake.

"That's my favorite geranium," Naruto gave an exaggerated, aggrieved wail and scooped up the ceramic pot in her arms, cradling it lovingly.

Yamato hastily regained his balance and his professional demeanor, only the faint blush dusting his cheeks indicating that he was uncomfortable in any way with the happenings of the prior ten minutes. He cleared his throat and coughed politely into a closed fist. "I'm not sure what just happened," he said steadily, "but I want you to know I'm blaming you for the consequences."

Naruto narrowed her eyes and Yamato gave a yelp as he found himself writhing on the ground, swaddled in yellow ropes.

"Whadda' ya' know," Naruto crooned as she stood over him, peering down at him over the leaves of the abused plant, "I can catch a jōnin in these things. I 'spose the next test is to see just how long it takes for them to wear off." She turned on her heel and sauntered out of the training field with an indignant sniff, carting her geranium off with her.

"Uzumaki!" Yamato hissed from where he wriggled awkwardly on the ground, managing to roll over on his stomach and inching after her like a particularly cantankerous caterpillar, "you get back here right now!"

"So," Naruto began, kicking her feet against the metal railing she was sitting on top of in one of the platform walkways that were so common in the park. "About guys—" Naruto paused to swallow a spoonful of her ice cream, careful to make sure that she didn't drip it on her outfit. In the meantime, her few, simple words were enough to halt the cheerful chatter of Ino and Sakura, sitting on either side, and to draw Hinata's attention as well. The jincūriki twitched nervously at the intensity of the gazes now trained upon her, but took a deep breath and posed her question: "Is it, like, wrong, to date older men, or something?"

Sakura choked on her ice cream as it went down the wrong pipe and Hinata helpfully whacked her gently on the back with the appropriate amount of force. "Thanks," muttered the medic-nin gratefully.
Ino gazed assessed her fellow blond and then she popped her own spoon out of her mouth and stuck it forcefully in her snack. "It depends, but generally, the answer would be no."

"Why are you asking?" Sakura managed to wheeze now that she was no longer accidentally inhaling a mouthful of frozen chocolate.

Naruto shrugged and looked forlornly at her ice cream, stirring the sprinkles around in the melting treat. "I dunno," she took a small bite, "I just had a conversation with someone and they acted like it was a big deal for someone our age to be dating someone older, like it was wrong or something."

The normally upbeat blond hadn't ever thought that others might consider her current mission to be morally wrong, as in from the age perspective it was immoral for Naruto to be with Kakashi. She considered herself an adult, considered Kakashi an adult, and Kurenai hadn't seemed too concerned about it. Kurenai-sensei seemed like the type of person who would have mentioned it if that was an issue, but Kakashi had seemed so matter of fact when he talked about it, like he was announcing the sky was blue or some-such. And it wasn't like Naruto was raised with parents who'd talk to her about shit like this or give her advice about men or anything. When she'd approached the topic with Jiraiya, he'd literally had a panic attack and dropped her off at a local geisha house and disappeared for a week. The women there had been charitable and informative, but they certainly hadn't cared about the age of the men with whom they interacted.

Sakura and Ino exchanged a troubled glance at their friend's uncharacteristically disheartened behavior, neither one of them sure what exactly the problem was or how to tackle it.

Hinata set her bowl of ice cream down gently in her lap. "I'm not certain what Ino-san and Sakura-san's thoughts are on the issue, but I've known since I was young that I would probably marry someone considerably older than me."

Ino stared at the usually taciturn girl, "What, like they've got someone picked out already?"

"Well, umm," Hinata drew back and nervously pressed her fingertips together. "There are a few candidates, but as the head of the family it is very important that my children carry on the bloodline." She hesitated, but seeing the attentive expressions of her audience boosted her courage to continue, "In families like mine, lineage is closely monitored. It is more uncommon for marriages not to be arranged than arranged, to make sure that the proper traits are passed on to the next generation."

"You mean," Sakura said, eyes wide and voice small, "You don't get any say at all in who you marry?"

"No!" Hinata blushed, "If I was very opposed to the match it would not proceed." She looked down, "But as the next head of the clan, whoever I marry will need to be who is best for the clan, both in leadership skills and as a candidate for passing on the best genes for the byakugan."

"Oh," Sakura blinked, "That's kind of sad, that you don't get to marry who you want, I mean."

Hinata just smiled, "It's not that much of a sacrifice, my parents' marriage was that way, and they grew to care for each other very much. I hope my marriage is the same."

"So," Ino pressed a bit, "have they picked out whoever you'll have to marry then?"

Hinata shook her head negatively, purple hair falling softly across her shoulders. "Not exactly. Several candidates have been recommended, all five to ten years my senior. But I'm still considering my options." Hinata rushed to reassure the other girls, "I've met them all and none of them would be a bad choice."
"Yeah, but," Sakura rested her own cup in her lap, green eyes sincere, "What would happen if you fell in love with someone outside the clan? If you wanted to marry someone else?"

"That, well," Hinata clasped her hands in her lap. "That's really a luxury Sakura-san, not one that I can afford to have, as clan head."

Naruto watched Hinata carefully, "Isn't it something you want though, to fall in love?"

Hinata looked up in surprise, "I think it is something everyone probably wants, Naruto-chan, but," the shy girl bit her lip, "I want to be a good clan head even more than that, though. I've been given a great privilege, and a lot of responsibility." Hinata looked away from them all, "I can do a lot of good as clan head. I promised to do so many things, and I can, and I will, I just—" she stopped abruptly, gathering herself and straightening. "This is part of my responsibility, to choose a husband who will help me make the changes I want to for my clan."

"But," Naruto felt frustrated for the sake of her friend, "What if none of those guys are good for that, what if none of them will help you the way you want them to?"

"Then I'll make those changes anyway," Hinata sounded resolute. "I believe I can make my clan better, I promised Neji-nii-san that I would. I will make sure my marriage will help me accomplish that." She looked at the other girls, gaze peaceful. "Please don't worry about me, I plan to change so many things that marrying an outsider would only make the road I travel more difficult, not easier. I know that some of these men want to see the clan change too, and I will find the one who shares interests closest to mine, who will work with me to help me fulfill my promises. When I find the one who will do that, who will help those promises take root, find life, well," she smiled fully, "how could I not love that person?"

The four girls sat in silence for a few minutes, enjoying the forest scenery and the relative quiet of the park and taking the time to reflect on Hinata's words.

*I don't understand why that's bothering you*, mumbled Kurama flatly. *She's making the strongest match for the strongest kits, what you're doing isn't that different.*

Naruto supposed it wasn't, if you broke it down that way. She licked some ice cream from her lips. *But still I'm doing this because I already love Kakashi, not because I think I'll fall in love—*

Naruto paused, spoon half-way to her mouth, heart suddenly beating double time. *Kurama,* she called shakily.

*What?* Came the reluctant acknowledgment of her demand for attention.

*I just thought that I loved Kakashi.*

*So?* The Kyūbi sounded thoroughly unsurprised at the admission.

*So!* Naruto's thoughts were taking on a hysterical edge, ignoring the other girls as Ino collected the ice cream containers to throw them away and Hinata-chan gave a small bow, smiling and waving as she left to return to her own duties. *So! So, that's a big deal! It's important.*

*Oh, great merciful kami,* groaned the chakra monster, covering its eyes with its tails as if it was too painful to look upon the scene. *Of course you love him you pea-brained, tick-infested, spawn of a mangy badger! He's family or pack or whatever moronic descriptive your generation and species uses to capture the concept. So is the pink one, and the one with those bloody eyes and practically every other reeking wag-tailed, soft-footed fuc—*
Naruto absently chewed on the end of a pigtail and tuned out the vocabulary lesson going on in the back of her head. She supposed Kurama was right at that, Sakura and Sasuke and Kakashi were all her precious people, and that meant she loved each of them, so it shouldn't be too surprising to realize that she felt that way about Kakashi. Still though, something felt like it was different when she used the word for Kakashi and when she used it to describe her feelings for Sasuke or Sakura, and that unsettled her.

—Not like you have any concept of emotional boundaries, but that's probably genetic, can't blame a pup for the faults of the bit—

Kurama, Naruto interrupted whatever her long-term leech was saying, You're right that I love them all, but, she hesitated, is there something different about what I'm supposed to feel for Kakashi?

Sullen silence met her question, and she was distracted from pressing for an answer when she realized a pair of inquisitive pale, blue eyes were mere inches from her own.

"Yoo-hoo," crooned Ino, waving her hand in front of Naruto's face, "anybody home?"

"I can hear you!" Naruto yapped, flustered, pushing the other girl backward so she had room to slip off the railing herself.

"You zoned out on us for a minute, everything ok?" Sakura peered at Naruto in concern.

"It's so weird when you do that," chimed in Ino, waving off Naruto's reassurances that everything was fine.

"Let's get back to that question you asked a while ago," said Ino, sidling closer to the other blond and throwing an arm about the girl's shoulders, "As far as ages go, generally it's kind of fair game when girls hit seventeen or eighteen." She scrunched her nose, "Admittedly, it's creepy and not cool when older guys flirt with girls before then, because, we're still kind of growing up at that point and until that time the idea is that girls and guys should try to stick with those within a few years of age difference."

Sakura nodded, opening her mouth to launch into a speech about psychological development and neurons, but Ino cut her off smoothly with a knowing look, "And the idea is that as we get older, an age gap matters less and less. And it's even stranger for ninja than civilians, 'cuz we're technically adults as soon as we get these lovely headbands here," she adjusted her hitiante. "But still, now that we're all eighteen it shouldn't matter the age of who you date, except, you know," Ino amended, turning green, "If you're telling me you suddenly have the hots for Danzo's long-lost twin, I might check you into the psych ward of my own volition, got it?"

"Ino-pig," Sakura gave a disturbed groan.

"Well," Ino defended, "I never know with her." She winked and pinched Naruto's cheek briefly, "this one does crazy stupid things sometimes."

"I'm right here," Naruto protested as Sakura giggled, "and he's not that old!"

"OOOoo," Ino squealed, tugging Naruto into a body-binding hug to keep the visibly discomfited girl from fleeing, "Naru-chan's into older men," she said in a sing-song voice.

A red flush spread across Naruto's face and she pushed at the other girl, "I don't know why you care, and I'm not saying anything else about it." She mimed zipping her lips shut.

Sakura grinned predatorily and hooked her arm with Naruto's, opposite Ino.
"Sharing is caring," sang Ino brightly, pulling at one of Naruto's pigtails fondly. "It's because he has more experience, isn't it?"

Naruto stammered out a denial, but Sakura grabbed at her arm, distracting her. "The boys our age leave a lot to be desired, don't they?" The medic-nin gave a knowing sigh as she and Ino tugged the flustered blonde back toward civilization.

"Mmmm," purred Ino, "There is definitely a gap between boys who are used to dealing with girls and men who've learned how to treat women as, well, women. But answer me this," she said with a serious expression, relaxing her grip on her prey so that they were now merely arm in arm, "If I saw him naked in a magazine, would I drool?"

"Ino!" Naruto felt like she was going to melt into an embarrassed puddle, not the least because now that Ino'd said that, her mind had gone straight to Kakashi in his towel, fresh from a shower.

Pale blue eyes dilated and the girl drew in a deep breath. "You've seen him naked!" Ino squealed in disbelief, "I didn't think she had, but she's proven me wrong!"

"Naruto-chan," Sakura pulled closer, scowling, "Why didn't you tell me, you're supposed to share these things!"

Naruto managed to stutter, but whatever she tried to vocalize was promptly ignored. The blonde chūnin was almost willing to sacrifice her favorite geranium for a chance to escape, (despite the fact that it certainly wouldn't survive another abrupt replacement jutsu) but vainly held on to the hope that this torture would be over soon. *I've had worse. Right?*

"Yeah," Ino nodded, "it's part of the sacred bonds of sisterhood, so spill it, is he yummy?"

"Yummy?" Naruto twisted in Ino's grasp, "He's not a dessert, Ino-chan! I'm not going to eat him!"

"Well," Ino giggled, "You probably shouldn't to start with, at least, but that's not what I meant."

Sakura sighed, "You know, you're not going to get anywhere with the guy as long as you're crashing with Sensei until you're apartment is fixed up." Sakura blinked, thoughts whirring, "Does Sensei know that you're dating someone? Is that why he's been acting kind of funny lately?"

"Oh, wow," Ino blinked. "That's where you've been staying? That'll definitely put a damper on your sex life. There is no greater cock block than an older man who thinks it's his job to protect your virtue."

"I know," moaned Sakura mournfully, clearly recalling an embarrassing moment she wasn't going to share with the class. Fortunately for Naruto, both girls were so wrapped up in their own memories that they hadn't realized that Naruto had frozen up like a block of concrete. "I bet that must be frustrating," Sakura said, tugging Naruto forward, "I mean, there aren't a lot of guys out there who'd be willing to face Sensei to ask a girl out on a date, especially if it meant picking the girl up from his place."

Ino cackled maliciously, "You should tell him that he shouldn't be so put-out with it unless he was willing to put out himself."

"Ino!" Sakura nudged Naruto forcefully, who in turn rammed into Ino and sent her stumbling a few steps.

Ino just grinned and giggled, gracefully regaining her footing with ease. "You know," Ino said thoughtfully, trying to be serious and helpful for a change, "Sakura and I have been talking about
moving out and renting an apartment of our own and living as roommates, you're more than welcome to come stay with us if you'd like."

The jinchūriki managed to emit a strangled sounding hiccup.

"You don't have to," Ino said with a roll of her pale eyes, "But I bet we'd totally be more understanding about you bringing home your latest boy toy than your Sensei."

Naruto's brain tried to think through that scenario. Bringing home Kakashi as the 'boy,' to a house shared with Ino and Sakura?

"Don't listen to Ino-chan," Sakura said with a disproving grunt. "She's a total pervert, she'd probably watch."

Naruto choked and forced her hands to her sides, clenching her skirt to keep from fleeing.

_I love my geranium. I love my geranium. I love my geranium._


"You're supposed to be on my side," bit out Naruto with a whine, head sliding to kitchen table with a dull thud.

"I am on your side," insisted Kurenai from where she was washing dishes in the kitchen sink. "No one has done anything to you for me to sympathize with you about."

"But, Ino-chan, Naruto spluttered, "and Kakashi-sensei!"

"Your girlfriends were right," Kurenai stated patiently, "age isn't really that big of a deal for you at this time in your life, and it'll become less and less so as you get older. Yes, you're a little young, but the difference isn't unheard of and we're ninja, grab happiness while you can and all that," she waved a hand covered in soap suds in the air absently. She felt her conscience twinge, but didn't let it show on her face. She'd usually be more patient with Naruto, but Matsu-chan had an ear infection and had been up all night crying for the past few days, which meant that Kurenai was short on sleep and a tad abrupt. _Oh well_, she thought, _Naruto-chan usually responds well to abrupt._

"And Kakashi has a right to his own opinion," the older woman continued, "just as you have a right to try and change that opinion." She scrubbed harshly at a particularly stubborn spot on the metal baking sheet. _Besides, you're half-way there already. He thinks you're attractive, and once he acknowledges that you just need to convince him that it's not anathema to act upon that desire._"

"But I've been trying to get him to admit that and he just goes and ducks his head in the sand like one of those stupid Suna birds with the long necks."

"An ostrich?"

"Yeah, one of those."

Kurenai pulled the baking sheet out of the sink and toweled it dry, "I don't think you're being forward enough."

"How much more forward can I be? Should I just tell him I like him?" Naruto pulled at her hair, looking eccentrically earnest and frazzled, "Should I be taking a page from Kurama's book and just ambush him in bed one night?"
Kurenai rolled her eyes, *Teenagers are so dramatic.* "I don't think you need to go that far." *Yet,* she mentally amended. "But it certainly wouldn't hurt to let him know that you wouldn't be opposed to a relationship with someone his age." Kurenai bit her lip, *I can't believe I'm about to suggest this:* "You also could show that you have some things in common with him."

Naruto sighed, resting her head in the palm of one hand. "Like what? All he does is train. All the time. And lately I've been doing that with him and it hasn't seemed to have made that much of a difference."

Kurenai began to stack dry plates on top of each other calmly. "That's not all he does."

Kakashi slipped into his apartment through his bedroom window, pulling it closed tightly behind him and resetting the seal that was keyed to open only to his chakra signature. He allowed himself to relax and stretch in the privacy of his own room, extending his senses enough to recognize that Naruto was in the living room. Her chakra was quiet and still, indicating that she was focused on something, but the chakra flow wasn't as peaceful as it was when she was asleep. Hopefully whatever she was preoccupied with would keep her from trying to drag him into another strange conversation like the one with Tenzō the other day.

*Tenzō. Why would she say that about Tenzō, she wasn't seriously considering a relationship with him, was she?* He shook his head as his stomach rumbled, reminding him that he'd come home to put together a sandwich for lunch and to grab the bag of bones from the butcher's shop that he'd been keeping in the freezer for his ninken. He was planning on training with the pack for the rest of the afternoon. He needed to brief them about the upcoming hunt and check in and see if any of them had noticed anything in the cavern they'd been set to guard for the past few weeks.

He opened his door and strolled through the living room, absently noting that Naruto was sprawled out on his couch. She was on her stomach, her feet kicked up in the air behind her, bare toes flexing every few moments. She appeared to be fully entranced by whatever book she was reading, studying the pages determinedly, and as a man who appreciated fine literature (and silence) he decided not to bother her.

Instead, he concentrated on his lunch. By the time he'd finished whipping together what might pass for a sandwich (in bachelor land, the standards for edible meals were pretty low), Naruto still hadn't indicated that she wanted to talk. He deemed it safe to sit down at the kitchen table and take his meal. He activated the low-level genjutsu which allowed him to eat without revealing his face and began to enjoy his simple, but filling fare.

He was finishing the last few bites when his roommate loudly sighed and rolled over onto her back, wiggling so that her feet dangled over the arm of the sofa. His eyes were attracted to the movement, but he averted them when he realized how far her shirt had ridden up when she'd changed positions. Not that it was inappropriate, it was just, more skin than he was used to seeing exposed by her and admiring how smooth and tan and—nrgghh.

He twitched, and then realized he'd stopped eating his sandwich because of the distraction and quickly finished the job. *Not a teenager,* he reminded himself, beginning to consider asking Tsunade for a true vacation where he could go and work off whatever build-up of hormones he seemed to be suffering from lately. *It's ridiculous to get that distracted by a little bit of skin.* He risked a glance at the couch,* and really long legs,* he spun around with a gulp to wash his dishes with more force than necessary.

As he was rinsing his dirty plate in the sink, Naruto finally broke the silence. "Ka-ka-shi," came the low croon (and since when had he been close to describing the way Naruto spoke as sultry?). He
gave a grunt of acknowledgment.

"Are these positions really possible?" Her tone was calm, curious, sincere.

Kakashi found himself answering automatically, "What positions?" He tried to recall the last assignment he'd given her, whether it had been a new sealing text, or maybe she got hold of one of the scrolls I checked out for Sakura or Sasuke? I do think there was some taijutsu in at least two of those.

"The ones in this book." Naruto drawled, thumping it against the back of the couch. "I know you like these a lot, but they just don't all seem physically comfortable. I mean, if I tried to bend that way I think it'd probably hurt, and I'm pretty flexible. I guess I could always just try it and see."

Kakashi frowned as he turned to see whatever the blond was musing about, and that's when his eye caught sight of the familiar orange cover and his brain. Just. Broke.

Because.

No. Oh no.

No, no, no, no, no.

What he actually emitted was best described as a hybrid of a frog's croak and the last cry of desperation from a dying man.

Thankfully, or maybe, horrifyingly, Naruto was too preoccupied by the book to pay him any attention. She flipped the page and her eyebrows went up. "Oh," she said in a small voice, electric blue eyes widening in surprise, "so that's why it doesn't hurt as much as it should."

She bit her lip and Kakashi had to remind himself to breathe.

"Nrgghhh," Kakashi managed to say, fingers of his right hand twitching faintly. He'd jokingly suggested that the kids read them before, but he certainly hadn't meant for them to carry through on that. Of all the things I tell her to do, that's the one she goes and does! At least, he hadn't meant for Naruto or Sakura to do so. And he definitely hadn't volunteered to answer questions about the literature. Because. Because.

Because he knew that book by heart, was intimately familiar with it, and he could tell, from how far she was in the book (he couldn't look away, he was trying, but it wasn't working) and the expression she was making—He knew exactly what she was reading and precisely what the characters were doing in those tattered, worn pages.

And he knew Naruto too well, entirely too well, because he could tell from her expression, from the flush to her cheeks and the narrowing of her eyes that she was trying to imagine how she would pull off those moves, which meant that now he was envisioning her trying to pull off those moves and everything was getting far too tight and he couldn't breathe and suddenly he was throwing his head into the freezer because—cool air, oh please, and why I am thinking about that damn bra?

Bones. Thank goodness for the bones, for the dogs, who he needed to go train. Right now.

"I've gotta' go train dogs," he managed to wheeze, scrambling for the door.

"Oh good," Naruto beamed, bouncing up and tossing the dog-eared copy of Icha-Icha Tactics over her shoulder behind the couch. "I'll come too," she bounced after his heels.
Kakashi just whimpered and fled for the hills, literally.

"This is the girl," bellowed Guruko, bowling Naruto over as she leaned down to greet him, not expecting such enthusiasm from the hound.

"Guruko," said Kakashi sternly, but the words weren't heeded as immediately as they should have been, probably because Kakashi hadn't managed to put himself together after the Icha-Icha incident.

Naruto just laughed as she returned Guruko's enthusiastic greeting, "Hello to you too, it's nice to meet you!" She giggled as her arms came up around the overgrown puppy to give him a hug and stroke soothingly down his back.

Bisuke and Ūhei came around to the sides of her face, sniffing at her whisker-marked cheeks in a friendly, but more restrained fashion, tails wagging gently behind them.

Pakkun rolled his eyes from where he sat at Kakashi's heels while Akino stretched out his entire body with a yawn, pawing at the fresh grass before trotting off to ensure that the clearing was as secure as Kakashi insisted.

Urushi advanced upon the younger trio with a growl, "He didn't tell you about her so that you could maul her, dimwits."

Naruto managed to sit up on the hilltop, pushing the energetic Guruko back down.

"Does she have biscuits?" Bisuke said, nipping at the pockets of her shorts.

"No," Naruto squeaked with an eep and a giggle, as the cold nose moved from her pockets to tickling her sides. She grabbed Bisuke and pulled him into her lap, rubbing behind his ears. "Next time," she promised, bending to kiss the top of his head with a smile and a wide grin.

"Naruto," sighed Kakashi, *she really shouldn't be babying the ninken like this.* He watched the scene with mournful eyes as his highly-trained, ferocious, warrior dogs rolled around like darling spoiled little lap-dogs begging for ear-rubs and treats.

"She smells foxy," mutter Urushi bitterly, circling back around Kakashi, sitting sulkily on his haunches and scratching at his ear with his hind leg.

"Don't start," warned Pakkun, droopy eyes honing in on the other dog.

Urushi laid out on the grass with a superior huff, plopping his head down on his paws in a pout.

Naruto was trying to keep the peace between Guruko, Bisuke, and Ūhei and missed the exchange.

"I think I like you," said Ūhei politely, hind leg thumping against the grass in pleasure as the blond scratched just the right spot behind his ear.

Akino returned to the clearing with a satisfied yap, strolling straight into Naruto's lap and pushing Guruko and Bisuke to the side, rolling over to expose his belly for a good rub. Naruto cheerfully obliged the dog, cooing something nonsensical.

Bisuke sighed and settled down next to Ūhei at the girl's side, but Guruko pranced away with a whine. "That's not fair, she was petting me first, she wasn't done."

Guruko gave a high-pitched puppy-attention-seeking growl-whine that made Kakashi wince and rub at his head, he thought he'd trained Guruko out of that habit.
"Boss," Guruko barked, twining about Kakashi's spread feet, "Boss, it was my turn. Tell them it was my turn."

"Mah," drawled the copy ninja, one hand stuffed in his pocket and the other cradling the bag of bones, which he was surprised hadn't drawn the pack's full attention yet. "It's not anybody's turn for anything. I thought we were here to discuss business and get to work, but I work with professionals, and I don't see any in this clearing at the moment."

Akino rolled off Naruto's lap with a sad huff and crawled toward Kakashi with his tail between his legs. Ūhei and Bisuke mimicking him.

"I didn't act like a fluffy little house pet," Urushi sneered, rubbing at his nose with a paw. "I should get my bone first."

The dogs spread out around Kakashi in a semi-circle, settling in attentive positions, ears perked forward as they awaited orders.

In the background, Naruto watched the spectacle curiously from where she reclined in the grass, leaning back on her elbows and enjoying the sunny day. Kakashi had never let her watch him train the ninken before, and she didn't want to be banned from the practice.

"Report." Kakashi barked sternly, fixing the dogs with his single grey eye.

"Nothing new Boss," stated Akino calmly, "Bull and Shiba are on watch now, but we've not seen nor smelled any sign of something living returning to the den of the snakes."

"Not true," butted in Guruko, tail whumping against the grass and tongue lolling out the corner of his mouth, "I saw a squirrel."

Urushi drew back his lips in a snarl and snapped at the other dog in a manner that clearly conveyed, 'Shut up, dumbass,' in dog.

Guruko drew back, hunched, and a little dismayed. "I did so see a squirrel."

Kakashi sighed and ran a hand through his hair, "Well, thank you all for keeping watch on the place. I know it's not the most exciting assignment, but I need you to keep at it for a while longer. I'm taking Naruto hunting and I don't want them coming back to the den once they get wind that I've left or that they've been located."

"We're going hunting?" Guruko perked up, scolding forgotten.

"I'm going hunting," corrected Kakashi, "I don't know if I'll be taking all of you with me on this hunt."

"But I want to go hhhuuunnnttiinnng," Guruko bayed low and rolled completely over, three times in a row.

"Boss, why did you have to pick him?" Urushi barked in offended dismay at his pack-mate.

Bisuke pawed at the copy ninja's pant leg, "May I have my biscuit now, please?"

"Yes, yes," said Kakashi, beginning to dole out the bones, and giving the leftovers to Akino with instructions to convey them to Bull and Shiba, currently watching the den of the snakes.

Kakashi took the last bone, "Pakkun?" He frowned, just now realizing that the pug wasn't in the
semi-circle. His ears caught the pug's voice and he turned toward the sound.

"—And then I said, if you really want to join the circus, you're going to have to bring more pairs of underwear, because you're not tha—"

"Pakkun," Kakashi bit out with a bit more force than usual, *but really, she didn't need to hear that story.*

Pakkun turned a bored gaze on his 'boss,' as he lay on his back in Naruto's lap, one of her hands scratching his stomach and the other rubbing the pads of his pale pink paws. "What?" said the dog, apathetically.

Naruto wouldn't meet his eyes; she looked like she was trying very hard not to laugh at the situation.

"It's my turn, Pakkun," Guruko informed calmly, trotting up to the pair and setting his own bone down on the ground, nudging it forward with his nose, "I'll trade you a turn for my bone."

Pakkun eyed the bone with disinterest, "No thanks, I'm having a chat with the girl."

"Pakkun," Guruko whined, upset for whatever reason. The dog spun in circles, yapping with displeasure, Úhei joining in after the first few spins.

Bisuke nipped the end of Kakashi's hand that was dangling loosely at his side. He raised an eyebrow at the mutt.

"May I have another, please?"

Kakashi gave a grunt and handed over Pakkun's bone, considering the other dog wasn't interested in it, Bisuke might as well make use of it. He was the only dog that Kakshi had managed to teach manners to, after all, he might as well reward that since none of the others were interested in exhibiting positive behavior this afternoon.

"Ridiculous," snorted Urushi eyeing the other dogs with disdain.

Kakashi found himself agreeing with the surly canine.

Pakkun sighed and rolled over in Naruto's lap. Guruko and Úhei stopped, ears perking forward with hope. The pug looked up at the blond, "Could you get the back of my neck now? That's the hardest place to reach—"

"NOOOO!" Guruko wailed, and apparently having had enough, sprinted back to Kakashi, then back to Naruto, then back to Kakashi. "Boss, Boss, Boss!"

"Yes?" Kakashi said, a tinge exasperated, quickly becoming resigned to dismissing them all back to their own realm as it was becoming clear that nothing productive was going to happen that day.

"He's trying to be the favorite. It's not fair, tell him he can't be the favorite," Guruko pawed at Kakashi's boot in frustration.

Kakashi furrowed his brow, "What are you talking about?"

"With the girl," Guruko whimpered, circling around the silver-haired human.

Kakashi sighed and knelt down so he was eye level with the dog. He put a heavy hand on the back of Guruko's neck and hauled the dog in front of him by gripping the loose skin he found, pinning the squirming creature still. "What are you talking about Guruko, I don't understand why you're so
upset?"

Guruko just whimpered and licked his snout.

Urushi scowled at the pair, "He wants the girl to like him. They all want the girl to like them."

Kakashi blinked at the dogs in confusion. "You've all seen Naruto before." Kakashi stated, baffled by the uncharacteristically friendly behavior of the dogs, "I know you don't spend a lot of time with her but I don't understand why you're all so fussy about getting to see her today."

"Now she's pack," said Urushi, gnawing at his paw, trying to get the meat out from between his claws, before settling down to gnaw on the now gleaming bone.

"She was pack before," said Kakashi slowly.

"Yes," admitted Urushi, apparently unconcerned that the Boss wasn't following dog-thought at the moment very well. "But she was puppy and pack." Sometimes the people were slow like that, they had to have things spelled out for them. "Puppies grow up and you let her go to start her own pack. Now she is alpha and you brought her back into this one."

"I brought her—because she's living with me?" Kakashi asked moving his hand from Guruko's neck to rub the dog's ears, trying to get the dog to relax from the hyper alert state he'd worked himself into, he was trembling with excess energy.

Urushi sniffed, "You're the one who decided to bring her back into the pack. She's alpha and pack and they want to be her favorites." The temperamental dog eyed the younger condescendingly, "I don't need to be her favorite."

Kakashi sighed, "It's just a temporary thing," he tried to explain. The look Urushi gave him and the way Guruko ignored the words made Kakashi doubt that they understood what he was trying to convey. Pack wasn't temporary after all, you could grow out of it, grow so that you didn't fit your role and search for a different nuclear pack where you could take on the role better suited to your nature, but pack didn't just up and decide they were visitors for a few weeks and then leave. Kakashi sat down completely with a sigh, running a hand through his hair. "Look," said the copy ninja, trying to explain the situation in a way that would get the dogs to lay off trying to please Naruto and focus on their duties. "She's not going to be giving you orders, she's not going to lead the hunt, she's not that kind of alpha."

Urushi and Guruko both gave him a look that reminded him strongly of Naruto rolling her eyes and saying "No, duh," which was a saying he didn't entirely understand other than that it meant something along the lines of he'd clearly missed some social cue, but still. He twitched at the implication that his dogs thought he was being purposefully obtuse. They were dogs, he was human, it shouldn't be debatable about which had a better understanding of the relationships at issue. It's like she's trying out being a beta," he offered, immediately wishing he hadn't because that sounded pathetic even to his own ears.

Both dogs regarded him with disbelief, heads swiveling to take in Naruto.

"That is not a beta," growled Urushi.

"Not beta," Guruko echoed the sentiment, and Kakashi had to internally agree. It didn't really work to label someone who'd been screaming at the top of their lungs since they could walk that they'd 'be Hokage one day,' as a natural second-in-command. Kakashi didn't even try to make the argument that she was a regular subordinate.
Guruko finally collapsed with a resigned sigh, "If I'm not the favorite," he said bitterly, "she'll never let me play with the puppies."

Kakashi choked. "Excuse me?"

"Pakkun said there'd be puppies, now that there was a girl," said Guruko, brown eyes watching Naruto cuddle the other dogs longingly. "I want to play with the puppies."

The silver-haired jōnin took a deep breath and rubbed his temples in a futile attempt to stave off the headache that he felt growing. "There are no puppies," Kakashi said flatly, "there will be no puppies. She's not that kind of alpha."

"Boss," barked Urushi, looking up at the other man pityingly, "I don't even like puppies, but it's stupid to think that if you bring the girl into the pack as alpha, there won't be puppies." He gnawed at the bone between his paws, "That's just how it works." The dog paused, then raised his head quickly, eyeing Kakashi with suspicion, as if something had just dawned on him, "You do know what to do with alpha bitches, right? I mean, I know you don't have a lot of experience, but you know that when an alpha male brings in an alpha female—"

"That's not necessary, Urushi," Kakashi cut the dog off quickly, trying to wrap his mind around the fact that his dog thought he needed a lecture about the facts of life. The dog was a bit late for that conversation, considering Jiraiya had long ago beat the canine to it. The sannin had considered it as something like a wedding present for Minato and Kushina, and a logical explanation that would get Kakashi out of the newlyweds' house and cause him to give it a wide berth for a good while.

What in the world has gotten into everyone in Konoha lately?

First Kurenai, then Genma, and most recently Yamato…

Kakashi rubbed at his face tiredly.

There must be something in the water.

Kurenai's original insinuations had been downright shocking, when Naruto first came looking for a place to stay. He was flabbergasted when his oldest female friend suggested that he liked his student. And then there was Naruto, suddenly growing curves over-night, out of nowhere, and having teenage stalkers watching her from bushes and attracting suggestive looks from men in bars. And what had possessed Genma to suggest a threesome of all things, talk about poor taste. And then it was Naruto in the low-cut tops, and admittedly, she was very attractive, but she shouldn't be wearing those nightgowns because they were giving him a heart attack because, well, because. The girl walked through a bar fully clothed and grown men tried to grope her, it wasn't a question of her being attractive. She just needed to tone it down, because seriously, he couldn't survive more afternoons like this one.

Kakashi sighed mournfully and tossed his head back, most of his weight supported by his elbow as he leaned back and combed his free hand through Guruko's fur. Yes, Naruto was obviously fully grown and had the physical assets to go be successful on missions like the one Kurenai was tutoring for her, but that didn't mean she should. It just, it made something in his chest twist unpleasantly to think about it. And his thoughts weren't making sense, or even very logical at the moment, they were just an emotional jumble.

Emotional. What an awful way to describe his mind, he needed to fix that, quick.

He just wanted her to be happy. And he knew she was grown up, and he was proud of her. She was
beautiful and lovely and it made him happy to see her smile and he wanted her to stay that way.

*I want her to stay that way.* Kakashi paused his thoughts, hand slowing as it petted the dog.

*I want,* Kakashi thought, tasting the words, *Naruto to be happy, because I want*—a hundred memories flipped through his head: Naruto crying in the rain, looking like a drowned kitten; Naruto singing off-key in the shower; Naruto chatting with his neighbor through the wall; Naruto setting his kitchen on fire; Naruto mouthing off to Sasuke and giggling with Sakura; Naruto hiding the coffee machine because she hated the smell and didn't want to tell him; Naruto leaving the bra in the bathroom; Naruto yawning, stretching in his nightshirt; Naruto flippantly suggesting getting together with Tenzō; Naruto's hair glowing golden in the morning light as he slipped out the front door before she woke; Naruto so joyful, so excited to get a new technique right; Naruto curled against him tugging at his arm, holding tightly to his hand, snuggling into his side.…

With dawning horror, Kakashi realized, quite suddenly and with unshakable certainty, that the answer to the Hokage's question about what he wanted in life was actually quite simple. What the copy ninja wanted more than anything else, more than anything in the world, was Uzumaki Naruto.

This is why Guruko and Urushi found themselves yowling in a most undignified manner as they tried to escape the strange tent-like structure within which they were quite suddenly and unexpectedly trapped.

"Kakashi," said the red-eyed jōnin flatly. "I really don't appreciate you locking yourself into my pantry and if you don't tell me where Matsu-chan's playpen is in the next five minutes, I swear on all that is holy I will put a bounty out on your Icha-Icha and commission D-rank missions to hunt down all the copies of that trash in Konoha and make sure it gets assigned to Ebisu-san's team."

Kurenai frowned at her pantry door in frustration. It's not that she wasn't impressed, she didn't know where he'd been, but that must have been one hell of a kawarimi to switch places with the playpen. But still, her kid's playpen? Couldn't he have chosen something safer, something that maybe a child wasn't using and wouldn't burst into tears upon its disappearance? She had plenty of perfectly convenient throw pillows to which Matsu-chan was unattached. She scowled and slapped her fist against the door frame.

The pantry door swung open and Kurenai expelled a huff of air, tugging it open the rest of the way and gazing at the man sitting sullenly on the step stool in the cramped, dark space.

She tapped her foot impatiently, "Well?"

Kakashi studied the spice rack, tugging at his mask with one hand, feeling stifled in a way that had nothing to do with the small space in which he'd closeted himself.

"As much as I'd like to tell you that cinnamon and paprika are the answer to whatever ails you, I'm fairly certain that you're far beyond the reach of their mystical healing powers."

The copy ninja clasped his hands, but remained sitting, eyes fixed on his hands. "I like my student."

"No shit."

Kakshi jerked back, blinking a surprised eye at the woman.

Kurenai scoffed and held out her hand. "I told you that you liked her two weeks ago. You were being stupid and wouldn't listen. Have you pulled your head out of your ass now?"
The silver-haired man took her hand, bemused, and allowed himself to be pulled out of the confining pantry.

Kurenai firmly shut the door behind him and steered him into a kitchen chair. She took the seat across from him and pushed a tin of cookies toward him casually.

He picked up one and studied it, absently counting how many chocolate chips were baked into the treat.

"Kakashi," Kurenai repeated, drawing the dazed man's attention. "It's ok to like her, you know."

"Is it?" Kakashi said softly, running his fingers around the cookie's burnt, imperfect edges.

"Yes, it is." The kunoichi said the words firmly, without hesitation. "And it's ok to see if she likes you too. You're both adults and theoretically capable of entering into a consensual relationship."

"Hmmm."

Kurenai sighed, "Play along with me here. You like your former student, she likes you, you're both adults—what's the harm of seeing if that goes anywhere, if the two of you can make each other happy?"

He set the cookie down on the table and stared at it morosely. "I'm no good for her."

Kurenai took a deep breath and counted to forty in her head, just to be on the safe side. "Kakashi," she said finally, "Eat that god-dammed cookie before I stuff it down your throat and tell Gai that it's your favorite recipe."

Kakashi ate the cookie.

Kakashi returned to the apartment—his apartment, he had to remind himself, late that night. He was hoping that Naruto would be asleep, but she was sitting at the kitchen table, Pakkun in her lap, reading a letter with a troubled expression on her face and biting the end of her hair.

He tried to slip by quietly, but her blue eyes darted up to him as he headed to his bedroom and arrested him in his steps.

"Kakashi?"

He held her gaze, "Yes?"

He expected to be called out for abandoning her that afternoon. For all those moments these past few weeks when she'd caught him staring at her and his own head hadn't caught on to what he was really doing. For being a filthy old pervert now that she'd actually sat down and read one of those books.

Instead, she pulled Pakkun to her chest and stood, walking toward him. "I got a letter from my land lady," she said casually.

She was wearing his shirt again. Her hair was loose, she was ready for bed and the tail of his shirt draped down her thighs. He wanted to reach out and touch her, but he didn't. Wouldn't touch her hair. Wouldn't touch the familiar buttons. Wouldn't let himself. She'd be gone tomorrow, back to her own apartment. His medicine cabinet would be empty, his couch would be empty, his home would be empty.

Back to normal.
His heart thudded painfully.

She paused by the couch, to set Pakkun down on the made-up bed, and look up at Kakashi in concern, coming closer.

"Kakashi?" She asked again, stopping a foot away, reaching out a hand to clutch timidly at his sleeve.

"Yes?" He repeated, looking at the top of her head, silently willing her to raise it and look him in the eye, to tell him that she was leaving and that everything would be fine. To say thank you and to walk away.

She tugged at his arm, and when he didn't come closer she moved forward herself. She raised her head and her eyes searched his own. "Kakashi," and her voice was afraid, _why was she afraid?_

He let himself raise his free hand, allowed himself to take the one strand of hair that had strayed into her face and brush it back, tuck it behind her ear. His fingertips brushed her cheek, soft, warm—he let his hand drop. "Yes?"

She bit her lip, and raised the hand not clutching his own, and his eyes focused on the letter in her grip, that she'd been reading when he walked in just a few minutes ago.

"Kakashi, what does extensive termite damage mean?"

Chapter End Notes

Beta(s): ElectraSev5n and Ladywinterfic
Chapter Summary

Kakashi and Naruto do errands. Like normal people. Kind of.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Over 22k words people. Enjoy. (And also, this fic hit over 1,000 reviews overall last chapter, which was really exciting. Thanks!)

TUMBLR ACCOUNT has been created, the link is in my profile (or just search for crownsoflaurels1020). Since it's taking me so long to update, I'll be posting previews, little scenes that didn't make the chapters, answering questions, and explaining what I'm doing (other than writing) on the tumblr blog. I've created it to be as interactive as possible, so STOP ANNONYMOUSLY reviewing and telling me to update and go harass me on tumblr where I can answer everyone.

P.S.: Kudos to those who catch the allusions to 'The Blues Brothers' and 'Animal House.'

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tsunade was enjoying a fairly peaceful day, one in which she broke more even than not on all of her lottery cards—which, typically, was only indicative of a minor problem, like a missive from another kage being mistakenly slipped in with Academy report cards instead of making its way to its proper home in Tsunade's inbox. It certainly wasn't a warning sign that a catastrophe of retirement-inducing proportions was on the horizon.

She'd been looking forward to leaving the office early, a rare treat, and so she'd purposefully ignored the reports she was getting from her secretary that an increasing number of upset civilians were trickling into the building to lodge formal complaints with the Shinobi Personnel Misconduct Investigator.

Tsunade rolled her eyes; I can't believe that the civilians finally managed to successfully lobby for a shinobi misconduct 'investigator.' It was really nothing more than a glorified secretary position, generally filled by some shmuck stuck on medical leave or the latest poor unfortunate soul who'd ticked off Tsunade.

The position had been created because the civilians didn't feel like complaining to the military police about shinobi 'misbehavior' got anything done. So now they came to the administrative building to complain to someone paid to nod his or her head sympathetically and say, 'of course I understand,' who would then forward the complaints to the military police— who still wouldn't get anything done.

Tsunade would privately admit to at least missing that about the Uchiha's presence in the village. When the Uchiha were in charge of the military police, the civilians hadn't been complaining. Not
that anything was actually getting done, but the Uchiha at least had enough presence to intimidate civilians into silence and complacency. They got nothing done with style.

Tsunade sighed as she stamped a seal of approval on the four hundredth and thirty seventh paper to cross her desk that day.

This was a military village, of course civilians were going to complain. Civilians liked the increased trade and protection, the feeling of excitement and being 'at the center of things,' that came with living within the walls of a hidden village.

What civilians didn't like was accepting that shinobi would always come first in a shinobi village.

Tsunade didn't know why this concept failed to sink into their thick skulls, it was like they honestly believed that all lives were equal or some such.

The Hokage snorted, Not in my village.

…Not that she was going to let them get killed needlessly, or anything like that either, but some things weren't going to change: shinobi would always be treated first in the hospitals, shinobi would be given a little more than just the benefit of the doubt when it was their word against a civilians, shinobi could fill higher 'government' positions in the village that civilians wouldn't be eligible for, the Shinobi Academy would receive more funding than the Civilian Academy, and yes, special allowances would be made for a shinobi's eccentricities when the same behavior from a civilian would get them locked up in a psych ward.

Civilians didn't like it?

Tough shit.

They could move to one of the dozens of other villages in Fire Country that didn't also serve as the hometown for hundreds of elite assassins.

However, while Tsunade could pretend that she was deaf every time her increasingly harried secretary poked her head in the door and reported that more angry civilians were coming into the building, Tsunade couldn't ignore her office doors being thrown open with a careless boom as the current (rather annoying but generally more capable than the rest of his moronic department) head of the military police bumbled in, carrying with him an odor reminiscent of freshly spread mulch and trailed by approximately four teams of people whom he claimed were all under arrest. And then there were chickens. Free range chickens, squawking and running aimlessly about her office. Which were apparently also under arrest, if she was hearing things correctly?

Surely not.

So much for calling it an early afternoon and heading home to curl up with a good book and some chilled sake. Her mask of righteous indignation slipped for a moment (another sign that she really should hurry up Naruto's 'training,' because did she ever need a vacation) and she gave a sad little hiccup of frustration that might have sounded borderline breakdown-ish. She immediately covered for this error by reassuming her normal temper with a vengeance, and the dozen shinobi in the office all scrambled to soothe the irate woman (or at least, quickly pass the blame off to another person, because no one wanted to be on the end of Shizune's lecture when the Hokage inevitably snapped and tossed her desk through the window for the second time that month).

Eventually, Tsunade had enough of the nonsensical babble. "Everybody, shut the hell up!"

The buzz in Tsunade's bizarrely crowded office abruptly chilled with the crash of what was probably
a priceless antique vase against the far wall.

Shizune, who'd slipped in behind the large group, gulped in resignation. She should have known better than to leave gifts from the Fire Daimyo in the Hokage's office for more than ten minutes. She tried to reassure herself that the Daimyo probably predicted his mother-in-law's ugly vase would meet such an end at Tsunade's hands in the first place.

A few moments of silence reigned, where the focus was on the blonde woman with the big hat who was struggling so violently not to explode that she snapped two pens in half before exhaling deeply and settling for directing her assistant to take notes.

"Let's try this again," said the Hokage, clearing her throat, "one more time, without the interpretive dance scenes and the backdrop of a theatrical chorus of incompetent nit-wits, shall we?"

Temporarily quailed, her audience listened to her opening remarks without further interruption.

"There is a line of civilians starting at the secretaries' desk and continuing past the conference room three floors below," the Hokage started her recitation soft and low, but her words quickly picked up pace and pitch. "There are eleven shinobi in my office under military arrest, the only one that is not smells like horse shit, and there are two dozen chickens in here." Tsunade blinked, coming to the realization that she'd fisted both hands in her hair in an attempt to keep herself from punching her desk.

She wanted to continue her tantrum in logical vein, but what came out was, "Two dozen chickens!" in a pitch much higher than intended. She set her elbows down on the desk and the wood underneath them cracked anyway, startling one of the creatures which had come to rest on her desk into fluttering off the edge with an indignant squawk.

"Technically," sniffed Udon, "there are only eighteen—"

Udon's life was saved by a timely ear-twist from his female teammate and a rare moment of wisdom on the part of Konohamaru, who slapped a hand over the other boy's mouth.

Sakura bit her fingertips nervously and twitched when a chicken made a particularly loud squawk at her feet.

"Chickens." Half-hissed Tsunade, eyes narrowing with rage, "Chickens and horse shit!"

Chief Hyūga Some-Name-Or-The-Other straightened in offense, "It's an unfortunate conseque—"

"Silence!" Tsunade's hand snagged in her hair, accidentally pulling loose one ponytail. She scowled and rebound her hair as she continued, fixing all present with an intense amber glare and wondering why being one of the most powerful women in the known world didn't get her out of having to deal with this kind of crap, "I want for whoever has committed the least amount of incidental damage to public property in the last twelve hours to explain this situation, right now."

A bemused silence settled over the room as it suddenly dawned on nearly everyone that they weren't able to answer her directive.

Perplexed glances were exchanged amongst the crowd until a single, smug feminine voice emerged, "That would be me."

Konohamaru snickered and Moegi hit him upside the head.

"Ow," the brunet put his hands to his abused head and joined Udon in scowling at the girl.
As Naruto slipped forward and brushed past Kakashi's shoulder, the sense of embarrassment that flooded the room was palpable.

"Someone tell me she's kidding?" Tsunade said weakly, pleading with the room by gesturing with a sweeping hand. Desperate eyes turned sorrowfully on the other shinobi present, searching for someone who normally could be relied upon to have a modicum of common sense and moderation. "Iruka-kun, no, really?" Tsunade felt strangely betrayed.

The Academy teacher sheepishly rubbed the scar on the bridge of his nose, shoulders hunching in an apologetic shrug, unable to explain the strange turn that the universe had taken that day.

Next to him, Sakura looked embarrassed on his behalf (and perhaps hers as well) while Sasuke leaned against the wall, channeling his best "these peasants bore me" face.

The military police chief looked like he wanted to punch the boy, badly. Tsunade could relate most days. At least, she was going to interpret the Hyūga's look as being fed up with Sasuke, but it was kind of hard to tell when his entire clan adopted looking pissed off as their default expression of choice.

"Fine." Tsunade took a moment to rest her head in both palms after she emitted the bitter word. She collected herself within a few seconds and raised her head with a weary sigh, "Go ahead."

Naruto was lost in the wonder of the novel concept of being the only person not responsible for large-scale property damage for a change. She surveyed the room with wide, pleased eyes, not catching on to the Hokage's order to report.

Kakashi coughed into his hand and elbowed the girl in the side to bring her attention back to the moment.

"Oh, right," Naruto rolled her shoulders back and set her feet, beginning her tale with the air of an experienced story-teller: "Well, it all began this morning, when Kakashi decided we needed to go talk to my landlady…"

Naruto cried out in surprise when her blanket was ripped away violently. She curled into a ball to protect herself against the rush of cold air, fully intending to go back to sleep. Instead of opening her eyes and lashing out at her attacker, she scrunched them tightly together, burrowing her head in her borrowed pillow to block out the intrusive, offending light.

"Maa, maa, Naruto-chan," came the way-too-cheerful voice for the early morning hour, "It's past nine and we have things to do today."

Suddenly, there was a firm hand on her back pushing her off the bed. Almost simultaneously her harasser caught the fold-out bed with his foot and gave it a vicious thrust, collapsing it back into a couch with one efficient movement and hastily tossing the cushions back on it before the dazed girl could collect herself and fight for her safe haven.

Naruto's blue eyes fluttered open sleepily as she sat up on the floor, clutching at the lumpy pillow and shivering at the slight chill that bled through the thin cotton of the tanktop and shorts combo she'd worn to bed. "What?" she tried to ask, but the word was garbled by the loud yawn she emitted concurrently.

The jōnin spun a kitchen chair around backward and sat down straddling it, resting his arms on the high back. "We've got places to be, people to see," his visible eye closed as he (theoretically) smiled, "Get dressed."
"I don't—" Naruto began to come to her senses a bit, peering around the room, confused. Sensing that the strange spirit which had temporarily possessed Kakashi wasn't going to leave him any time soon, she slumped in a pout and squinted at him with a doleful stare, "Where's breakfast?" She stuck out her lower lip and cuddled her pillow, making it clear that she was going to be completely uncooperative until fed.

Kakashi's eye widened slowly at the demand, in mock surprise that the girl would demand a meal before getting down to business.

Naruto's stomach growled loudly. Startled, she looked down, as if she could see it through the pillow. She blushed, scratched one whisker-marked cheek, and hid behind her pillow-shield so that only her eyes peeked up inquiringly at the older man.

"Well," Kakashi drawled thoughtfully, face serious but tone amused, "I probably shouldn't reward your mistaken belief that you possess bargaining power, but at least you're more adorable than my ninzen. Get dressed."

Kakashi rose, grabbed Naruto by the back of her tank top as she belatedly yelped in protest, mentally reeling just the tiniest bit at being called adorable (even if in a very round-about way).

Free from similar distractions, Kakashi easily carried out his plan of shoving the chūnin into the bathroom, tossing in her bag of clothes, and firmly shutting the door.

By the time Naruto emerged from the shower, slipping into her cropped jacket and trying to finish towel drying her hair at the same time; Kakashi was putting plates of bacon and eggs and pancakes on the tabletop.

"Yes!" Naruto crowed, dropping the wet towel on the couch. She ignored Kakashi's wince at her actions and bounded into the kitchen, inhaling the enticing scents deeply. "It smells awesome!"

The jōnin, attention diverted by the out-of-place couch-soaking towel, automatically embarked to restore it to its proper location, but was thwarted when Naruto grabbed him from behind in a tight hug.

"Thankyouthankyouthankyou," chanted the blond, squeezing the breath out of the subject of her affections with her unrestrained enthusiasm. "You're the best, I'll love you forever!"

Kakashi froze awkwardly at the words.

Naruto ignored the man and settled into the spare kitchen chair to devour the delectable arrangement before her.

He slowly unwound from the shock and uncertainty that burst into existence with the girl's simple words by reminding himself that she'd said the same thing a dozen times before (in fact, just yesterday it was Tenzō she was going to love forever, for agreeing to play target practice). This allowed him to get back to more important matters that required his immediate attention: such as the wet towel threatening the integrity of his beloved sofa.

That particular crisis averted, he returned to the kitchen to claim his own humble portion of breakfast (three pancakes and half a dozen pieces of bacon) and spare a brief moment to wonder if anyone in the world could prepare enough food to actually fill Naruto's stomach. *I meant that to be breakfast for tomorrow too,* he thought mournfully, watching the girl devour what had to be enough to feed an entire 'normal' genin team. *If I didn't personally know her parents, I'd swear she's part Akimichi,* the copy ninja thought, feeling uncomfortable as Naruto finished up her meal by sucking on the fork.
she'd used to shovel her eggs into her mouth, her eyes darting about the kitchen as if checking to make she hadn't missed anything.

"As I was saying," Kakashi began, recovering from his bout of mild hysteria at observing the spectacle that was Naruto inhaling food and deciding to catch her attention before she demanded more sustenance, "we need to run some errands today."

"Oh," warm, ocean-colored eyes honed in on him and the blond set down her fork. "I've never known you to be in a hurry before." The word slid off her tongue like an insult and Kakashi narrowed his eye.

Naruto smiled gamely, "Whadya need to do?"

"I'm not in a hurry," Kakashi said with a sniff, "but," he began ticking items off on his fingers, "We need to check in with a team that's doing some preparatory research for our mission, at some point we need to check in with the Hokage about said mission," (which they probably should have done yesterday, but, meh, time wasn't an issue on this matter) "and," he levelled a stern look at the girl, implying there would be no wiggle room on this last task, "we need to go talk to your landlady."

"Oh." Naruto looked down at hands in her lap, wringing them together nervously and biting at her lower lip.

"I'm not kicking you out Naruto," Kakashi said gently, eye softening.

Naruto's face shot back up, liquid eyes hopeful.

"But we do need to figure out what's going on with your apartment, that letter you got last night wasn't really that explanatory." His voice was firm, but Naruto was obviously reassured by his words as her expression lit back up with its normal optimism.

"Ok," she agreed amiably. She didn't know what Kakashi thought he was going to accomplish by talking to her harpy of a landlady. Naruto personally thought that she and the woman had a good thing going by mutually pretending the other didn't exist, but whatever. If she continued this train of thought she'd wake up Kurama and he'd start mouthing off about not being allowed to eat people. Again.

However, now that Kakashi was mentioning things that needed to get done, Naruto had a few things that she needed to put on today's list too. She hummed softly as she fidgeted in her seat, "We're almost out of groceries so we should stop to pick them up on our way home—," she nodded meaningfully toward the refrigerator as she stood to collect the dishes and shuffle them to the sink.

No thanks to breakfast this morning, Kakashi eyed the picked-clean plates as they were spirited away, unenthused.

"—And it's Iruka-sensei's birthday today and I haven't got him a present yet, so I need to pick one up—" babbled the girl, smile affectionate as she paused next to Kakashi at the table.

Why does he still get to be called 'sensei'? What did I do to lose that respect? Kakashi was somewhat confused by the matter, but he also wasn't as put out by the realization as he thought he should be, and he stowed the thought away for consideration at a later time.

"Also," the sudden tell-tell glow of an idea spread across Naruto's face.

The silver-haired man tensed as she turned a shrewd gaze upon him. He fought the physical tightening of his shoulder muscles as Naruto placed a light hand upon one, eyes big and wide and
was she batting her eyelashes?

"You did promise to teach me how to make some of my Mom's dishes and since we're getting groceries anyway..." Naruto trailed off, using a trick that Ino had taught her and invading Kakashi's personal space, demanding his attention by placing one hand on his shoulder gently, leaning in close. "Please?"

Kakashi's eye was fully open, not drooping in the slightest, trained intently on the opposite wall but not really seeing it as the girl moved so that she slid around him. The hand she'd laid on his shoulder never lost contact as she dragged it across his back, bringing it to rest on his opposite shoulder.

She ran it down his arm and brought her other arm around him slowly but gracefully, loosely encircling him in a hug as she rested her jaw on his other shoulder. "Please?"

Kakashi's mind went blank when she breathed softly into his ear.

This was probably not quite appropriate.

He should probably say something about this.

To stop this.

He should probably—

"Please?" She repeated even more softly, pressing her face close against his neck, the only thing separating their skin the thin fabric of his mask.

"Ok," said the copy ninja.

By the time he'd managed to herd Naruto to the dusty hospital archive, Kakashi still hadn't decided whether he should be amused or upset with himself for his earlier behavior.

He'd established that he was attracted to Naruto, but did that really give him license to act on such an attraction? He was fourteen years her senior; that wasn't an insignificant gap, no matter what Genma claimed. On the other hand, Naruto was an adult and Kurenai implied that Naruto wouldn't be completely opposed to the idea of a relationship with him, that it might actually be good for the girl. Now that he thought about it, the girl had been getting increasingly, well, physical lately, indicating a predisposition on her part for forming such a relationship.

Still, why would such a thing be good for Naruto? What did he have to offer in a relationship that could possibly be good for the girl? Surely Kurenai wasn't suggesting it for the sole reason that Kakashi could provide Naruto with some sexual experience. After all, there were other, far more emotionally stable and balanced individuals who could provide the girl with that. Not that anyone particular came to the top of Kakashi's mind.

Kurenai must think that a relationship with Kakashi in particular would benefit the girl in some way, or Kurenai wouldn't have made a point of mentioning it. Kurenai was the kind of kunoichi who always took care to choose her words wisely. But Kakashi had no idea what he could offer the girl, especially when what he thought she needed was a long-term relationship that had the potential of developing into a family.

Yes, his dimwit, darling ninken classified her as pack, and made clear they had certain expectations, but Kakashi hadn't been entirely raised by canines. He retained enough human social conditioning to realize that he shouldn't let the 'pack mindset' he habitually adopted dictate all his life choices. Just
most of them. And the ones he didn't know how to make, and the ones where he felt really uncomfortable—anyway.

Kakashi cleared his throat and nervously glanced at his companion. Fortunately, she was just as oblivious to Kakashi’s internal dialogue as usual and was staring curiously at the stalls they were passing, the sellers just beginning to set out their wares.

Reassured that nothing important was happening, Kakashi slipped back into his thoughts. The reality of the situation was that Kakashi’s life-expectancy was considerably short at the moment, especially as he didn’t plan on cutting back on the amount or degree of danger in his mission work. He couldn’t offer her what she deserved; someone who adored her, respected her, and could commit to being in a relationship with her for a long time. Preferably somebody strong enough to watch her back and check the damage of whatever reality bending charismatic bloodline-jutsu-secret power she had that Kakashi still hadn’t found a way to adequately explain.

Kakashi rolled his shoulders and craned his neck toward the sky, scanning the tops of the buildings lining the street for potential threats and dangers, cataloguing the normality of it all and yet still feeling uneasy.

He cared for her, certainly, but Naruto didn't need a caretaker. She probably didn't want one either. Naruto needed someone who was able to love her. Kakashi wasn't sure that he had ever been capable of that emotionally. He was intelligent enough to know his own flaws, and honest enough to admit that he was more than a bit broken in that regard, and perhaps always had been.

And what would his other students say, how would they react to their teammate in such a situation? Naruto was very attached and dependent upon peer relationships. How would becoming intimately involved with Kakashi, even for a brief time, affect those relationships?

What a headache.

Kakashi rubbed futilely at the sharingan eye, covered and throbbing dully behind his hitiate as he escorted Naruto to the hospital. She skipped ahead and fell back alternatively, saying hello to every third or fourth person they met and chattering away about nonsensical things like the weather and herb gardens and such. Every once in a while, Kakashi obligingly paused while she finished her small talk and caught up to him. He never had to pause for too long, she had too much energy to stay in one place for a prolonged amount of time.

He was pulled from his time of personal reflection when Naruto hooked her arm through his own and looked up at him expectantly.

He raised an eyebrow in response.

She huffed, but didn't ask the question she was dying to know, which was where the hell were they going. She only grew more confused as they bypassed the main entrance to the hospital and entered through a back way, down creaky stairs into the floors dug underground, bypassing the administrative levels and continuing to areas Naruto had never explored. "Where are we?" The blond asked, finally caving to curiosity and wrinkling her nose at the smell of stale air and old papers.

Kakashi stopped before an unassuming door, pushing it forward with a thrust of his palm and graciously holding it open as Naruto preceded him. "We're where the dead go to be forgotten," Kakashi said dryly, good eye dilating to adjust to the dim lighting as his sharingan teared up in reaction to the dust, despite being securely covered. "Only, of course, nothing is ever completely forgotten in a village of shinobi."
"Haha, very funny," came the sarcastic huff of a sulky teenager from somewhere within the large room.

Naruto walked further inside upon hearing the familiar voice, and sure enough, Konohamaru appeared from behind a long row of shelves filled with files and scrolls, his arms full of a stack of old documents.

"Good morning!" Naruto greeted cheerfully.

A chorus of voices responded: Konohamaru-kun's stiff with dulled enthusiasm, Udon's 'hello' by far the most polite, and Meogi's muttered grumble barely audible, muffled by the racks of files.

Konohamaru crossed his arms and glared at the only jōnin in the room. "So it's your fault we're stuck in here? We've been at this for like, a whole week!"

Udon trotted out to greet them with his own armful of papers, dumping them onto a table that looked like it had been brought in specifically for the trio. "We've only been here five days," informed the boy seriously, taking one of the three seats at the table and opening a scroll dutifully.

"How is that different from what I said?" snapped Konohamaru irritably, before wrinkling his nose in displeasure at his visitors. "You two are so late, you were supposed to be here days ago!"

"We had to renegotiate bathroom occupancy agreements," Kakashi said with a shrug.

Naruto looked oddly at the copy ninja while Konohamaru ignored the explanation.

"Whatever," muttered the Sandaime's grandson, "If we'd croaked you'd totally have been responsible. There's no sun light in here, we're like, gonna' die from lack of vitamin Z or something."

"Vitamin D," corrected Udon automatically, not looking up from his assignment.

"What?" Konohamaru scowled.

"Vitamin D," repeated Udon absent-mindedly, "The skin contains provitamin D3 which reacts with sunlight to form the vitamin—"

"I wasn't asking you," Konohamaru fussed, only to squawk as Naruto hit him upside the head.

"Stop being mean to your teammates," scolded the blond, "they've been working just as hard as you and that's no reason to be nasty."

"Sorry," mumbled Konohamaru, cowed in the face of disapproval from someone he admired so much. "It's just been really boring lately."

"Super boring," agreed the kunoichi of his team, carrying her own burden and slumping down in the chair next to Udon with frustration. "And we've not found anything that we've been told to look for," she added, addressing Kakashi. "Not that we were told why we were supposed to go through the lists of all active shinobi in the last half century and look for missing blood records."

"Not anything?" asked Kakashi, surprised. Konoha wasn't perfect, there should be at least some missing files. The lack of imperfection in itself was suspicious.

"No. Not anything," said Udon, looking up at the two older shinobi and stressing the word, his knowing gaze indicating that he'd already latched on to Kakashi's own train of thought.

"Super boring," huffed Konohamaru, leaning against the table. "Although," the boy gave a sneaky
grin, "Udon did find a summoning scroll—ack!" He was cut off as several scrolls hit his back.

"That's not relevant to the medical records at all," mumbled Udon sheepishly, appearing to be taken aback by his own aggression.

Moegi sighed and resumed scanning her pile of documents while Konohamaru rubbed at the back of his head and pouted.

"Do you have any notes," queried Kakashi, thinking perhaps they'd stumbled upon some other anomaly within the records which would help Kakashi determine with whom Danzō had been messing.

"I dunno," Konohamaru shrugged, "I think Udon made a chart or something, beats me."

Kakashi's eye drooped with displeasure at the attitude, but, *Not my genin, not my problem.* Tsunade and Ebisu could have fun with that. The copy ninja ventured forward to take a look at the pile of papers the spectacled kid pushed toward him.

"It's not like we did anything really bad to get stuck in here," added Konohamaru with a whine, "that new guy who's heading the MP can't take a joke."

Naruto shook her head, unsympathetic to the genins' plight. "I've told you before," she tsked, waving her hand and assuming a lecturing posture, "if you're going to prank someone you have to be prepared to face the consequences; doubly so if you're trying to pull something on someone without a sense of humor."

"You sound like Aunt Kurenai." Konohamaru hunched his shoulders sullenly, "What a drag."

"Really?" Naruto asked, beaming at the suggestion.

"It wasn't a compliment, Boss," said the brunet, dismayed.

Meanwhile, Kakashi flipped through the chart created by the one kid in the group who seemed intent to do the task properly, ignoring said kid's expectant gaze. His eye paused on a notation in the margins that began to appear, "What's this then?"

Udon perked up, "The asterisk? That's for when an active shinobi's wounds recorded in a medical history deviated from those recorded in the autopsy report by more than forty percent. I considered that an anomaly too great to simply be due to chance, so I started noting such occasions. There's a whole bunch of them from the last war."

Kakashi flipped further into the chart, as it had been organized from the oldest deaths first to the most recent. Sure enough, quite a few asterisks appeared by familiar names. Kakashi recognized most as confirmed Root participants. Still, a few of the names were new. It was entirely possible that Root members weren't aware of the full extent of their membership, and as far as he knew, even Danzō's recently discovered storage closet hadn't contained a convenient membership list. Following Udon's analysis was their best bet of knowing the full extent of that roster at this point in time. Using that information, they could identify what areas Danzo had access to and the possible extent to which his influence reached.

It wasn't going to help Kakashi's current mission, as it would only show which of Konoha's many dead were potentially affiliated with Root, but it would help Tsunade identify and remedy potential breaches in security. Perhaps even identify areas of work or specialties where Danzō had found it easier to gather his dissident minions.
"New orders," Kakashi announced, tossing the chart onto the table. He felt bad for that afterward, as it stirred up a cloud of dust that sent the Udon kid folding over into a sneezing fit.

And it would keep idle minds busy.

Konohamaru snapped his mouth shut mid conversation and he and his orange-headed female teammate looked at the masked man hopefully: Anything to get out of the basement.

"I want a chart detailing the discrepancies that Udon-kun found, the names of those shinobi and their identification numbers," began Kakashi, ignoring the falling faces of two of the three children in front of him. The identification numbers would allow Tsunade to pull all the personnel files of those shinobi from storage (securely kept separately from the medical histories) for Kakashi to browse at his leisure at a later time.

"That means you're going to have to redo a lot of your work," mused the copy shinobi, oblivious to panicky widening of eyes in his audience, "But you should be able to limit yourself to the past twenty—no, thirty years of deaths."

"What," protested Konohamaru, "No way! We've already spent days in here, now we're going to be here twice as long!"

"Don't mouth off to commanding officers," said Naruto, swatting Konohamaru on the back of the head again.

Konohamaru looked at her, aghast, "Who died and made you Iruka-sensei?"

Naruto gave a superior toss of her hair and turned her attention to Kakashi, "Did you find what you needed?"

"Not really," drawled the copy ninja, "But I wasn't expecting them to be able to find anything at all, so now that Udon-kun's performed so spectacularly, this might yet turn out to have been a useful endeavor."

"Wait," cried Konohamaru, stamping his feet, "You mean, we've been looking for something you didn't think would exist this entire time?" The teenager was nearly frothing at the mouth in anger, "and now you're going to make us stay here longer 'cuz we actually did a good job?!"

Moegi had buried her head in her hands, ignoring her teammate's tantrum.

Udon slumped in his seat, pushing his glasses up his nose, an embarrassed flush spreading across his cheeks.

"Yup," Kakashi said, eye crinkling in a smile.

"What are you even going to do with this information anyway," howled the boy, "why can't you do it yourself?"

Kakashi shook his head, "I could tell you, but I'd have to kill you," he said with sincerity. "And we don't have time to do it ourselves, because Naruto-chan and I are going on a mission."

"Wait," Konohamaru froze, eyes narrowing, "You mean, you are taking your team on a mission, right?"

Kakashi raised an eyebrow, mildly amused at the threatening tone the kid was leveling at him.
"No," Naruto snorted, "It's Kakashi's mission, but he's taking me because I know how to properly behave on missions and don't throw temper tantrums when I don't get my way or take my anger out on my teammates."

Kakashi bit his tongue; surely she sees the hypocrisy in that statement?

Naruto had her hands on her hips and was looming self-righteously over the younger boy.

Of course she doesn't, thought Kakashi with a sigh, this is Naruto I'm talking about. He cleared his throat and called the blond's name in an attempt to interrupt the squabble that had erupted between the pair. Naruto paused and twisted about to face the older man just as she'd pinned the kid in a headlock.

"Come along," Kakashi said, heading for the door and holding it open for her, "If you want your groceries, we need to get going and finish the other things on our list."

"Ok." Naruto relinquished her death grip on her closet fan-boy, but not before giving him a playfully hard push into the table that rattled the wood and knocked the breath out of him. Latching on to the new topic, she started up her usual comforting babble, "What are we making for dinner tonight?"

"Hmm," said Kakashi, "maybe karaage?"

"That sounds good, what all are we going to need for that?"

The voices grew muffled as the door swung shut behind them, leaving the room with three unhappy teenagers. Konohamaru stared at the closed door in shock, body tense and face slowly turning red as his thoughts whirled.

"Sorry," said Udon, misinterpreting his leader's anger as being caused by the team's newest orders. Udon tried to stifle a sniffle, and moved to rearrange the abused papers and scrolls into some semblance of order.

"It's not your fault," acknowledged Moegi with a sigh, resting her head in a palm, "I was so hoping to be done with this place today, though. What about you Konohamaru-kun?" She blinked as the boy remained unresponsive, back to his teammates, spine stiff.

"Konohamaru-kun?" Moegi repeated the inquiry, tone light.

Finally, the boy straightened and turned to face his two teammates with a slightly manic gleam in his eyes to which Moegi and Udon instinctively recoiled.

"Let's go," said the leader of the trio determinatively, "We've got a new mission."

"We already have a mission," said Moegi firmly, biting her lip in trepidation.

"We have a more important mission," bit out Konohamaru, throwing his scarf more securely around his neck.

Moegi and Udon exchanged a look.

"What kind of mission are we talking about?" Udon wasn't sure he wanted the answer to his question.

Konohamaru was already half-way out the door. "This, my friends, is a mission from Kami," he said seriously, then completed his exit with all the grace and poise of an aged film star.
"Oh," Udon simply stated, before sharing another look of resigned misery with his female teammate. "I hate those missions."

Moegi nodded in agreement and they scrambled to catch up to their fearless leader, because at this point in their lives, they'd long since become accustomed to the fact that even if they weren't at the scene of the crime they'd be deemed guilty by association and assigned a share in the punishment regardless of the extent of their actual involvement.

Might as well enjoy the insanity while it lasted.

And, in Udon's case, at least suggest minimizing the damage.

"She shouldn't be making you pay rent," Kakashi told Naruto as they strolled through the crowded residential streets that led to the girl's apartment building.

Naruto shrugged, "I told her that, but she said she'd consider it a breach of my lease and line up a new renter. It's a good space you know, big for one person at least. And it's the entire top floor, which is great for being a shinobi, except she doesn't like us. And Sandaime-jiji got my rate locked in a long time ago, he did something so she couldn't raise it on me as long I stayed. She'd be really happy to see me go so could rent it out a higher rate."

"Technically," said the copy ninja, "She's the one in breach of the lease right now by not making sure that your apartment is habitable. She should be paying you any cost you are incurring in excess of what you would normally pay in a month's rent under your contract."

Naruto tilted her head, lips curving in a faint frown and blue eyes puzzled. "Ok," she said, but the simplicity of the word implied she wasn't following the older man. "I guess it's a good thing then that you aren't charging me rent, or she'd owe you money!"

Naruto smiled up at him, but Kakashi was looking away, distracted.

"What's wrong?" Naruto asked, brows furrowing.

"One second," muttered Kakashi, stilling for a moment. Just as quickly, he relaxed and continued forward.

Naruto paused to look back and see if she could detect what had attracted his attention. When she couldn't, she darted forward and tugged at his arm. "What was that about?"

Kakashi's face had relaxed and he gave her a small smile, "Your fanclub is following us."

"My fanclu—" Naruto muttered, beginning to twist around, but stopped when Kakashi grabbed her shoulder. "Don't look," he admonished, "try to feel them."

Naruto huffed, but did as directed, fusing with Kurama briefly to enhance her ability to identify unique chakra signatures and searching through all the people she felt suddenly 'pop' into existence on her mental map until she found—

"Those three!" She scowled and turned about fully, hands on her hips.

Kakashi rolled his eyes but turned with her. So much for teaching her the art of subtlety, he thought wistfully. He had to admit that particular lesson was wasted as far as Naruto was concerned.
"I thought you told them to search for some stuff in the archive?"

Konohamaru and his friends weren't visible. They had, by now, advanced to stealth techniques more complicated than hiding under boxes, but that didn't stop Naruto from scowling in their general direction, a hundred feet or so back.

"They must have needed to walk the dog," mused the jōnin.

"They don't have any dogs." Naruto said snippily, turning on her heel and grabbing Kakashi's hand. She dragged the older man forward for a few steps until he caught up to her brisk pace to their original destination.

Kurama laughed at her predicament, *I told you that brat considers you to be residing in his territory. You're the vixen that introduced another dog into the equation; you should be prepared to face the consequences.*

*He doesn't like me like that, you pervert,* snapped Naruto, brain reaching and failing to find an explanation for why Konohamaru was stalking her rather than working on his own assignment. *He's probably just bored and planning a prank or something.*

*Or something,* drawled the Kyūbi in agreement.

*Well he's not going to catch me,* thought Naruto, giving a mental huff and ignoring the chakra beast's snickers.

Naruto tugged more fiercely at her bewildered companion's hand, pulling him up the steps of the entrance to her building and to the peeling green paint of her landlady's door.

Kakashi studied Naruto from the corner of his eyes, but whatever fit had temporarily possessed her seemed to have passed—or not, he thought, as the girl pounded on the door forcefully with the flat of her palm.

"Oy, Old Lady!" Naruto bellowed when the first ten knocks went unanswered, "We need to talk!"

*Well,* thought Kakashi, scratching at the back of his head awkwardly and wondering why someone with exposure to the phenomenon that was Naruto had yet to invent a reset button that could be used to undo the last ten seconds of life choices and avoid potential crises. *That's one way of getting attention. Although, it might explain why her landlady prefers to communicate with her through letters rather than in person.*

The door finally opened to reveal an unamused child of roughly eleven, with tousled brown hair and bored eyes. "What?" the kid looked at Naruto with pursed lips and a put upon expression.

"Where's your ma'?" Naruto asked, flipping a pigtail over her shoulder. "I need to talk with her about my place."

"She's in the shower," grunted the kid, "She can't talk now."

Naruto rolled her eyes, "Fine then, just tell her I'm going up to grab some things—"

The kid's eyes widened, "you're not supposed to do that!"

Naruto scowled, "Why not? I'm paying for the place still."

"The Health Inspector said it was dangerous," insisted the boy, "you can't go."
Naruto's eyes narrowed, "Just watch me." She spun on her heel and dashed up the stairs, ignoring the shouting kid she'd left behind in her wake.

The fussy boy turned to assess Kakashi, who was still standing in front of the door with his hands in his pockets.

The kid gave him a head-to-toe once over, and then an unimpressed sniff. "Shinobi," scoffed the boy, slamming the door shut in Kakashi's face.

Kakashi stood in front of the door for a few seconds, bemused and not certain what to make of the situation. Eventually he decided to turn in the direction that Naruto had headed and to amble up the stairs after her. He'd been to her apartment before; although, usually he'd come in through the roof entrance to avoid encountering the girl's neighbors.

When he finally found her, she was standing on top of her couch and poking at a wooden ceiling beam, face thoughtful. Kakashi looked around the apartment. The once cozy home looked depressing and damaged. Whatever had been done to get rid of the mold had apparently required the removal of the walls. This left the original beams exposed. They looked rotten and were sagging under the weight of the roof.

"Is this what termite damages looks like?" Naruto asked curiously, running her fingers along the beams.

Kakashi scratched at the back of his head. "I have no idea; I've never studied termites. But it looks like something has been eating at the wood." He took a deep breath. "Smells like bugs," he offered, unable to pinpoint the somewhat familiar smell with more particularity. He'd heard of dogs that could differentiate between species of bug smells, but it wasn't something for which he'd trained any of his pack.

"Ick," Naruto made a face and stopped tentatively prodding the beams. She hopped down from the couch and drooped as she took in her home sans-drywall and most of her belongings. She shook her head, as if that would shake off the unfamiliar feeling of sadness which filled her brain like thick cotton and headed into the kitchen to wash her hands. "At least the water is still running and the electricity works."

"Your landlords' family is always that pleasant?" Called out Kakashi as he sat down on Naruto's couch, jumping a bit when he felt something uncomfortable poking him. A quick check of the couch cushions proved he was sitting on the remote.

"Always," drawled Naruto as she plodded into her bedroom to pack the rest of her clothes. "Although to be fair, I think she hates me especially because Sandaime-jiji made her cook for me when I was little and I refused to eat it and made fun of it so I could have ramen. And, of course, this was a nice building once upon a time and then I came to live in it and she couldn't keep tenants and there went the neighborhood, ya' know."

Kakashi filed her chatter away in the back of his mind and ignored the eerie feeling the skeleton walls gave him. He focused on a problem he could hope to fix: figuring out how to use the remote to Naruto's t.v.

It didn't seem to be working.

He checked for batteries—nope, it had those. He tried Naruto's favorite remedy and hit it harshly against the worn coffee table before aiming it at the screen. The screen flickered and the machine buzzed slowly to life, bringing in some familiar background noise which lessened the gloomy
atmosphere of the normally vibrant home. Kakashi rested his feet on the kunai-gouged coffee table and mindlessly flipped through the channels until a comforter was thrown on his head.

He sat like that for a minute; his vision tinted orange as the light from the windows was filtered through the bright fabric. It smelled oddly familiar and comforting, a faded scent of ramen and grass and that one shampoo with the citrusy smell that she favored.

He pulled it off his head. "What was that for?"

"It's cold in your place at night," said Naruto, sticking out her tongue and swinging the now bulging duffel bag over her shoulder.

Kakashi had just opened his mouth to retort (after biting back the automatic, completely inappropriate quote from *Icha Icha Tactics*, page 36) when the front door was violently thrown open and a fuming woman in a fluffy pink bath robe and slippers ensemble, hair wrapped in a matching towel, bumbled into the room, a similarly frumpy (but dressed) man at her heels.

"What are you doing in here?" The woman exclaimed in a rush, hands fluttering at her sides in worry. "The health inspector said no one was to come in until he made sure it was structurally sound. You'll bring the entire building down!"

Kakashi and Naruto shared a flat look. They were shinobi, they could tell when the beams they were walking upon were solid enough to support their weight. *Her weight, on the other hand*—Kakahsi cut off his uncharitable thoughts to take in the appearance of the woman who he now recalled had suggested that Naruto use her "tricks" to find lodging after rudely kicking the girl out during a storm.

Realizing that her hysterical rant was falling on unsympathetic ears, the woman rounded on someone she could boss about unquestioningly. "Tell them they can't be here."

Her husband, whose shirt looked like it needed to be introduced to an iron, straightened his shoulders and puffed out his chest. "You really need to leave. It's not safe," he insisted, running a hand through his beard as he tried to fulfill his wife's demands and, at the same time, avoid picking a fight that he knew he couldn't win.

Kakashi personally thought this made the man look awfully like something he'd seen once on a mission called a walrus. However, his commentary probably wouldn't be appreciated, or understood, judging by the level of world-wide exposure the married couple most likely shared between them.

"I'm ready if you're ready," said Naruto with a shrug and a wave to the copy ninja, walking toward the door.

"You want this then?" Kakashi gestured to the comforter. Naruto nodded, so Kakashi stood and tried to fold it into a more manageable clump of fabric.

The harpy and her keeper slipped out ahead of him as he struggled with the uncooperative, bulky orange mass. He caught up with the trio at the first landing, where the women had stopped to have a heated debate in between flights of stairs.

"I'm not paying you until the health inspector says its liveable. I don't have to and you can't bully me into doing otherwise," growled Naruto, standing her ground.

Kakashi felt a flash of pride for the girl and came to stand by her side. That was one of his favorite things about her; that once she was pointed in the right direction she wasn't afraid to fight her own battles, no matter the opposition—or what pitch in which the opposition was screeching. Kakashi fought the impulse to rub his aching ears.
The woman spluttered angrily and tossed her hands in the air with a loud wail of despair, gesturing for her husband to take up the argument. The man looked just as indignant as his wife, but while apparently eager to con an eighteen year old out of money, he was more hesitant to do so in front of a jōnin vest.

Kakashi felt a frown tug at the corner of his lips as he assessed the tentative man and the guilty cast to his face. In what other ways had they been taking advantage of Naruto's naiveté for him to be acting so culpable?

"You'll have to at least pay a holding fee," the man settled for saying, "so that we know you're invested in the apartment and aren't going to abandon the lease. You'll get a quarter of it back when you return and finish out your lease."

"That's absurd," Kakashi butted in, attempting to end the nonsense so they could move on to more important things. They were already a day late in reporting to the Hokage, after all. "You've breached your agreement by not keeping the premises livable; she doesn't have to do anything until you fix that."

"Why I never," hissed the woman, pushing forward to jut her finger against Kakashi's vest and speaking through gritted teeth. "You shinobi think you can just waltz on in here and always get things to go your way, just because you kill people for a living."

Kakashi raised an eyebrow, but let the woman rant. You'd think she'd be a little more respectful of the men and women who fight and bleed and die for her home. Kakashi had to remind himself to reign in his temper; nothing he could say would get through to this woman. Obviously, she had buried herself in the idea that she and hers had been irreparably harmed by shinobi. Naruto's fingers clenched tightly in the loose fabric of his sleeve, and he forced himself to relax to encourage her to keep calm.

The irate woman continued her diatribe in the face of Kakashi's feigned apathy, voice rising with the onslaught of her words, "You think you can ignore how things work and break all the windows and wake decent people up at all hours of the night, holes in the walls and bloodstains in the common areas, always forgetting weapons where children can reach and ordering people to keep certain tenants no matter the trouble they cause. You ruin good folks' livelihoods, and your women are loose —"

"We're done here." Kakashi was more than done actually, but he was recalling a recent promise to the Hokage and the fact that Naruto, despite living in a dump, was emotionally attached to said dump and would probably resent him if he burned the building down and further pushed back her move-in date.

The silver-haired jōnin attempted to move past the woman and start down the stairs, but she moved forward at the same time, and in the crowded space of four people trying to navigate the top of a set of stairs, it was inevitably the civilian who lost her balance and fell forward with a squawk.

Kakashi leaned forward to try and catch her (not his most enthusiastic attempt, but still, there was some effort). However, with his arms full of comforter, what the woman actually latched onto was one end of the blanket. This at least cushioned and softened her fall, but still left her bumbling down the stairs and landing in an awkward heap, robe falling open and revealing rather unattractive frayed blue undergarments.

Awkward silence reigned briefly, none of the group sure how to appropriately react to the absurd scenario.
Then, the snicker of teenage voices broke the moment as the 'potted plants' in the lobby *poofed* into a trio of familiar faces.

Konohamaru doubled over in laughter. "You have Granny-panties," he crowed in a delighted juvenile cackle. Udon seemed to find the situation similarly humorous, although he and Moegi at least had the grace to blush in embarrassment for the woman's plight while simultaneously giggling at her expense.

The civilian woman gave an outraged shriek and leapt up to cover herself with Naruto's comforter.

"Ooops," said Kakashi, rubbing at the back of his head.

"Nadeshiko," the balding landlord gasped theatrically, trotting down the stairs to his wife.

"Ummm," Naruto murmured, adjusting the weight of her bag, "At least she's not hurt?" She called tentatively down to the couple, wondering if the woman would release her death grip on the comforter. She really liked that blanket.

Kakashi looked over at Naruto, who was biting her lip and tugging on a pigtail, probably blaming herself for not moving to catch the woman. "Come on," he said, nudging her forward lightly. "She wouldn't have the energy to be that indignant if she was actually hurt, she'd be rolling on the floor and moaning about how you permanently injured her and demanding reparations."

Naruto didn't seem to find that reassuring, but down the stairs they went.

Kakashi hauled the laughing Konohamaru to his feet by the back of his shirt, swatting him upside the head when he teetered unsteadily, as if contemplating collapsing back to the floor.

"Don't you have an assignment to get to?" Kakashi said casually, watching the brunet stiffen resentfully.

"Yes sir," Moegi jumped to her feet and grabbed her teammates' hands, herding them toward the door, "We were just taking a lunch break."

"A really early lunch," amended Udon.

"We eat early lunches all the time," added Konohamaru, in between giggles.

Thankfully, Moegi bustled Konoha's worst group of liars through the lobby doors before Kakashi actually felt obligated to call them on their fibs.

He turned his attention to Naruto's landlords, who might have a future in daytime soap opera judging by the level of drama with which they were infusing the scenario; the woman was practically fainting with mortification.

Kakashi would be mortified too, if he'd been seen in public wearing *that* underwear. To each their own, he supposed.

"I'll be back to talk about the lease when the health inspector clears the apartment," Naruto said through a false smile, losing her patience. She tugged at her comforter impatiently, her landlady still holding it hostage.

"OH! The nerve, thinking you'll be staying here after all this," Ground out the woman, re-adjusting her robe as her husband fussed with rearranging the towel on the top of her head, until she was forced to release the comforter so that she could bat away his hands.
Naruto hastily retreated with her prize, taking refuge next to Kakashi, who the nameless husband still seemed wary of approaching.

"You just wait, missy," called the woman as the two shinobi exited the building, "You'll get yours one day!"

Kakashi let the door slam shut behind them and took a good look at his companion, noting the slump to her shoulders, downturn to her lips, and distracted expression.

He reached out to put a hand on her shoulder.

She paused, turning to look at him, eyes tired but attentive.

"You shouldn't listen to her," Kakashi said softly, giving her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Some people just can't stop living in the past. They just let the wounds, however minor, fester and grow, until they have nothing but pain and that's all they're capable of expressing." His throat was suddenly thick and the words stopped coming. So he settled for brushing her bangs out of her eyes and tucking the longer loose strands behind her ear before letting his hand drop.

Naruto blinked uncertainly and let her gaze drop to the ground. She scuffed a foot in the dirt, feeling awkward.

What would Kurenai say?

And didn't that thought make her snort, because, really, who the hell knew. She knew what she wanted to do though. She brightened and looked back up to Kakashi, his gray eye widening slightly at her sudden change in mood.

She grinned, and thrust her comforter into his arms. "Your turn to carry this, Lazy! Don't make me do all the work."

As Kakashi fumbled with the comforter, trying to ball it up and keep it from dragging in the dirt, Naruto took advantage of his preoccupation to loop her arm through his and propel them forward. The copy ninja quickly matched her stride, and tugged her into a route toward the center of the Village, where all roads led to the Hokage's Tower.

As they passed through a particularly empty road, Naruto turned her face toward Kakashi's shoulder, resting it briefly against him. "Thank you," she said sincerely.

"For what?" Kakashi asked, looking straight ahead.

"For coming with me today," said Naruto calmly, "For standing by me." Naruto looked forward, pretending this was just an ordinary conversation and not an emotionally vulnerable moment, the likes of which both participants were equally bad at handling. "And," continued Naruto, "For being strong enough not to be like her, to not get stuck like that—"

"Naruto—" Kakashi's voice hitching in warning.

"Don't," Naruto said, head shaking in the negative, "You're not, whatever you think. Because you've never hurt me like that, ever. And you could have," Naruto's voice shook a bit, thinking about how close Kakashi was to her parents, about how he had every right to shy away from her completely, to never let her in, to blame her for taking his precious ones away—"So thank you," she said, voice firm, focusing on walking forward.

Kakashi didn't say anything else as they made their way to the Hokage's office.

But he didn't push her away either; that was enough.
"You're late," snapped Tsunade catching the familiar mop of white hair entering her office from the corner of her eyes.

"We got caught in a territorial dispute with a walrus," said Kakashi sincerely.

Naruto's head swiveled to look at him incredulously. That's the second time his excuse has kind-of-sort-of made sense. Don't tell me he's actually been telling the truth for years? She felt a strange pressure begin to develop behind her eyes and her left eye twitched reflexively several times. She rubbed at it.

"I don't have time for your lies," huffed the blonde woman, finishing her signature with a flourish and then looking up to examine them both, eyes widening as she took in their belongings. "Absolutely not," growled Tsunade, posture tightening defensively, "I've told you before, you cannot have a slumber party in my office."

The blonde chūnin stopped rubbing her, now watering, eyes and looked up in confusion. She quickly realized that Tsunade was making assumptions from the comforter in Kakashi's arms and the duffel bag Naruto was hauling over her shoulder. She snorted, "Don't worry, I'm having a sleepover with Kakashi, not you."

Everyone in the office took a moment to process that statement, and then Naruto turned bright red as Kakashi stiffened and Tsunade's eyes went wide. "I didn't mean—that's not," Naruto spluttered squeakily, "not that kind of sleepover!" The embarrassed girl slapped a hand to her face.

Kakashi cleared his throat and shifted his weight uncomfortably. His hands itched to rub at the back of his head, but his arms were full of obnoxiously bright fabric.

"Oh?" A predatory grin spread over Tsunade's face as she leaned back in her chair. "I suppose the two of you kissed-and-made-up, then?"

"Granny!" Naruto whined, trying not to melt into the floor in embarrassment.

Kakashi tensed and twitched at the words. He knew the Hokage was teasing, but he couldn't shake the panicky feeling that she would punt him through the wall if she actually thought that was what had happened.

"Stop it," the younger blond managed to get out in a half-plea half-huff, blue eyes contrasting sharply against her bright red cheeks. Naruto straightened and clutched the strap of her bag tightly with both hands. "Everything's fine, do we have permission to go on this thing or what?"

Tsunade hummed, shoving some scrolls off her desk as she searched for some particular papers. "Amegakure is somewhat of a mess at the moment, administratively, but I've alerted them that I'm sending two shinobi in to investigate a few odd reports from their civilians." She found the document she was looking for and held it out to Kakashi. "That's the acknowledgment that they are aware you'll be travelling through the place."

Kakashi folded the paper up and slipped it securely into the inner pocket of his flak jacket.

Naruto furrowed her brows, concerned, "They're just going to let us pass through, no problem?"

Tsunade shrugged, "They really don't have the manpower or political presence to complain or retaliate, but they'll probably be watching you." The Hokage gave a sigh and leaned back in her chair, rubbing at her forehead. "However, the alternative is to let you both go in unannounced and inevitably something will blow up and then all three of the border nations you'll be investigating will be screeching about breached treaties and I just don't want to deal with it."
"Ah," Naruto blinked, understanding dawning on her face, "So this way, if we're in Iwa or Ishigakure and discovered, we can claim to have been chasing people from our investigation in Amegakure, which we had permission to do?"

"Very good," Tsunade beamed, then clapped her hands loudly, "Now scram, I've tentatively penciled you both as being out for two weeks for this thing. Take the rest of the days to gather supplies and set out in the morning. If you find that you need more field time, just let me know."

"Ok," nodded Naruto amiably, catching on to the fact that Tsunade meant for her to send progress reports by toad.

Both Kakashi and Naruto left quickly in silent agreement, stepping out into the busy antechamber where Tsunade's secretary was screening the next visitors.

"Enjoy your sleepover, you two!" Tsunade called out after them cheerfully.

"Eh-heh!" Naruto stumbled as all eyes turned on the pair.

An uncomfortable awkward tension settled over the pair as they walked back out in the central village roads.

Neither seemed to know what to say, but Kakashi eventually sighed and scratched at the back of his head in contemplation. "We should probably drop your stuff off at my apartment." Before anyone else draws the wrong conclusions, he thought, single eye twitching from stress.

"That's probably a good idea," muttered his blonde companion, the color in her cheeks finally beginning to fade and her fingers loosening their stranglehold on the straps of her bag. She brushed a stray pigtail over her shoulder and rubbed at her own eyes as they turned the corner, crossing a central road and heading toward an alley way where they could take to a rooftop without alarming too many civilians.

At least that was the plan until Naruto spotted a familiar face and her eyes lit up in recognition.

"Oh," she took in a gulp of air to better yell her greeting, "Hey, hey, Iruka-sensei!"

Kakashi's heart sank in his chest as the girl thrust her hands into the air in a joyful wave. She trotted off down the road toward the newcomer.

The jōnin spared one yearning look toward the rooftops before his shoulders slumped in defeat and he trudged after the blond, ambling slowly in her wake.

He caught up to the pair just as they finished exchanging banal pleasantries.

"Hatake-san," the brunet man greeted, "good to see you, too."

"Ah," acknowledged Kakashi, inclining his head.

"I'm so sorry Iruka-sensei," babbled Naruto, tone anxious as she leaned forward apologetically, "I haven't had time to get your birthday present yet. I even remembered this year, I swear, ask Kakashi!"

The chūnin laughed loudly, raising a hand to rub at the back of his head, "I believe you, Naruto-chan, I promise! I don't need a present; though, it's sweet of you to remember."

"You deserve one," mumbled Naruto, "I'm sorry."
"Really, I don't." said the man with a smile, swinging out one arm to pull Naruto in close for a side-hug, ruffling her hair in a well-practiced gesture.

Kakashi checked his scowl, bewildered at the strange impulse that had overcome him.

"I have some time on my hands right now, and it is almost lunch time, care to join me?" Iruka let the girl go and looked at her expectantly.

"Yes," Naruto beamed, "Let's get ramen, right? And I'll pay because it's your birthday!"

Iruka hummed in good humor, "I suppose I can tolerate some ramen today, especially if it's with such wonderful company."

Naruto bounced on the tips of her toes eagerly, dancing ahead of them down the road. She stopped abruptly, and then suddenly she was back at Kakashi's side, clutching his arm and pulling him forward with a blinding smile, "And Kakashi can come too, right?"

Kakashi blinked in alarm, "I'd hate to intrude—"

"Sure, the more the merrier," Iruka shrugged nonchalantly.

"Yay!" Naruto released her captive and bounded ahead again as Iruka's attention truly turned to Kakashi for the first time.

Iruka's brown eyes widened as he noticed what the man was carrying. The chūnin's smile froze on his face, looking very forced.

Kakashi warily took a step back.

"Kakashi-san," Iruka drawled pleasantly, "Why do you have Naruto-chan's comforter?"

"I'm helping her move," the jōnin responded stiffly, not sure why the other man looked like he wanted to pull out his kunai and gauge out Kakashi's good eye.

"Move where?" Iruka said, forced-fake smile so tightly drawn on his face it looked painful.

"Why are you two just standing here, you snails, you're both so slow," interrupted Naruto, appearing between them, linking their arms together, and pulling the men forward. "There's ramen ahead, no time to dawdle, I'll have hair as gray as Kakashi's at the rate you guys travel."

"I'm not that old," protested the jōnin.

"He is that old," said Iruka grimly, eyes roving over the other man as if evaluating him as a threat for the first time in his life. "Kakashi-san says you're moving, Naruto-chan," the chūnin instructor prodded the girl, voice pleasant; ignoring the offended look Kakashi was giving him over the blonde's head.

"Yeah—this is it for today though," Naruto babbled, thinking that Iruka might be trying to volunteer his help. He was just awesome like that. She dragged the two men along with single-minded focus. "Most of my stuff is at Kakashi's already."

It was beginning to dawn on Kakashi that here was yet another person getting the wrong idea and Naruto's commentary was not helping. "It's just a temporary arrangement, until we figure out something better," said Kakashi, trying to mollify the chūnin.

Surprisingly, the academy teacher's expression only grew more thunderous at the words.
"Here we are!"

Kakashi started at Naruto's proclamation, realizing that yes, they had indeed reached the girl's favorite ramen stand. Naruto ducked under the noren, batting the fabric away and gleefully greeting the owners, leaving the two-men glaring each other into submission outside.

Well, it was more like the chūnin was attempting to murder the jōnin with a stare that was much more threatening than a chūnin should rightfully possess, and the jōnin was fighting the impulse to throw the comforter in his arms over the other man and shunshin away from danger.

In fact, Kakashi thought, there really isn't any need for me to stay, I should just go—

Iruka's teacher-senses kicked into overdrive and he stepped forward to grab Kakashi's arm and prevent the man's escape. "I hope you—"

Iruka's hiss was cut off by Naruto's cheerful cry of surprise and both men broke apart as the girl bounced back out of the stand, dragging her limp prey with her.

"Look who I found," crooned Naruto, holding up her captive by the back of his shirt, like a particularly pleased puppy presenting a freshly fetched stick.

"Hello," said Sai, blinking up at the two older men. Sai's natural apathetic expression was marred by the slightest frown as he picked up on the aggression radiating from brunet chūnin. "Have we interrupted something?" He politely inquired.

"No," said Naruto, before either man had a chance to answer, "but it's Iruka-Sensei's birthday and since you're already here you're going to join us for lunch."

"But I already finish—"

Naruto shook the uncooperative boy harshly in her hands. "Say, Happy Birthday, Iruka-Sensei."

Sai went limp.

Smart boy, thought Kakashi, internally wincing.

"Happy Birthday, Iruka-Sensei," said Sai amiably, plastering on the pseudo-smile that seemed to unnerve Iruka just as much as it unnerved everyone else to whom the boy was introduced.

"Ah," said Iruka, "Thank you, umm, shinobi-san—"

"Oh," Naruto's eyes widened, "How have you never met Sai?" She slapped a hand to her forehead, "I'm so rude, this is Sai-kun, Iruka-Sensei, he's a teammate of mine. Sai, this is Iruka-Sensei."

Naruto's eyes narrowed suddenly and she pulled the taller boy down by his ear and locked him in a threatening gaze. "He doesn't need a nick-name. Got it?"

"Ok," said Sai submissively, wincing at her tight hold on his ear. "It's nice to meet you, Iruka-Sensei."

Naruto smiled brightly as she let the cooperative boy loose.

Kakashi jumped into the conversation, seeing an opportunity to flee, "I really should go drop this stuff off at the apartment, Naruto, we shouldn't crowd the—"

"Oh, no you don't," Naruto's head swiveled toward the silver-haired jōnin, and she advanced on the other man, ripping the comforter from his grasp. If you go, you'll never come back. I know you. And
we have too much stuff to do this afternoon for me to waste half of it trying to chase you down. *I'll* take it to the apartment and *I'll* be right back. Sai, Sensei, make sure he doesn't leave." And without waiting for verbal acknowledgment of her orders, she was gone in a puff of smoke.

"Oh, I think that's just fine." Iruka said, lips pursing as he considered the copy ninja. "We should talk, Kakashi-san," he swept one arm in front of him, graciously gesturing for Kakashi to enter the stand first, posture implying that the invitation was mandatory.

Sai's black eyes darted between the two. "I truly have finished my meal, perhaps these are matters best discussed priv—"

"Take a seat, Sai," said Kakashi with a smile.

Sai sat.

Kakashi and Iruka sat down on either side of him.

Iruka ordered for himself and Naruto, and then voiced his concerns. "How long has Naruto been staying with you, Kakashi-san?"

The jōnin's eyelid drooped lazily as he placed his own order, winking at the waitress. He carefully blanked out his expression in response to Iruka's inquiry, mentally sulking in resentment at the snoopy chūnin's invasion into his private affairs.

"I don't see how that's any of your business, Iruka-san."

Iruka bristled.

Sai tensed as he continued to gaze at his empty bowl, deciding the best course of action would be to flee at the first gleam of metal.

"That's my little sister, you inconsiderate ass—"

"Ramen! Ramen!" Naruto's chant popped the aggressive atmosphere and both Kakashi and Iruka instantly reverted into relaxed postures as if nothing had happened.

"On its way Naruto-chan," Ayame greeted the blond as she handed out drinks.

"Budge over Kakashi, I want to sit in the middle," Naruto playfully pushed at the jōnin's shoulder. He acquiesced to her demands by sliding over to the next stool without objection. She happily settled in between the somber man and her socially stunted teammate, where she could control the flow of conversation (and murder Sai, if needed).

"What did I miss?" She looked around at the group.

"Nothing," Iruka said, shaking his head as he took a drink.

Kakashi hummed an affirmative sentiment and pretended to be busy looking at a menu.

Sai clasped his knees and concentrated on his empty bowl. "Nothing at all."

Naruto paused, *something is wrong here.* "So what, you all just stared at the wall?"

The three men nodded in agreement and Naruto narrowed her eyes, crossing her arms as she glared suspiciously at everyone and Kurama snickered in her head, contributing absolutely nothing to the situation but an inexplicable sense of amusement and superiority.
"I didn't know you were related to, Iruka-Sensei, Bimbo." Sai said blandly as Ayame began to set bowls on the table.

"What?" The blond blinked at the boy sitting next to her.

"Excuse me," said Iruka, voice cold, "But what did you just call her?"

An unfamiliar, unsettling chill ran up Sai's spine at the words.

Kakashi escaped from the ramen stand with a full stomach and a twenty minute lecture on the appropriate way to address individuals ringing in his ears. He pushed down a groan and rolled his shoulders back, subtly stretching in the sunlight. At least Naruto had paid for everyone's lunch.

He tried very hard not to glare as Naruto emerged from the stall behind him clinging to Iruka-Sensei's arm. Crazy man. That should go without saying, considering how much time the man voluntarily spent around small children. He stuffed his hands into his pockets and waited for Naruto to finish her conversation.

Sai stood listlessly next to the copy ninja, trying to discern the cause of the jōnin's uncharacteristic distaste for the bossy chūnin as well as the underlying meaning of the recently delivered lecture. Perhaps the idea was that it was rude to give nicknames based on sexual attributes—no, Sai shook his head, that couldn't be it. This Iruka must have been cautioning him not to use nicknames in front of unassessed strangers. Sai certainly hadn't done any reconnaissance on the affiliations of the Ichiraku proprietors. He'd remedy that immediately.

"Thank you, Iruka-sensei, for pointing out the deficiencies in my training," Sai said with a bow.

"Um, right—" Iruka said, eying the boy with concern, before his attention was recaptured by the girl babbling cheerfully at his side.

_They don't look like siblings_, thought the pale boy, comparing their features. _Perhaps Kakashi-senpai can spread some light on the matters._ "They are very close?" Sai posed cautiously, looking up at the copy ninja.

Kakashi spared the boy a glance, but didn't respond. Instead, he cleared his throat and raised an inquiring eyebrow when he had his target's attention.

"I thought you wanted to get groceries sometime today?" Kakashi drawled, and was rewarded when Naruto brightened at the words, flitting away from Iruka's side to Kakashi's, hooking her arm through his.

"Groceries?" Iruka strode up to join the pair.

Kakashi's eye narrowed, but Iruka didn't take the hint to *piss off*. Sai knew the look well, though, and was very relieved to finally understand that the situation was a dominance fight, and that Bimbo was somehow the territory. Now things were clearly in perspective.

Naruto smiled at her former academy teacher, blonde hair glowing in the afternoon sunlight, "Kakashi is going to teach me how to cook."

"Is he now?" Iruka considered the jōnin with suspicious eyes, mimicking the more experienced soldier's posture.

"That is an admirable endeavor," Sai commented, comfortable contributing to the conversation now
that he was aware of the social parameters, "with your skill in that area, there is only room for improvement."

"Hey," the blonde girl said with a pout, "I'm not an entirely awful cook."

"I don't know about that," Kakashi drawled fondly, gray eye softening, "the last time you tried to cook you did set my kitchen on fire."

Iruka's lips thinned. "Why were you cooking in Kakashi's kitchen, Naruto?"

"Because that's where I'm staying right now, Sensei, I told you earlier," explained the girl patiently, twisting around to face Iruka as Kakashi began walking toward the market district.

Iruka dogged their steps determinedly.

Sai trailed behind out of absent curiosity and a desire to see how the dominance dispute between the two would be resolved. This apparently was one of those situations that couldn't be resolved with pure social or physical superiority, or this Iruka-Sensei would not be so persistent in his confrontation. Sai was eager to learn the appropriate way to handle such a trial.

The brunet chūnin kept up his inquisition, "Why are you staying—"

Kakashi ignored the questions and let Naruto rattle off answers, letting his mind wander back to its most comfortable routine, searching for threats and guessing where the weapons were hidden on each passerby.

Ah, thought Sai, rubbing at his chin in understanding, Kakashi-senpai and Bimbo have redefined their relationship and Iruka-san is feeling slighted for not being made aware of the change, as someone who sees himself as a guardian to a younger charge.

"Hey, Sai-kun," Naruto nudged her shoulder against his lightly. "You ok?"

Sai noted that Iruka was scowling at the taciturn, silver-haired jōnin once more while Bimbo was gazing at him curiously, as if she expected him to contribute to the conversation.

"I'm glad for the changes in your relationship with Kakashi-senpai, lately," said Sai, reflecting on his conversation the other day with Bimbo's teammates, "Traitor and Ugly seem particularly happy for you as well. Although I'm not sure I understand the development of such relationships," continued Sai, oblivious to the fact that his companions were looking at him with stares that ranged from what-in-the-world-are-you-talking-about to if-you-don't-shut-up-right-now-I-will-acquaint-you-with-the-business-end-of-my-kunai, you-deranged-miscreant.

"Relationship?" Said Iruka, spitting the word out of his mouth as if it were something he'd like to step on and snuff into oblivion in the dirt.

"Yes," nodded Sai, "Ugly stated that the moments which Kakashi-senpai and Bimbo have been sharing lately are important to the student-teacher bonding process but when I indicated that I already understood the concept as the natural evolution of such a relationship as expounded upon in Icha-Icha Seducing Sensei, she disagreed, but could not explain how the behavior deviated from my text."

Sai turned a pleased gaze on the blonde girl next to him. "I'm glad my understanding was correct, though." It is exciting to be able to classify the social developments I am encountering without outside aide, thought Sai, proud of his accomplishment.

Naruto's eyes were as wide as saucers.
Kakashi had long since learned that the best way to deal with Sai was to tune him out, pretend he was acting normally, and just nod and occasionally say 'yes.' Therefore, the only warning that he had that disaster was imminent was Naruto's grip tightening on his sleeve and the sudden spike of killing intent emanating from the normally docile academy teacher.

Kakashi stopped walking and turned slowly to face the other man.

Iruka's feet were firmly planted in the dirt road, arms crossed, eyes burning in accusation. He clearly expected some sort of reaction from the copy ninja, but, other than being vaguely aware that Sai had been speaking, Kakashi hadn't the slightest clue what the last nonsense words were which escaped the boy's mouth.

"Yes?" Kakashi offered hesitantly.

"Naruto," Iruka's face grew even darker, "Go take your friend shopping. We'll catch up."

Ah, thought Kakashi, obviously not the right answer.

Sai looked to Naruto, expecting the girl to grab his arm and drag him 'shopping,' but Naruto had unexpectedly stilled. Her bright blue eyes were the only parts of her body that moved, darting frantically between the two men.

It took Iruka a few seconds to realize that his words weren't automatically heeded. He frowned at the girl. "Naruto," he said, tone hinting at his impatience.

Naruto straightened a little, eyes flickering to Kakashi. She took a deep breath, "Why?"

"What?" Iruka blinked, so taken aback at her question that his posture loosened a bit.

"I mean," Naruto elaborated, "why do you want me to leave?" She grabbed one of her pigtails, pulling it over her shoulder so her fingers could thread through it. She was uncomfortable with getting in between Iruka and Kakashi like this, but felt it was necessary to remind the parties that she wasn't a child who could simply be shooed away from a conversation at their pleasure.

"I—" the academy teacher looked completely flummoxed that she would question him like this. However, the retort on the tip of his tongue, that Naruto should obey the orders of her superiors, no longer carried any weight. Iruka felt out-of-his-depth, so abruptly faced with Naruto's growth. His face twisted unpleasantly with hurt and he took a step back.

"I'm sorry," Naruto's eyes scrunched up and she looked at the floor, voice soft, "It's just, you sound angry at Kakashi, but he's not done anything wrong."

Sai watched the unfolding scene in fascination.

Kakashi cleared his throat when he realized that neither Iruka nor Naruto could figure out a way to resolve things.

Naruto's blue eyes flew up to his own single gray one and he tilted his head toward the road. "Its fine, Naru-chan, you'll do me a favor if you get started on the shopping. If Iruka-san has something that he wants to get off his chest, I'm sure I'll live."

Blue eyes peered up at him sincerely, "You'll come find me, right? I'm not going to have to go hunt you down in a training field somewhere?"

Somewhat despairingly, Kakashi realized he'd completely backed himself into a corner on this one.
"I'll find you," he gave his word, trying not to sound too pained about having to do it.

Naruto nodded once, satisfied, and grabbed Sai by the back of his neck and steered him down the road. "Come on, you can help me figure out what I'm going to need for dinner tonight."

"Aside from a fire-extinguisher?" Sai asked curiously.

"Shut up!" Screeched a flustered Naruto, bopping him over the head.

Iruka and Kakashi watched the two squabble as they meandered out of hearing distance.

Kakashi was the first to look back. He immediately wished he hadn't; he felt incredibly uncomfortable upon seeing the open, longing look on Iruka's face.

A second later, the chūnin blinked, and it was gone, the man's face once more a mask of professionalism.

Kakashi said a mental prayer of thanks, he didn't have the training or the natural skills to play emotional support in this situation.

"When did she grow up?" Iruka sighed, trying to reorganize his thoughts, rubbing at his forehead. His gaze slid toward the copy ninja, "She may be an adult now, but that isn't any excuse for your behavior." Iruka's voice gained strength as he turned to completely face the older man, "What in the world has possessed you?"

Kakashi's eye widened at the heat in the other man's voice. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about, Umino-san."

The chūnin narrowed his eyes, not buying the jōnin's deflections for a second. "Oh you know exactly what I'm talking about; I thought I was just hearing exaggerated gossip, but then I saw you and Naruto in the market today and—"

Kakashi held up a single hand to rebuff the man's accusations. "It's really not what you think, nothing is happening," the copy ninja said stiffly.

"Nothing is happening," Iruka repeated flatly, lips pressed thin in displeasure.

"Aa," agreed Kakashi, nodding his head.

Iruka's posture conveyed his disbelief, but his ponytail bobbed as he jerked in surprise at something that caught his eye over Kakashi's shoulder.

Kakashi didn't react; he had a pretty good idea of what caught the teacher's attention.

Iruka's eye twitched. "Why are Konohamaru-kun and his friends posing as really bad mannequins in the shop window behind you?"

Kakashi shrugged, "I have no idea, but they've been following Naru-chan all day."

Iruka rubbed a tired hand over his face. "I'll deal with it." The chūnin marched off, muttering under his breath about teenagers and hormones.

Kakashi refrained from helpfully informing the other man that no one was asking him to 'deal with it.' Kakashi had noticed the man was a bit of a martinet. He had no idea how Iruka and Naruto had originally bonded actually, he should probably ask some day.
The copy ninja continued down the road to catch up with Naruto, trying to ignore the fact that he was truly dreading the whole cooking episode into which the girl had cajoled him into participating. It wasn't that he was too lazy to show her how to cook; rather, it was that it felt so strange going through the motions of something he hadn't done in so long.

After the Kyūbi attack, he found himself surviving mostly off of take-out, as he couldn't cook without recalling who'd taught him the recipes. It was the same with fighting, using moves that hadn't been good enough to save the lives of the ones who'd drilled the motions into him. However, he couldn't function successfully in his job by pushing aside the fighting skills Minato-sensei had taught. It was much easier to get away with forgetting Kushina's lessons, pushing them back to the recesses of his mind and locking them away—until her hyper daughter barged into his life. And he really didn't have the heart to tell the younger girl no, because she deserved to have these memories too, even if all he could provide was a faint echo of the passion with which Kushina had enthused her cooking.

Cooking for others had been one of the ways Kushina showed people she loved them. Despite what people thought, Kakashi generally didn't enjoy subjecting himself to painful things. It was going to hurt, teaching Naruto to cook. But he didn't see a way around it.

He found the blond and her brunet companion, both dubiously staring at a melon in the girl's hands. "Did it do something wrong?" Kakashi asked, sounding bored.

Naruto started and flicked her blue eyes up at him. "What?"

"The melon," Kakashi inclined his head, "You're looking at it as if it's been particularly disobedient."

Naruto frowned, "I want one, but we don't know how to tell if the fruit is ripe or not."

Sai and Naruto both looked up at Kakashi earnestly, as if for instructions.

The copy ninja hesitated. "Is there mold on it?"

Naruto turned the melon over in her hands. "No?"

"There's no mold on my melons," scoffed the middle-aged man tending the cluster of fruit stalls, wiping his hands on his apron and coming over to join the conversation.

Naruto greeted him with a charming smile, "How do you tell which ones are the best, shop-keeper-san?"

The man obligingly took the melon and began to talk about bruising and bounciness and the most perfect-shade of yellow-green that meant the melon was the epitome of melon-ness. Kakashi was wondering if he could escape to the bookstore around the corner when the day took yet another turn for the worse.

"ETERNAL RIVAL!," came the greeting in a deep booming voice.

Kakashi was expecting the hard slap to the back, but it still sent him stumbling forward a few steps, jostling Naruto and the melon stand.

The melon owner tutted anxiously and quickly steadied the wobbling table.

"What brings you to the market on this glorious fine day, my friend?" Gai bellowed, white teeth gleaming as he addressed the gathered ninja, ever-present minion Lee bouncing eagerly at his side.
Naruto held out her melon. "We're shopping," she said flatly, in a tone that indicated this should have been obvious.

"Ah," Gai nodded seriously, "so you are my blossoming flower."

Naruto blanched and dropped the melon, stepping back and practically into Kakashi, who, now that there were five ninja and an antsy civilian in the space between fruit stalls, had nowhere else to move.

Lee caught it smoothly, "What a lovely fruit, Naruto-san," he said, returning it to the girl, who took it with a mumbled thanks. "What were you planning to do with it?"

Naruto looked quizzically at Sai (because craning her neck to look up at Kakashi would be too difficult in her current position); unfortunately Sai just gazed back blankly. "I was going to," she hesitated, *is this a trick question?, "eat it?"

"What a youthful thing to do with such an item!" Crowed Gai. "We shall assist, only the best melons should be eaten to obtain optimum vitality and health. Rival, I challenge you to a contest in picking the most perfect melons out for our comrades' consumption." Gai waved a hand outward, as if bestowing a gentlemanly favor, "come now, you pick first."

Kakashi took the melon from Naruto's hand and held it out to Gai, "This one's good."

Gai took it and scrutinized it carefully, bringing a hand to his chin in thought. Then he clutched it dramatically, "It is indeed such a perfect melon, I will be hard pressed to find its equal, but hope is not yet lost."

And with that, Gai left the selected melon in Lee's care and began rummaging through the melon bins.

"Hey," said the shop keeper, nervously, "stop that, you're going to bruise them."

Gai was nonplussed, "Hush my good shopkeeper, I'm earnestly engaged in a task of utmost importance." He held up a melon to the light. "No this will not do at all," he shook his head disdainfully and tossed it to the side.

"You're damaging my product," the man complained, hastily picking the discarded melon up from the dirt and brushing it off on his apron.

"You really should stop," Naruto said, trying to help, "it's just, searching through all these bins is going to take a while, and I have to finish collecting everything I need for dinner tonight."

"You are quite right, youthful maiden," Gai acknowledged from where he was pawing through some musk melons. "Lee-kun, start searching the bins next door. It will take a while if we're going to search the entire market and do this properly."

"Right away, Gai-sensei!" Lee beamed, thrilled to have been entrusted with aiding his sensei in this challenge.

"What," said the shop keeper, blinking in bewilderment, "No, get back here you!" He chased after Gai's minion fervently.

Kakashi wondered if he should argue that was cheating and if he could set Sai to looking through the fruit bins. Then he reminded himself that Sai had been looking at the melons as if they were an alien species not five minutes ago. And that caving to Gai's more ridiculous challenges was never a good
idea.

Naruto looked at the scene with resignation, "I'm going to go get the rest of the ingredients for dinner."

Kakashi nodded, "I'll come too—"

"No," Naruto sniffed, putting a hand against his chest and pushing him back, "he's your friend; you stay here and make sure he doesn't tear the market apart in his search for the perfect melon."

"Maa," Kakashi protested, "there's not a lot you can do to rein him in when he gets wound up about something like this."

As if to illustrate Kakashi's words, a flying melon struck a passing civilian in the head, and the man dropped like a brick.

Sai shifted uncomfortably, "I do believe Tsunade-sama made an edict that this behavior was no longer to endanger civilians."

"Right." Kakashi said weakly, recalling the particular wording of that rule, and Tsunade's promise of retribution should Kakashi fail to contain the Green Beast's challenges. Damnit. He just knew somehow this was all going to get blamed on him. He looked at the downed civilian contemplatively and relaxed when he saw the rise and fall of the man's chest. Still breathing, no harm done.

"Can't you just tell him he wins, you know, just forfeit," Naruto suggested, scratching at the back of her head.

Kakashi gave her a look that implied she was shamefully naïve in all things Gai and Green.

Naruto sighed, "Why don't you finish buying the fruit. We still need umeboshi. I'll go get the chicken."

Sai perked up, "Then I shall take my leave—"

"Oh no you don't," said Naruto, for the tenth time that day, "you're going to go find me potato starch, whatever that is." She counted out some money and pressed it into Sai's hands.

"I do not understand why I am obligated to assist you in your shopping endeavors," protested the brunet, in a tone that almost could be considered grumpy.

"It's because I know this is somehow your entire fault," retorted Naruto, pushing Sai in what she hoped was the right direction. "And it's only polite."

"How much of this 'potato starch' do you require?" Sai asked, obligingly moving forward.

"I dunno," Naruto shrugged as she walked along, leaving Kakashi behind to deal with his deranged peer. "Just get a couple pounds of it and meet me back at the fruit stalls, I bet Kakashi will still be there."

Sai nodded in acquiescence as Naruto ducked into a butcher store to get chicken. She placed an order for four chicken thighs with a homely, buxom woman manning the counter. She was asked to wait a few minutes and so retreated to a wall, leaning against it and humming as she looked through the bag of items she'd been able to collect prior to Gai's interruption of her shopping trip.

She felt another person enter the shop and take up a position next to her, but she didn't look up to see
who it was until the stranger cleared his throat.

Naruto started, "Oh Shino-kun," she said with a smile, "I didn't see you there."

Naruto always felt awkward talking to Shino; it was so hard to tell what he was thinking with his high collars and dark glasses obscuring all the telling features of his face. But really, it wasn't like Naruto had that much ground to complain on, she was, err, pre-dating (is that a word?) a man who wore masks. Every day.

"You usually don't." Shino dipped his head.

Naruto opened her mouth and then closed it again, sheepishly. Is he joking? I can't tell if he's joking or seriously put out. "Was there something you needed," she weakly asked, "Not that it isn't good to see you—"

"I wanted to inquire about your status," Shino said, uncharacteristically interrupting Naruto's babbling rather than letting her talk herself out of breath.

Naruto wrinkled her nose in confusion, "my status?"

"Yes," Shino shifted uncomfortably, "I have been made aware that your living arrangements have become uninhabitable. I wished to make sure you have adequate accommodations."

"Oh," Naruto brightened, "You must have been talking with Kurenai-san then, have you?"

Shino hesitated, "In a manner of speaking." He paused for a moment and then continued. "I have been working through some training exercises for her lately."

"She's so nice," beamed Naruto, "you're so lucky she was your sensei."

Shino said nothing.

"It's all good though really, I'm staying with Kakashi for a while until the damage is fixed."

"My deepest apologies for the trouble," Shino murmured. "Please let me know if I can assist you in the meantime."

"That's really sweet," said Naruto, somewhat distracted as the butcher called her name and waved a brown package in the air that Naruto assumed must be her order. "But everything is fine, and you shouldn't put yourself out like that. It's not like it's anybody's fault or anything, sometimes old buildings just have these problems."

Shino gave a very quiet hum. But that might just have been his bugs.

Meanwhile, back in the market, Kakashi idly noted that the situation was rapidly approaching the point where more fruit was on the ground than actually in the stalls. He had unwittingly made things worse by buying Naruto's requested bag of dried plums, because that had spurred Gai on to enlarging the parameters of the challenge to include other types of fruit. Now Kakashi was holding several bags of random types of fruit which he'd chosen as prime specimens of their species and standing awkwardly to the side as various vendors tried to impede the progress of the Green Beast of Konoha and his prize student. They did not succeed where many valiant ninja that had come before them failed; but their passionate efforts were noted, nonetheless.

Kakashi assured everyone that they would be reimbursed for the product no matter the outcome of this fiasco, but that didn't seem to soothe all the ruffled feathers of the irritated shoppers and shop
keepers who'd become involved in the mess. Kakashi was actually quite serious about the reimbursement. Seven months into her reign of terror, Tsunade had taken stock of the situation and decided that 10% of both Gai's and Kakashi's earnings would be set aside to pay for the inevitable damage caused by such challenges. Gai had actually been very moderate in his activities for a while now, so the fund should contain enough to cover this particular stunt.

Kakashi bravely stood his ground as a tall woman who'd been trying to sell various lemons gave Kakashi the stinkeye and watched him disapprovingly from across the way with crossed arms.

Kakashi considered himself lucky that he'd managed to contain the damage to a single row of fruit stalls, and that Gai hadn't yet thought of expanding the search down the lane either way, where other vendors selling vegetables and meats and other edibles were beginning to warily take up defensive stances in front of their stalls and store fronts, armed with brooms and spatulas and ladles.

"There he is!" A loud familiar, female cry reached his ears.

The copy ninja mentally cringed, he recognized that voice. Slowly, he turned around, and, sure enough, Mr. and Mrs. Walrus were waddling down the street, hanging off of the arm of a Hyūga with the symbol of the military police proudly sewn onto the shoulder of his long-sleeved shirt.

Oh boy, Kakashi thought with sarcastic delight, just who he wanted to deal with right now.

"That's the man who broke into my building and pushed me down the stairs," accused the woman dramatically, shaking her finger at Kakashi as her husband nodded his agreement. She was fully dressed now, though Kakashi didn't think that was much of an improvement. She sniffed, "He was with that blonde wench I was telling you about, the really loud one."

Kakashi couldn't keep his eye from twitching. He'd done no such thing. And Naruto was not a 'wench.' She'd done nothing but be patient with this harpy.

Unfortunately, Kakashi had already had some unfavorable run-ins with this particular officer, and he already knew in whose favor the biased man would be ruling. Really, Kakashi thought, rallying himself for the verbal altercation, some people just don't see the humor in the art of evading service. After all, you couldn't actually be summoned to court if they could never find you to serve the summons.

"Hatake-san," the officer greeted the copy ninja, "This woman has filed a complaint of—"

Whatever the brunet officer was going to say was interrupted as a group of teenagers rushed by in a whirlwind, bumping into the officer with a rushed, "sorry officer-san" as they fled down the aisles.

"What the—?" The Hyūga's pale eyes scrunch in confusion as Iruka came barreling down the road after the trio.

"You heathens get back here, I'm not done—" the academy teacher yelped in surprise as he stepped on one of the many melons littering the walkways, tripping and slipping in the juice and crashing into a few wooden stalls, taking them down to the ground from the force accumulated in the speed of his chase.

"Hey now!" Yelled the middle-aged shop-keeper who'd been the original victim of Gai's challenge, "You're going to have to pay for those stalls, I built them by hand!" Despite his scolding, the man helped pull the academy teacher to his feet.

"I'm so sorry," babbled Iruka, "but I've got to deal with my kids first." And with that, Iruka's head seemed to grow three sizes as he screamed down the street, "Konohamaru!"
The trio had stopped at the academy teacher's fall, presumably to take glee in the extent of the carnage, and quickly collected themselves with an exuberant chorus of "oh shit!s" and spun around a corner into an alley.

"What is going on here?" Demanded the Military Police Chief, finally pulling his focus away from the 'injured' landlords to take in the chaotic state of the street in which he was standing.

"Nothing good," muttered Naruto's landlady.

"Not now!" Snarled Iruka, brushing off the officer's hand as it reached out to catch his arm. He raced after his prey without a single deferential look back to the officer's demands to halt and report.

Kakashi felt like snickering, but didn't. The military policeman whirled on him, narrowing his eyes at the copy ninja as if this was all his fault anyway, "You find this funny, Hatake-san?"

"Rival!" Yelled Gai, bounding into the clearing with perfect timing, thrusting a bag of fruit into Kakashi's nonplussed face. "I have found the most perfect specimens, let us compare our treasures and determine the victor with these wonderful salesmen as judges!" Gai thrust out his arm to indicate their audience, which now included an entire street of unhappy vendors, a military police officer, and the landlords of the year.

"Is that what this is all about?" Snapped Officer-san, crossing his arms and attempting to look menacing. "Is this yet another one of your ridiculous challenges that's gone too far?" He sounded very unimpressed.

Kakashi personally thought that was tragic, because this was by far the biggest mess Gai's challenges had orchestrated in at least half a year. It deserved some appreciation.

"They've ruined all my plums!" Cried an unknown voice from the middle of the crowd, others beginning to add pipe up now that the first person had bravely spoken.

"I was promised payment for this mess," added the lemon seller, pursing her lips and butting into the conversation.

The floodgates opened, and the numerous offended civilians rushed forward, encroaching on the officer. Hyūga-san looked harried, but was determinedly focused on jotting every complaint down in his little notebook like a good, dutiful officer should. Gai appeared to be very distressed that not everyone had enjoyed his challenge as much as he had. Both he and Lee were trying to assure the "good people" that they would repair the damage, or walk up and down the street on their hands seven hundred and fifty times.

The good people really weren't fans of the latter option.

Kakashi blinked as he saw Konohamaru and his friends trying to weave through the crowd and make their way to the other side of the street.

"Do you see him?" Konohamaru hissed, as the three slipped under the arm of a large man waving a rolling pin and speaking in a heavy accent.

"No—" Moegi started to say, and then her eyes widened as she saw Iruka's face rounding the corner, "Yes, he's a dozen yards behind us." She pulled the boys to the ground and they began to dog-crawl underneath the irate mob.

Iruka's eyes scanned the masses looking for his miscreants. He couldn't see them, but his teachersense must have been telling him that they were nearby, because he didn't leave the street.
Kakashi amused himself by continuing to watch the unfolding chaos.

"We need a distraction," hissed Moegi, wincing as her hand got stepped on by a spindly woman too busy wringing her hands in her apron to watch where she was walking.

"Now would be a good time to use that new technique," Konohamaru bit out, looking pointedly at Udon.

Kakashi focused on the children, getting ready to move and contain any damage that might be unleashed by an unpracticed jutsu in a crowded public arena. Surely the three were old enough to know better than to do something too stupid…right?

Udon secured his glasses, "but I've not tried it yet, I don't know how much chakra—"

"Just do it!" Barked Konohamaru, panicking as he realized that Iruka had seen them and was heading their way.

Udon's fingers came together in the start of a summoning sequence—

"I have returned with two bags of potato starch, Hatake-san," said Sai, smiling his non-smile and looking at Kakashi expectantly.

Kakashi blinked, startled at the boy's sudden appearance and looked away from the trio for just a second—

And then suddenly his vision was filled with hundreds of white feathers.

It really was amazing how easily civilians could become frightened, because with the inexplicable appearance of two dozen chickens randomly popping into existence in the middle of a mob, most of the (presumably) rational men and women ran away screaming as if their lives were in imminent danger, trampling people and melons and stalls in their haste.

A flying melon took out one of the bags of potato starch, exploding the paper container and covering Sai in a thick powder of test. A reflexive replacement jutsu with Lee was all that saved Kakashi from the same fate.

"I have returned with one bag of potato starch, Kakashi-san," said Sai, not missing a beat, tucking the remaining bag protectively under his arm.

Lee gave a weak sneeze, expelling a cloud of starch in the air, looking confused.

Instead of covering their escape, the summoning technique cleared out the area swiftly, leaving the only occupants of the street a tense military police office, an irritated academy teacher, three baffled teenage ninja, two taijutsu experts, and an elite assassin.

Oh, and two dozen chickens milling about in confusion, but beginning to calm down now that most of the peasants had fled.

"Gotcha," said Iruka, sounding smug as he grabbed the collars on Konohamaru's and Moegi's shirts. Apparently Udon could be trusted not to escape the scene of the crime, even though he couldn't be trusted not to summon a horde of ninja chickens in the middle of a mob.

"You three!" Hissed the military police officer, leveling his arm and pointing at the trio with the tip of his pen. "What is the meaning of all this mess, huh? Do you know how much damage has been done here?" The officer waved his arm to the totally trashed street. "This is all going to have to be paid for,
and Tsunade-sama won't be letting you off easy this time with so many witnesses."

Iruka blinked, looking a little upset that the officer was depriving him of his hard-earned lecture.

Kakashi began to slip away, but the police officer's whistle stopped him short.

"And where do you think you're going?" Yelled the officer. "I'm placing everyone here," and the angry man began pointing randomly at anything that moved, "under arrest. We're all going to see the Hokage, no one can leave."

"I believe I'm going home," countered Kakashi shortly, not in a mood to humor the flustered Hyūga. He began to walk down the street, turning the corner into a blissfully unaffected area from the afternoon's traumatic events.

The officer and his arrestees followed him. And the chickens, apparently deciding that Udon was the head of the flock, tagged along too.

"Umm," Udon started to speak up tentatively, "may I release the chickens, officer-san?"

"No," hissed the officer, "everyone here is under arrest."

The trio exchanged looks which conveying they doubted the officer's mental stability. Lee and Sai would have exchanged dubious glances, if Sai had known that was the appropriate social thing to do in this scenario and Lee wasn't distracted by trying to rub potato starch out of his eyes.

"I don't think so," said Kakashi, following Naruto's trail toward the meat vendors.

"Come now rival," coaxed Gai, glancing between the chief's rapidly purpling face and the set of Kakashi's shoulders, "it's not very youthful to buck the authority of those doing their best to maintain the safety and order of the village."

Iruka was clearly too embarrassed at being officially put under arrest to offer any input on this scenario.

"You will be accompanying me whether you like it or not," and the officer made a very unwise decision to lunge at Kakashi with a pair of handcuffs as they passed a storefront.

Kakashi didn't know how the officer thought that was going to be successful, he easily side-stepped the man, who went stumbling forward, propelled by his own momentum.

And then the man tripped on an outstretched foot protruding from under the closest store's awning.

The officer pitched forward into a securely closed barrel, sending both man and barrel sprawling. The barrel (which was not as sturdy as it looked) smashed into several pieces, instantly releasing a foul odor in the air.

The ninja took a large step backward in unison, although the chickens didn't appear to be too bothered.

"Oops," came a deep silky drawl, as the owner of the foot stepped forward into the light, a female companion following him blinking into the sunlight.

Sasuke's dark eyes glinted in satisfaction.

"Oh god," said Sakura with a grimace, pulling up her shirt to cover her mouth, "what is that smell?" She executed a basic suiton effortlessly, water washing over the store front and drenching the already
soaked military police chief. The man spluttered as he tried to push his long hair out of his face. The contents of the barrel were washed into the nearest sewer drains, but the foul stench remained.

Kakashi allowed himself to feel a small flash of pride at Sasuke's exhibition of a normal human behavior.

"Eew," hissed Sakura, stumbling back a few steps, putting more distance between here and the military police chief, "why does it still smell!"

The barrels' owner hurried out front at the sounds of the crash. "That was my kusaya," whaled the man, "that brine has been in my family for a century. Who is at fault for this, who will pay for this mess?"

"You're under arrest!" Cried the now hysterical police officer, pointing at the large group of ninja watching with wide eyes. "You're all under arrest!"

Sasuke arched an eyebrow elegantly, holding out a clear plastic bag. "I was buying tomatoes" he said simply, as if that should explain the entirety of the situation.

The officer wordlessly snarled at the Uchiha and scrambled to his feet.

It was at that time that Kakashi heard a soothing familiar voice approaching, babbling innocently away to a companion.

"—It's really fine, Shino-kun, I don't need you to walk me—"

"And you!" Howled the police officer, whirling from Sasuke to point at the startled blond who had just walked up to the scene. "You are especially under arrest!"

Naruto's large blue eyes blinked wide open and her mouth gaped, "…What?" She eventually asked, shoulders slumping sadly.

Shino cleared his throat. "Perhaps I may take your bags home for you after all, Naruto-san?"

"—And that's why we can't have nice things," finished Naruto, pounding a clenched fist into her palm and nodding decisively.

Tsunade's face rested in her hands. She said nothing for a full minute, until Naruto began to fidget.

"Can we go home now?" Naruto asked, wrinkling her nose, "because he really does need a bath, believe it." She pointed rudely at the Hyūga, whose eye twitched in response.

Tsunade clearly believed she was the only one entitled to develop an eye-twitch from stress at this point. She sat back in her chair and crossed her arms. "You're all fired." She finally declared decisively.

"Not possible," Shizune shot down, used to nixing the older woman's more impractical impulsive solutions.

"Well, then," said the village leader snarkily, "they're all on probation."

"I'm already on probation," contributed Sasuke, sounding bored.

"Technically, it's secret probation," added Sakura thoughtfully. Military punishments weren't generally publicized to civilians.
"Then you're on fucking-double-secret probation," snapped the Hokage, raising her head and pounding the desk with a fist, stirring feathers into the air. She batted them away impatiently, "Damnit. Somebody do something about the god-damn chickens!"

Udon complied hastily, releasing his squawking summons.

"Excuse me?" Asked Tsunade, narrowing her eyes as she caught Sasuke muttering something under his breath.

Iruka took a step away from the Uchiha, not wanting to get hit if anything was thrown in his general direction. Sakura bit her lip but bravely stood her ground.

Sasuke straightened from the wall, "I said this whole situation was ridiculous."

"Well, on that, we can agree," said Tsunade with a sniff. "Who would you hold at fault in this scenario, Sasuke-kun?"

Sasuke tensed defensively at her familiarity, but responded to the bait, "The police chief is to blame. His utter incompetence in this situation exacerbated the problem, increased the damage instead of containing it, and wasted military resources."

"Hey now—," the police chief perked up, feeling cornered and a sudden need to take up apologetics.

"Shut up," Tsunade said, tapping her fingers against her desk, her eyes not leaving Sasuke's. "You think you could do better then, Sasuke-kun?"

"I know I could," said Sasuke, with predictable arrogance.

Sakura's shoulders slumped and Kakashi gave her an understanding, sympathetic look. The boy'd walked right into this one.

"Excellent," beamed Tsunade. "Congratulations, you're the new military police chief."

Sasuke blinked, looking completely taken aback for once in his life. "What?" He asked eloquently.

Tsunade frowned thoughtfully, "I probably shouldn't say congratulations, its technically your punishment for today's events, after all."

"That's my job," protested the Hyūga, "You can't give my job to him, he's a child, and I'm in an elected position."

Tsunade sniffed disdainfully, "You see, that right there is why you're not fit to hold that job. The military police chief should know that his position can be revoked for misconduct by the Hokage. He's only elected by the rest of the military officers to generally relieve the Hokage from having to personally oversee that aspect of the village too."

"I'm elected!" Squeaked the man.

"You're the head of the military police," Tsunade said slowly, as if speaking to a particularly dull child. Or the Village Council.

"Shizune-chan," directed Tsunade, "get Sasuke-kun some of the files he's going to need to get started. Since he believes that the current department is so incompetent, he'll need to completely overhaul the place."

"Come along, Sasuke-kun," said Shizune cheerfully, tugging on the Uchiha's sleeve and dragging
the boy from the room.

Tsunade looked quite pleased with herself.

"Umm, Shishou," Sakura began hesitantly, looking in the direction the pair had disappeared with concern.

"Of course," Tsunade said, slapping a hand to her forehead exaggeratedly. "an administrative assistant would be very helpful in this scenario. What a wonderful thing you've got so much experience in that field, Sakura-chan." The Hokage waved the girl toward the door, "Off you go."

Sakura bowed politely to the room and bolted.

Tsunade hummed contentedly, until she realized her office was still full of ninja staring at her with various levels of expectation and confusion (and in one case, horror).

"Why are you still here?" The blonde woman scowled at the former military police chief. "Go take a bath. Seriously. You smell like shit and you're stinking up the office, get out."

The man left dazedly.

Kakashi, for the first time, could somewhat sympathize with the man. He often left Tsunade's office like that too. Actually, come to think of it, he often left Naruto feeling like that too. Maybe it was just an effect Hokage were supposed to have on their subordinates. He pondered that for a minute.

Tsunade looked at Konohamaru and his friends in dismay, "What am I going to do with you three? What even started this?"

Konohamaru straightened, deciding to be bold. "We were on a mission from Kami-urk!"

Moegi strangled him with his scarf.

"Right," Tsunade muttered, looking skeptical. "Well, then, I expect Iruka-san to escort you back to the Academy, since you're acting like Academy students, and supervise you as you write 100 lines of 'The only Kami from whom I accept missions is Tsunade-sama,' clear?"

"As mud," muttered Konohamaru, scuffing the floor with his sandal.

"What was that?" Tsunade said, voice tight.

"I said 'yes ma'am!'" Konohamaru quickly self-corrected as Iruka grabbed him by the shoulder and began to corral the three teens to the door.

"That's what I thought you said," purred Tsunade smugly.

The academy teacher hesitated in the doorframe, "My own punishment, Hokage-sama?" He asked bravely, not wanting to be hypocritical. If he taught his students that they should face the consequences of their own actions, he too should do so, even when the damage he'd caused had been unintentional.

"Supervising them," said Tsunade, rolling her eyes.

Iruka flinched. "Right." He'd forgotten how difficult simply doing that would be.

Tsunade turned her attention to the Green Beast and his prized student with a frown. Before she even opened her mouth, Gai cut in, sounding contrite.
"Forgive us our rash behavior, Hokage-sama," Gai said sincerely, "My student and I will personally see to it that the market is restored to its former glory by dawn tomorrow, or we will purchase and hand-deliver 100 fruit baskets to village orphans."

"You do that," Tsunade said mildly.

"We accept your judgment, most esteemed Hokage-sama," Gai bowed to the woman and Lee mimicked him, before they left through the window.

Tsunade gave a sigh to her mostly empty office, "Why don't you two just go home," she said with a shrug, sounding tired.

"Really?" Naruto perked up hopefully.

Tsunade gave a grim laugh, "for once it sounds like you didn't do anything wrong, I'm told I should reward good behavior." She waved the pair off and started restacking the papers on her desk that had been scrambled around by tiny chicken feet. She blew her bangs out of her face with a puff of air, frustrated. She bet the Mizukage had never had her desk messed up by ninja chickens.

A soft cough drew her attention to the back of the room, where Sai stood at attention, covered in, well, she supposed it was potato starch. "Oh," said Tsunade, she'd forgotten he was there.

"What are your orders, Hokage-sama," asked the boy politely.

Tsunade opened her mouth to send him home too, and then snapped it shut when she realized that Shizune was nowhere to be seen, and with firing the military police chief, she'd created a whole bunch of paperwork that needed to be completed immediately. It was going to be a long night.

She leaned forward and started ticking items off on her fingers as Sai cocked his head attentively. She would never admit that Danzo had been on to anything, but she sure did wish more of her subordinates reacted to her orders like this one kid, "I need six bottles of junmai, and not the cheap stuff either. You'll need to smuggle it up here, I suggest burying the bottles in a potted plant—"

Naruto was pleased to find all her groceries neatly packed away in their proper places when they got back to the apartment.

"What a day," murmured Kakashi, feeling tired and relieved to be home and away from all those people.

Naruto hummed, "But just think, you didn't pull out your book once."

Kakashi paused in the midst of unzipping his jōnin vest. He supposed he hadn't at that. Huh.

Naruto bustled about the kitchen, pulling out the ingredients they'd need for dinner and laying them out on the table and kitchen counters.

"That was nice of Shino-kun to take the groceries home," commented Kakashi as he pawed through the unusually full basket of fruit on the counter.

"Yes it was," said Naruto, happily starting up the rice cooker. "He was unusually nice today, I think he said more to me than he ever has."

Kakashi considered that information. "Why so suddenly loquacious?"

Naruto gave him a weird look as she held the bag of rice. "What?"
"Talkative." Kakashi clarified.

"Oh," Naruto rolled her eyes, "Why didn't you just say that in the first place. I dunno, I think Kurenai told him about my apartment situation and he felt bad about it or something."

Something was tickling at the back of his mind, an idea or a theory that was just beginning to form, but it got swept to the side when Naruto's face popped in front of his, begging for instructions on how to prepare the chicken.

Kakashi let the eager blond pull him to his feet and he shuffled into the kitchen putting on a show of reluctance. But as he began to walk her through the familiar motions, he found himself relaxing and enjoying the activity more than he anticipated. She was the antithesis of sorrow, and it was next to impossible to drown himself in feelings of remorse when she was so genuinely thrilled just to be spending this time with him and learning to do something new.

"So what do you do next?" Asked Naruto, still bubbly and energetic after all the chaos of the day.

"We're going to marinate the chicken," said Kakashi, reaching around Naruto for the bowl as she reached for the ginger. She put the ginger in the bowl with the sake and waited for Kakashi to add the soy sauce. He peered over her shoulder as Naruto dropped the bite-size chicken pieces in the bowl.

She took a step back when done, but didn't realize Kakashi was so close to her in the small kitchen and backed into him.

"Sorry," she apologized.

"It's fine," he said dismissively, automatically steadying her by placing a hand on her waist.

"Why are you holding my hair?" She asked, finally realizing that Kakashi had been pulling her hair back with his right hand and still hadn't let go.

"I'm keeping it from falling in the marinade," he said dryly, giving the coils wrapped loosely around his wrist a teasing tug.

Naruto laughed and twisted her head about as best she could, smiling brightly, "What's next?"

This wasn't painful. Not really. Kakashi was surprised to find it was, for lack of a better word, nice. It felt right again, cooking with company, in a way that cooking alone never had. Tense muscles loosened up, and his features softened as he smiled back at the girl.

As they sat down to eat the meal they prepared, Kakshi discovered that the evening had slowly morphed from something he'd originally approached as an obligation to become something memorably pleasant.

Naruto didn't demand that he share the painful memories of how he learned to cook. She didn't ask questions about Obito. She didn't demand that he talk about his feelings, or even that he add that much to the conversation. She just babbled cheerfully on about her day, her life, all the things she'd learned in the market while talking to various people. And surprisingly, she'd learned quite a bit of important information about which politically powerful clans and civilians were distracted because of a family illness or worried about a business or considering making one investment or another.

She had a skill with people that Kakashi admired. It wasn't something that could be learned, Kakashi certainly had never been able to pick it up.
"What's that look?" Naruto asked as they stood side by side at the sink. Naruto was washing dishes as Kakashi dried them and set them on the counter.

"What," said the copy ninja, focusing on the blond as her words drew him from his thoughts.

"You had a funny look on your face, just then," said Naruto, a smile tugging at her lips. "What was that about?"

Kakashi smiled at her, even though his throat felt thick. He set down the cup he was holding, and made the mistake of looking in those eyes he liked so much. "I was just thinking what an excellent Hokage you were going to make."

Kakashi could physically see the breath leave her in shock as her eyes dilated in hurt, like she thought he was teasing. Her expression was so open and vulnerable that Kakashi shook his head, moving instinctively closer, trying to figure out how to soothe the injury. And her face, always so expressive—Kakashi saw the moment when she realized his words were genuine, when she gained confidence and accepted the compliment and something else—and her lips were on his, or were his on hers? He could feel the gentle pressure through his mask, her soft cheek warm against his.

*Five seconds, ten?*

He snapped back to himself, removing his hand from the back of her head. *When did that get there?*

"Naruto," he said hoarsely, shaking his head, taking a step back, "We can't—"

And the blue orbs were on fire, stubborn jaw set, "What do you mean we can't?"

Words failed him, and the copy ninja looked at her sadly.

"Why can't we?" Naruto repeated, taking a step forward, but stopping when he took another step back. She looked hurt again, and something gripped Kakashi's heart painfully.

"There's nothing wrong with it, Kakashi," said the girl boldly, only the fingers clenching the folds of her skirt giving away her nervousness. "I know you want me," she said, gaining confidence when Kakashi couldn't bring himself to contradict the statement. "Why is it wrong when I want you too?"

She said, voice smaller, looking up at him hopefully.

He couldn't give her what she wanted.

He couldn't.

She must have seen something in his expression, because suddenly the blue eyes were filling with liquid and she spun on her heel, storming off to the bedroom and slamming the door.

Kakashi heard the lock turn as he bent over the counter, taking a deep breath and trying to calm down his heart rate. He rested his head against the cold countertop, and splashed some water from the sink on his face when the strength returned to his legs. That was when it dawned on him that Naruto had stolen the bed.

"Naruto," he called out loudly, knowing she could hear him. "That's my room," he said, putting forth what he thought was a logical argument.

"It's mine now!" Was the muffled wail that reached his ears, and he winced miserably when he picked up the sniffling sound, confirming she'd been crying.

*Well haven't I made a mess of things,* thought Kakashi. He sighed and scratched his head. Only one
thing to do in this situation; they had to be ready for a mission in the morning after all.

He bit his thumb and summoned Pakkun.

The pug popped into existence on the kitchen counter.

"Yo," said the dog, raising a pink paw. "What's the deal?"

Kakashi jerked his head toward the bedroom as he leaned against the opposite counter.

"Kicked out of the dog-house tonight, huh?"

Kakashi decided that was a rhetorical question. "She's not going to let me in," murmured the copy ninja, "I'm going to take a shower, can you go in there and calm her down? Tell her she can come out and change while I'm in the bathroom, and leave some clothes out for me on the sofa. She can have the bed tonight."

"You messed up big then, huh," said the pug, not-so-sympathetically.

"I did not," said Kakashi, regaining a bit of his energy. "We just had a minor miscommunication."

"Right." Said the pug. "Minor. Which is why you've been exiled to the couch."

Kakashi grunted and crossed his arms.

"You know," said the canine, trying to be helpful, "this would probably work out better if you found your balls and ninja-d yourself into that room to talk to her—"

"Pakkun," glowered Kakashi, in a tone that indicated the dog should stop talking.

"I'm just saying," said Pakkun, hopping down from the counter and giving himself a good shake followed by a stretch. "A couple minutes of petting in the right places—"

"We don't have that type of relationship," bit out Kakashi, for what felt like the hundredth time.

"You don't?" The pug sounded dubious. "Then I'm telling you, you're doing it wrong. I know you are a bit backwards for a human, but generally she can't kick you out of the dog-house until you've brought her in it."

Kakashi rubbed at his eyes, too tired to translate the pug's odd advice.

Pakkun sensed this, and so put it more simply: "I mean, she can't kick you out of the bed unless you invited her into it in the first place, squirrel-butt."

Kakashi waved a hand at the dog. "I'm going to take a shower."

"What's the rush?" Inquired the pug.

"We have to be ready to go on a mission tomorrow," Kakashi admitted, eyeing the locked door as he walked into the living room. "We need to be able to talk to each other and communicate effectively."

Pakkun sighed, his nails tapping against the wood floor as he trotted over to the bedroom door. "Shoo then human, while I go work my magic with your bitch."

Kakashi made an unflattering gesture with his finger, which didn't really offend Pakkun, because he
was a dog.

Duh.

Pakkun scratched on the door when Kakashi started the water in the bathroom. Naruto let the pug in, having heard the part of the conversation between the two when they'd moved into the living room.

Pakkun followed her back to the bed as she flopped down on it. He jumped up and curled against her side. She stroked the fur on his back methodically.

"I'm sorry, little fox," Pakun murmured, pressing his cold nose into his hand. "He's going to get it eventually," the dog promised. Naruto snuggled under the covers and buried her face into the pillow.

Pakkun wiggled until he was under her arm, where he could talk to her softly with his head right under her chin. "Don't give up on him, ok?"

"Hmm?" Naruto murmured sleepily.

"He's not as stupid as he seems," said the pug with a yawn, "his brain will kick in soon and he'll snap to what your place in the pack is. Everything will settle down once he stops fighting his instincts, just wait and see."

Naruto took a shuddering breath, taking comfort in the small dog's promises, holding onto the words while everything on the inside felt it was falling apart. She tried to close her eyes, but all she could see when she did was the rejection written plainly across Kakashi's face.

"None of that now," Said Pakkun, startling the girl's eyes open with a lick to her nose. "Did I ever tell you about the time boss thought he could make his kunai better and melted wax all over the kitchen and tried to clean it up with a hairdryer?"

"No," Naruto said, gold hair falling about her face as she listened to the small dog tell tales of some of the more humorous mishaps of Kakashi's childhood.

In the living room, Kakashi found some sleeping wear laid out for him on the sofa. He slipped into the loose clothing, and tried to get comfortable on the old pull out sofa bed.

He tossed and turned, less from the springs digging into his back than from the fact that the entire thing smelled like Naruto.

And she wasn't there.

Chapter End Notes

Beta: ElectraSev5n
'It’s three am and you are in my kitchen,” stated Sasuke, unamused as he greeted kitchen intruder in his pajama bottoms and a hastily donned shirt.

“What is all this stuff on the table anyway?” Naruto asked in lieu of explaining her presence. She shuffled through one of the stacks of papers that littered the room. Reports and scrolls and file folders were stuffed in boxes and strewn across every available surface.

A shuriken hit the table next to her hand and she withdrew it with a hiss, turning to scowl at the grumpy homeowner. “I wasn’t hurting anything.”

“Don’t touch,” the Uchiha grumbled, refusing to move further into the room. “It took Sakura and me hours to get all that organized, and we aren’t done yet.”

“Oh.” Naruto gazed at the piles in comprehension. “Is this all police stuff then?” She took her companion’s silence as confirmation of her guess. “Shit,” she whistled in appreciation at the extent of Tsunade’s spur of the moment punishment. Sucks to be Sasuke. She grinned fiercely. “Found my file yet? I was told I took up two whole drawers by the time I was eleven!” She preened boastfully.

“It’s three in the morning and you are in my kitchen,” Sasuke bit out once more, narrowing his eyes impatiently. He looked spectacularly unappreciative of her significant contribution to his current assignment.

“Yeah, see,” Naruto began, fingers twitching as if they wanted to return to examining the forbidden contents spread across the table. “Is there a question in there because I don’t—“

“Naruto,” Sasuke growled, deep from his throat, tone implying there were more shuriken where the first had come from.

“Ok, ok.” Naruto slumped dramatically in her chair with a prolonged, despairing sigh. “It’s like this, see. There’s this guy, and I like him and I know he likes me, but I’m pretty sure he has some type of complex and he thinks he’s not good enough—“

“Did you,” Sasuke cut her off sharply, sounding as if someone waltzed into his kitchen and told him that Tsunade had decided he should now start tending pigs in penance. “Are you trying to talk to me about boy problems?” He spat the last two words as if merely speaking them might have summoned unspeakable evil into his home.

“Yes?” she answered, wondering why her response appeared to make him choke on a hairball of some kind. Naruto sniffed the air cautiously. Sasuke looked like he smelt something distinctly unpleasant. It must be the dogs. Uchiha are cat people traditionally, and I have been spending an awful lot of time with dogs lately.
“No,” Sasuke made a strange motion with his hands, aborting it at the last minute. Probably some type of jutsu which would forcibly eject Naruto from his house—except he remembered that if he tried to do so it would trigger an alarm which would have ANBU swooping in to play football with his head.

_Nothing better than a captive audience._

Sasuke set his shoulders back, turned, and began to walk away.

“Wait!” Naruto cried in alarm, darting after him and latching on to his arm, dragging him back into the light of his kitchen. “Where are you going?”

“Back to bed,” muttered Sasuke, failing to pry her away. “Because clearly I’m dreaming. Or hallucinating.” He looked at the empty cups littering the room with deeply ingrained suspicion. “Sakura’s done something to my sake again.”

“No, no,” Naruto huffed, waving her hands—then that statement caught up to her. “Wait, what?”

Sasuke ignored her in favor of inspecting the contents of the empty glasses on the table.

Naruto put her hands on her hips and stomped her foot. “This is totally serious, believe it. I need your advice and I’m desperate or I wouldn’t be here.”

“That makes it so much better,” Sasuke grumbled. Still, he let himself be bullied into a chair, blinking around in confusion as if he expected his surroundings to melt away into mist. He tugged the shuriken that he’d recently thrown out of the table and tested the sharpness of his blade.

“Right.” Naruto said, ignoring the boy’s actions. “Like I was saying, I’m pretty sure he’s convinced himself he’s no good for me—”

“I’ve gone to Sakura and Ino about this,” interrupted the Uchiha. “Don’t they spend most of their time discussing things like this anyway? I’m not—”

“I’ve gone to Sakura and Ino about this.” Naruto rolled her eyes with despairing drama. “Several times. They’ve had advice, but it’s not working. I’m beginning to think it’s because they’re socially well-adjusted and well, he’s not. So I thought I might go to someone who was similarly situated and try to get things from their perspective. You know, see if one man with a traumatizing childhood, overly-developed fear of loss, and chronic untreated PTSD might understand another.”

Sasuke stared at her flatly for a good five seconds. “Well that’s flattering.”

“I thought it was a sound strategy,” nodded Naruto, ignoring the deadpanned sarcasm. “But like, Ino and Sakura had advice on how to dress and how to act and what to say and while I think it’s worked in the sense that he no longer sees me as a child, it hasn’t worked to actually make him, you know, do anything.”

“Naruto.” Sasuke sounded as if someone were digging an elbow into his rib cage, and looked as if he hoped an exit sign might suddenly start magically flashing over the kitchen window. He ruffled his hair in aggravation and scrunched his face up. “You can’t make someone like you, you know.”

“That’s debatable,” said Naruto promptly, eyes sliding toward Sasuke as if his existence might be the very example for her ability to break that rule. She pulled a kunai out of a pocket and spun it around her fingers.

Sasuke bristled.
“But anyway, I know he likes me; he told me he likes me,” Naruto’s confidence quickly faded and she physically drooped. She looked forlornly at the table and picked absentmindedly at the grooves in the wood with her weapon.

“Stop that,” snapped Sasuke, snatching the kunai away and tossing it into the sink before he was tempted to do something productive with it. “Look—” he hesitated. “You know he likes you? As in, likes you?” Immediate shock and horror tore across his face at the fact that those words left his mouth. “Never mind that,” he smacked a palm to his face. Nope, still awake. “You can’t force someone to act on a romantic attraction,” he amended his earlier words. “It’s their choice; you don’t get to make that for them. No amount of dresses or makeup will change that.” He sniffed with superiority. “And you shouldn’t be ‘changing’ things to make someone more attracted to you anyway, that’s just setting yourself up to build a relationship upon a foundation of lies.”

“Yeah, but,” Naruto bit her lip and looked down embarrassed. “But what if I like dressing up like a girl every once in a while? It’s kind of fun—just now and then, not all the time.”

“Oh my god.” Sasuke twisted away from the table in exasperation, accidentally hitting his knee against the tabletop as he rose too quickly. “Then dress like that when you want to, do what makes you happy. That’s fine, I don’t care. He shouldn’t care either, I mean, he should appreciate—nrggh.” Sasuke’ lips twisted as if he’d eaten something particularly sour. “We are not having this conversation. I’m going back to bed, and when I wake up you will be gone.”

“No, Sasuke, no, please!” Naruto turned liquid blue eyes upon the boy. “You’re one of my best friends and I have a problem and nothing else has worked and I have to leave on a mission in, like, six hours and I’m going crazy and—”

“Okay, okay.” Sasuke cut her off by holding up a single hand. He lifted his head and looked at the ceiling, took a deep breath, counted to ten, and then let out a long stream of expelled air. “Five more minutes,” he stated. “And then we’re done and this never happened.” His dark eyes promised retribution if that last criteria wasn’t met.

“Deal,” agreed Naruto, pulling up her legs and resting her chin on her knees. “He likes me Sasuke, I know he does, he’s just,” she struggled for the right words. “Scared he’ll hurt me? Scared I’ll leave?”

“So. He’s just scared.” Sasuke shrugged. “A lot of ninja feel that way about relationships. Our profession doesn’t exactly encourage us to engage in shared emotional intimacy and tender, prolonged cuddles.”

“I know that.” Naruto blushed. “But I want, more, and I want it from him and I think he does too, just—“ she trailed off with a huff, tugging agitatedly on a pigtail.

“Then tell him that.” Sasuke crossed his arms and leaned his back against the kitchen counter. “Like I said, it’s his choice on how to respond, but you have to start by being honest. If it’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that lies don’t build stellar familial relationships.”

Naruto stared forlornly out the window, chewing on her lower lip. “It’s not that easy Sasuke-kun.”

“Then it’s not worth it and he’s not the right person for you to be with.” Sasuke snapped. He was more than done with this conversation. He rubbed his face, trying to ease the pressure he could feel building in his head. He didn’t even want to contemplate the idea of Naruto liking someone; this would only bring him further grief, he knew it. Ughh, she’d start dragging him to team lunches and she’d want Sasuke to be nice and social and talk with the weirdo. And she thinks we have things in common already, she’s going to want us to bond. Nonono. “Why would you want to be with someone you couldn’t be honest with anyway?”
Naruto’s expression popped in surprise. “I guess I really wouldn’t, would I?” She tapped a finger against her cheek, looking alarmingly pensive.

“I have no idea, I can’t even begin to fathom how your brain works,” said the Uchiha dryly. He pretended to look at an imaginary clock behind Naruto’s head. “It’s been five minutes.” It’d only been three. Maybe.

“Yeah, yeah, Bastard.” Naruto waved him off. “Don’t act like you don’t enjoy our heart-to-hearts.”

Sasuke spit up a bit in his mouth. “Is that what this is?” How appalling. He hadn’t been talking about feelings, had he? Had he been tricked? He turned a dirty glare on his female teammate.

“You’re the best male friend with a complicated history that a girl could ask for,” beamed Naruto. She darted forward for an appreciative hug.

“Na—” Sasuke began to refute the accusation, but ditched his efforts in favor of physically dodging the unwanted show of affection.

Naruto sighed, gazing at him in mock disappointment. “Is it so hard to accept a simple thank you?”

“I imagine it would be easier after dawn,” retorted her teammate as he opened the door and gestured for her to leave.

Naruto batted her eyes at him as she let herself be herded outside. “Really, Sasuke-kun, where would you be without me?”

“Asleep,” deadpanned the other ninja. “Like the majority of sane people in Fire Country.”

“I doubt that,” Naruto squinted up at the taller chūnin in a teasing, considering manner. “You’d probably be wandering aimlessly around the continent on some half-assed, indefinite journey ‘to find yourself.’”

Sasuke rolled his eyes and slammed the door. “At least it’d be quieter,” he muttered, firmly locking the door in her wake. He paused, feet still against the cold flooring. He turned to look at the door with pursed lips. How the hell did she undo my traps in the first place?

Naruto watched the sun rise slowly into the sky from her vantage point on top of the village gates, gaze lingering appreciatively on the creamy orange and blues. The chūnin guards occasionally stirred from their posts to cast curious glances in her direction, but she’d simply acknowledge them with a wave and a grin. She wanted to be left alone to think, and they seemed content, for the most part, to let her do so.

She clicked her sandals together idly, wiggling her toes and watching the paint on them glow softly in the morning light. Kakashi had wanted to leave at dawn, which meant he’d be by in a few hours now. She was already packed though; she had been before her last minute decision to crash Sasuke’s house when she finally gave up on sleeping. She’d left a snoring Pakkun curled up in the nest of blankets and had taken a page from Kakashi’s book, slipping out his bedroom the window.

Sasuke hadn’t had much advice, but what he said made sense. If she really did care for Kakashi, why would she want to build a relationship on lies? That wasn’t nice. It wasn’t what teammates did. It certainly shouldn’t be what people who were closer than teammates did. Not that she’d ever had a family of her own to put the notion into practice.
It wasn’t what you did to someone you thought you loved.

*But the mission parameters,* she groaned and rolled her shoulders back before gripping the wooden posts tightly and kicking her feet against them.

She knew exactly what Kurenai and Tsunade would say, but she didn’t think they’d be right this time. It made her stomach twist into knots, the idea that she was contemplating breaking away from her orders. It wasn’t the first time she’d gone against her superior’s directives. In fact, it might be the first time she hesitated to do so. But she was trying to be more conscious about breaking the rules now that she was older. She was trying to be better at finding ‘loopholes,’ as Shizune called them, rather than engaging in blatant disobedience. She was trying to be more conscientious and avoid leaving the clean-up of the messes she made to others.

*But they’re stupid rules, they’re not right.*

Her internal grumblings woke Kurama. She could feel him unfurling languidly, fuzzily attempting to swat her discontent away as he might an impudent kitten.

*Why do you care so much?* The massive fox-ish concentration of chakra sent its query rolling through her bones, slow and deep.

*Because I want*—Naruto puffed out her cheeks, not certain how to put her feelings into words. She fell onto her back on the flat gate-top, glaring up at the sky as if the fluffy morning clouds were responsible for withholding the answer to her ailment. *I want more than this mission,* she admitted, to both herself and Kyuubi. *I want to be together with him, for a long time. I want it to last.*

*That sounds spectacularly awful,* declared Kurama, four tails flicking in bafflement. *You have such strange wishes. You’re never going to get rid of the dog smell if you do that.*

Naruto rolled her eyes at the unhelpful creature and went back to trying to plan the conversation she wanted to have with Kakashi. When he inevitably showed up. And how he might respond.

She whimpered, rolled to the side slightly, and realized that she was so nervous she was chewing on a piece of hair. She spat it out and sat up. *Really.* She jumped to her feet, dredging up the fathomless enthusiasm she was known for. “Uzumaki Naruto is not a coward,” she bellowed at the sunrise in greeting. “Believe it!”

She could feel the chūnin startle in the gatehouse, poking out their heads to stare at her.

*It might be wise to wait a few days before talking with the dog,* Kurama offered, nonplussed at the girl’s battle cry.


*Can’t run off if he’s in the middle of the hunt,* purred Kyuubi, liking his gigantic paws.

Kakashi was studiously refusing to look at Naruto. They’d been travelling to the northwest borders of Rain Country for three days now, taking their time to visit some of Naruto’s eccentric collection of “pen pals” along the way. Naruto was cheery and social and Kakashi was that silent, awkward tall guy trailing behind her for “security.” The duo hadn’t found anything promising yet, but these first
few visits were more to reaffirm Naruto’s social network while they had the opportunity to do so. Neither of them believed they’d reveal any concrete leads to the resolution of their mystery this early on.

For the first time in weeks, Kakashi had released his entire pack and was enjoying the feeling of being back to almost full chakra capacity. Tsunade would be setting up a physical watch in the ninken’s stead. The presence of actual people would hopefully deter any visitors to the site and keep them around Ame’s borders (if that is truly where the prey was basing operations).

Travelling with Naruto was—strange, at the moment. She was friendly enough when they stopped to gossip with civilians, but she was uncharacteristically taciturn and contemplative as they ran, not keeping up her usual one-sided babble.

It made Kakashi nervous.

For the most part, she acted like their kind-of-kiss mishap the other night hadn’t occurred. But, at the same time, Kakashi felt her silence was indicative of an internal monologue in which she was trying to think of the best way to address the issue. Perhaps he was wrong, but Naruto usually took perverse pleasure in digging up the most awkward topics of conversation she could think of at the least opportune moments.

He still felt that he’d been right to stop the, well, whatever it was. No matter what Kurenai said, he could not see any possible benefit for Naruto if they continued down that road. She was one of his most precious people. Not some one-night stand or whimsical fling. He wasn’t stable enough to provide what she deserved. He was simply too broken to be what she needed.

With the mood between them dense with anticipation, he wasn’t too surprised when Naruto slid into a chair across from him that evening after their merry host and his wife and their ten obscenely boisterous children had gone to bed for the evening. This man hadn’t had any offspring abducted either. However, he did have a friend who had a cousin whose kid went missing, so they’d be setting out to look into that tomorrow. It was to be expected, since they were getting closer to the ‘problem area’ they’d identified on their map.

His blonde companion set her elbows on the tabletop and intertwined her fingers, resting her chin on her hands. He already knew he wasn’t going to like this conversation. He peeked over the worn pages of Icha Icha Tactics, narrowing his visible eye at his former/current student/minion/housemate/something.

No wonder he was a bit confused lately.

He cleared his throat and raised his eyebrow inquiringly when Naruto didn’t automatically start the conversation.

Blue eyes blinked back at him. “I have something to say,” began Naruto, “and I don’t think you’re going to like it.”

Kakashi’d guessed as much, but considering it’d taken her three days to work up to saying anything at all, he thought he’d wait a few minutes before completely derailing her.

“I want your promise that you’ll stay here and listen to everything I have to say before you leave,” she stressed her words and maintained eye contact with him.

Well, that’s an auspicious start to the conversation. “Is it going to interfere with the mission?” Kakashi kept his book up as a shield and began to mentally recount his available exit strategies.
“Eh,” Naruto fidgeted uncomfortably before giving in with a sigh and a slump of her shoulders. “Probably,” she finally admitted, before immediately perking up. “But I’m going to say it anyway because it’s going to interfere with life no matter where we are and at least right now you can’t run away from me.”

Kakashi leaned backward an inch, his chin rising ever so slightly, as if in acceptance of her challenge.

“Try it and I’ll scream this conversation at the top of my lungs as we travel tomorrow,” grinned Naruto, with a bit too much teeth.

Kakashi narrowed his eye further, reminding himself that she wasn’t a dog summoner, and therefore didn’t realize how much her statement challenged his authority. Of course, he reminded himself as she slouched back confidently in her chair, She’s also got Kurama, so it’s entirely possible she does.

“You won’t leave, right?” Naruto asked again, a wavering uncertainty in her tone undermining her assertive poise.

It was enough to tug at Kakashi’s conscience and remind him that he probably owed her the courtesy of at least listening to what she felt she needed to say; it didn’t mean he had to respond.

The chūnin seemed to sense his acquiescence, and took a deep breath. “Were you aware,” she began, “that sometimes the Village, well,” Naruto swallowed and averted her eyes from Kakashi’s, focusing on the table top. “Sometimes they assign missions to help ensure that, in the future, the Village will still be strong?”

Kakashi blinked uncomprehendingly.

“Right,” Naruto nodded to herself. “That probably is a bit vague.” She swallowed and grasped her drink tightly with both hands, staring solemnly at the liquid and biting her lip. “What I mean is that sometimes the Village is a little more proactive about that, in the sense that it wants to ensure there will be strong shinobi in the future too. So when the Village elders see that certain bloodlines are in danger of ending, they might interfere to make sure that the bloodlines continue. And the Hokage might give orders to see that happens.”

Kakashi blinked uncomprehendingly again.

“Has Tsunade-sama ordered you to marry someone?”

Naruto ducked her head further, voice small. “Not exactly.”

Kakashi lowered his book a few inches, taking in the hunched shoulders and light blush beginning to creep across the girl’s face. He took another stab at guessing based off the prior few sentences: “She ordered you to have a child?”

Naruto muttered something unintelligible.

Kakashi felt indignation and anger well up in his gut until it rapidly cooled as he recalled the particulars of the sequence of events of the past few months and how the only man Naruto had been close to was—“Tsunade-sama ordered you to have my child?”

His ears registered a muted thud, and he realized dully that his book had slipped from his fingers and hit the table. There was a rushing in his ears and he felt a bit faint and like he couldn’t breathe and
now would be a wonderful time for something else to happen, like, oh, say, be ambushed by Iwa nin. Yes, that sounded very agreeable. Where were they when you needed them? Ah yes, shock. Hmmm, he’d almost forgotten that feeling.

Naruto’s eyes were large and round and wide in concern, but she hadn’t left her seat (yet, thankfully).

“Umm, yes,” Naruto’s face grew even redder, her voice still uncharacteristically quiet.

Kakashi’s fingers twitched. He needed to leave, he needed to breathe, to think—

“You can’t go yet,” Naruto squeaked and pushed herself across the table, pulling back her hands at the last minute as she recalled vague lectures on why one shouldn’t try grabbing panicking jōnin.

She’s not done? That was horrific. What more was there to say? Kakashi swallowed, took an actual breath. She didn’t smell of deceit—nerves, fear, embarrassment—not deceit. Did that make it better or worse? When, how—

“I didn’t understand at first.” Naruto blurted out, the words coming fast now that the initial confession had been made. “She said she wouldn’t have asked if she thought we were incompatible, but she said because I already cared about you we’d do well together—I didn’t get it because you’d only been Sensei before and now you were more and I couldn’t help—we got closer and I paid more attention and I realized—“ She choked up and stuttered to a stop, snapping her mouth shut and laying her palms down on the table, stretching out her fingers.

Kakashi just focused on breathing, too many feelings and thoughts and colors and scents swirling in his head—too much, too much.

Naruto took a shuddering breath and then those intense blue eyes looked up. “I want this.” She put so much sincerity and emotion into the word that something in Kakashi’s chest tightened even more, to the point where it felt like it might shatter.

“Put aside the whole kids thing, forget about that ridiculousness,” Naruto babbled. “I want you. It’s cliché, and cheesy, but I like being near you all the time and I like the way you make me feel when you laugh and you smile; I like your stupid not-excuses; that you’re always late but always there, and my heart hurts when you’re sad. I miss your ridiculous dogs, and the bizarre way you can’t talk about feelings without having a panic attack, your inability to put the toilet paper on the thingie the correct way and your irrational hatred of my cosmetic box, and I even like those perverted books though I swear I’ll never admit to that again—“

Kakashi started to shake his head.

“I’m not done!” Naruto hissed, and it sounded painful.

The smell of salt was faint in the air and Kakashi uncomfortably realized that Naruto’s eyes were tearing up. “It took me so long to realize that I didn’t just like you, Kakashi.” Naruto paused and swallowed.

Kakashi made a pained noise, trying to cut her off but he wasn’t quick enough, too slow, always too slow, too late—

“I love you Kakashi, and I want to be with you.” Naruto was doing her best to remain composed, trying, and failing, to hide how much this admission was costing someone who’d been on her own for so very long. “And I know that you, at the very least, like me too. And I know you’re scared of being with me, that we’ll mess it up, or we’ll only be hurt, or nothing good can come of it but you’re
lying to yourself—"

Kakashi was gone.

Book abandoned on the table, out the window, away-away-away.

He ignored the distressed cry of his name.

He focused on the grass flying under his feet. He couldn’t think about—*Long blonde hair, light laughter, comfortable smells*—her. About this, about—*what he wanted, what he broke, what was good and bad and golden and untouchable*—He couldn’t deal with ---*her, with them, with everyone. He couldn’t*.

And so he ran, focusing on putting one foot in front—

“Ooof,” Kakashi gave an undignified grunt as Naruto tackled him at the knees, taking him down to the ground.

“Goddamitall,” Naruto growled, eyes flashing as her fingers dug into the fabric of his pants.

He twisted as he fell, hitting the ground with a thud and rolling in the grass onto his back, elbow digging into the dirt and the scent of mud assaulting his nose. He kicked his legs out, careful not to hit her in the face, trying to shake off his problem with a glare. *Surely she could take a hint that he needed some space right now?*

“Stop it,” snarled Naruto, right hand flying up to get a better grip, snagging his jacket and tugging as she pulled herself up even with him. “Just stop it already!”

“Let go,” Kakashi ordered, still trying to get away, reigning in the urge to use more effective moves that would certainly get him free but might actually hurt the girl.

“No,” yelled Naruto, both hands now wound firmly in the front of his vest. She shoved him back against the ground, maintaining her handhold, and his own fingers slid to her wrists to pull her away.

“Stop it,” she cried again. “Just stop—” she stuttered, choking on the words, taking in a big gasp of air, and letting her full weight fall on top of him. Her head fell onto his chest, resting in the curve of his neck.

He paused as the tremble of her body was echoed in her voice, too paralyzed by the recent events to react in any way at all.

“Stop running.” Her voice lowered, exhaustion creeping into it. She flexed her fingers as they clutched his vest, but otherwise maintained her position, using her weight to keep him pinned down.

Kakashi forced himself to push down the panic, focusing on the smell of clean grass, the sound of her swallowing, her rapid pulse beating strong under his fingertips.

“Aren’t you tired of running?” Naruto lifted her head, blue eyes turned toward him brimming with something.

And Kakashi shouldn’t have looked at them, because now he couldn’t look away from the sheer force of the *wanting* in her gaze. Couldn’t move to stop her when she surged forward. Couldn’t keep a hold of her wrists as they rose to bring down his mask; instead, he let his hands slide down to her waist. Couldn’t keep himself from moving forward to meet her as her soft lips crashed against his.
He let his eye flutter shut, intent on savoring the dream for just one moment. And for that instant, it was gentle and warm, cautious and tender—nothing that should belong in his life.

She pulled away and all Kakashi could feel was the coldness of the air against his exposed face, the receding warmth as he pushed her up, pushing her away a few inches, refusing to meet the yearning inquiry in her eyes.

“No,” was all he managed to say, not able to keep the sorrow from his voice, brushing his thumb against her cheek as he rose. A weak apology, but the best he could bring himself to offer. At least the word sounded firm even if his voice was hoarse.

It hurt to lose the closeness, wasn’t as reassuring as it should have been to pull up his mask. It felt like he was swimming against the current as he took one step away, and then another, leaving one of the most important people in his world sitting in the grass. Alone.

But they had a mission to complete.

And he needed some time to think.

When they finally got to the house of Naruto’s pen pal’s friend’s cousin, the only words that had been exchanged in the past twelve hours had been between Kakashi and an aging farmer. The farmer gave them instructions to the place they were looking for: It was the “new” Nakamura place; three hale bales down the road, then ten miles farther than the Watanabe’s barn that burned in the big fire five years past and had yet to be rebuilt yet by his lazy good-for-nothing-son-in-laws, not that he would consider them competition should anybody ask.

Naruto seemed content to let Kakashi gather his thoughts, although there was a tension to her movements that let Kakashi know she was just gathering energy for the next round of combat in their-whatever it was—a stubbornness in the way she held her chin and shoulders that implied she didn’t consider his prior rejection to be the final word on the matter.

Kakashi himself had a hard time recalling when he had last felt so emotionally uncomfortable and compromised on a mission. Maybe it was the ill-sanctioned trip to Wave, the C rank that wasn’t. That one point it had seemed like he was going to lose all three of his students before he’d even really started to teach them. He felt equally unbalanced now, as if he might be about to lose something he hadn’t realized just how much he treasured—and as if he were trapped and the right answer to the problem was just out of his reach.

So they were physically attracted to each other.

He snuck a glance at his companion as she wandered ahead, pushing down the thoughts that had plagued him so recently about how pretty her hair was when it caught the light, or how nice it would be just to brush against her arm or rest his hand in the small of her back—The point was, a lot of people were physically attracted to each other, that didn’t mean it was a good idea to act on the attraction. Even if the village apparently——

This mission. Focus on this mission. Kakashi felt unwelcome pressure winding up in his head, heralding the oncoming of an unappreciated migraine.

He was going to have to mentally quarantine any personal issues until the job was done.

He watched the road, calculated where they were likely to be ambushed given the terrain and the
recent weather. He mentally took stock of their equipment and rations. He recalled each and every relevant report he’d read in preparation for the mission. He readjusted his calculations of the team’s fighting capabilities as the day wore on and Naruto grew more impatient with the lack of conversation and his non-responsive grunts, beginning to bounce on the heels of her feet like she did when she was trying to hold back classified information.

He ignored his companion’s ramblings as she finally began to talk, knowing she didn’t truly want him to answer the questions she voiced. What she wanted was an answer to the throbbing, unspoken ‘why not?’ that was just as painful as it was pressing, curled cautiously underneath each statement she made.

If he answered anything, the trap would spring, and he’d have to answer everything.

So he said nothing, at least, not until they found the house they were looking for and he rapped his knuckles against the wood of the door. Whereupon Naruto gave him the stink eye and a frustrated huff, crossing her arms and stepping back so she was a few paces behind the jōnin.

A harried woman with frizzy brown hair escaping a bun answered their knocks, wiping her hands on her apron and looking like she had a hundred more pressing matters on her mind. “Can I help you?” She shrunk back in her doorframe when her eyes finally took in their faces, lighting upon their hititate.

It took a few seconds of silence for Kakashi to realize that his normally sociable and less visibly threatening partner wasn’t going to take the lead on introductions as she normally did. Apparently this was her passive aggressive retaliation for his own uncooperative silence.

He cleared his throat. “We’re looking for the Nakamura residence. Is this the right place?” He kept his tone light, smiling behind his mask and tilting his head to the side in a manner calculated to make him look less intimidating.

“Yes,” said the woman softly, her brown eyes somber. “Is this about Yuichi-kun? Have you found him?”

From her tone, it was clear she didn’t expect their answer to be the one she wanted to hear.

“We’re not sure,” explained Kakashi. “We’ve been sent to investigate the disappearances, and we’d like to ask you some questions about them.”

She looked doubtfully at them. “We’ve already had some Ame-nin come by to look into things; they couldn’t help.”

“Aa,” Kakashi scratched his chin. “We have some new information they don’t have access to. It looks like this may be a multi-country problem, so we’ve been brought in to assist in resolving the matter.”

She hesitated, fingers nervously tracing the door frame. “My husband is at work.”

Kakashi nodded, expecting to be asked to return at a later hour.

“No,” the woman reached out with her hand, before quickly thinking better of the gesture and retracting it. “I’d rather talk to you now; he gets upset when asked to talk about it. I don’t—I’ll talk, but you have to leave before he comes home.”

“We’ll be gone,” he promised, slipping inside the traditional home. Naruto dutifully dogged his steps, silent in a way younger partners were expected to be (but she never was).
Nakamura-san was an excellent hostess, and had them seated with refreshments before relating the story about how her eight year old son had been playing with friends one day and not come home. She was just as excellent a repository of local gossip, and could recall every detail about the other disappearances that occurred within a fifty mile radius in the past two years. Boys and girls, six to eight years of age, all had gone out to play and simply not returned.

“And their friends go missing at the same time?” Kakashi asked quietly, cradling his tea cup and appreciating the warmth that seeped through his glove.

“No,” the woman shook her head, a few more strands of hair escaping her bun. “It’s only one at a time. They all go out to play games and eventually notice that someone is missing. It’s not too odd; we’re all so spread out around here. Kids realize they’ve stayed out later than they’re supposed to and slip away from the games. No one walks miles out of their way to check and see if they made it home. It’s not even strange—or it wasn’t,” she corrected herself, “for our kids to spend the night at other houses if a game went too late or if a few more hands were needed at someone’s farm for whatever reason. Sometimes it could be a few days before anyone noticed anything wrong.” Her voice wobbled on the last few words and she ducked her head.

Kakashi gave her a few moments to compose herself. “And none of the children have ever been found?”

Nakamura-san raised a hand to muffle a sad hiccup. “No.”

Naruto set down her own cup onto the table, blue eyes dark and troubled.

“Well,” amended the house-wife. “I heard there was one child, over in Namida no Toshi, that came back. But it’s just a rumor. We don’t have many visitors from that area, and don’t travel that way often ourselves.”

Kakashi filed the information away. “Do you know anything more about that incident?”

The brunette shook her head. “I’m sorry. That’s all I heard, but it supposedly happened only a month or so ago.”

“We’ll do our best to find him and bring him back to you.”

Naruto’s promise was abrupt, and the woman blinked up at them without any hope at the words.

Kakashi stared at the dregs of his tea, clinging to fragile blue porcelain.

“We’re not sure what we’ll find,” he added, not wanting to pledge to accomplish the potentially impossible. “But we will do our best to figure out what happened, and we’ll let you know whatever the result.”

“Yes.” The housewife swallowed, nodded. “Thank you.”

She directed Naruto to the restroom before they left, looking curiously up at Kakashi as she collected the empty teacups. “Did she lose someone too?”

“What?” Kakashi asked, blinking back into awareness from his own internal ponderings.

“The girl you’re with,” murmured the woman. “She just looks a little sad. Did she lose someone too?”

Kakashi slipped his hands into his pockets, carefully not looking in the direction Naruto went. He
turned the question over in his mind before giving an answer. “No,” he finally said, running a hand through his hair. “She’s not lost anyone; she’s just worried she will.”

The woman gave an empathetic hum. “I hope it all works out for her. I didn’t think about it so much before losing—before Yuichi-kun went missing,” she corrected herself, eyes still downcast. “But now that’s happened and it feels like it’s the only thought that’s ever in my mind.”

Kakashi shared a sad smile with the woman and thanked her for her time with a bow as he and Naruto returned to the road.

They made it to Namida no Toshi, a more centralized town with an emphasis on sheep herding, while the sun was melting into the horizon line; Naruto’s favorite color vividly swirling through the sky. A few probing questions from Kakashi led them to the correct house, where a man with a scruffy beard ushered them in and cheerfully invited them to dinner with his family.

“You must be hungry, shinobi-san, and we’ve plenty to spare at the moment,” the man’s attitude was buoying after hours of enduring his own companion’s gloomy temper.

Naruto accepted the food easily enough, sitting much farther down the table with a horde of the man’s children—and perhaps nephews, or something, the explanation of how everyone was related to one another went straight over Kakashi’s head. She seemed to find the company of children rejuvenating, and took it upon herself to provide entertainment so Kakashi could interrogate the adults of the household.

Kakashi sat across from Fukada-san and his quiet wife, while Fukuda-san’s very outspoken mother took the head of the table.

“’Bout time someone looks into this mess,” muttered the imposing woman, squinting dark eyes at the symbols on his uniform.

“We’re all glad to help, sometimes it takes inter-village cooperation to solve issues that span the borders of several countries,” said Kakashi with a practiced smile. Naruto was usually much better at chit-chat than he was, but she was ignoring every attempt he made to catch her eye and request an intervention. With her bright countenance and well-practiced story-telling, the children had latched onto her quickly, begging to see “ninja tricks” and hear about her heroic escapades. It was easy enough for her to pretend that she had a viable reason to ignore him.

Kakashi shook his head. “I missed that, come again?”

“I said it’s not your border; I don’t understand why you’d be sticking your nose into this at all,” drawled the woman, turning away from him to demand that her daughter-in-law refill her drink.

“Mother,” scolded Fukuda-san, stroking his beard. “He only wants to help.”

“You think everyone wants to help,” said the woman, sniffing superiorly, cheap jewelry clinking on her feeble arms.

Fukuda-san sighed, tapping his fingers against the wood of the table. “Well, I certainly don’t understand how the information he wants can hurt anyone.”

High pitched squeals caused the four adults to simultaneously turn toward the end of the table, where Naruto had three little girls hanging onto her clothes and chattering. She grinned sheepishly at them;
one hand clapped around the youngest’s mouth. “Sorry,” she rubbed the back of her head. “We’ll be quieter.” The children babbled even louder at that, in prompt contradiction to her promise. “I’ll just,” Naruto stammered, standing and making shooing motions toward the door. “Take them all outside to play for a while. Yeah?”

The mother-in-law glowered at the cacophony as they made their escape and picked at her food with distaste. “Hana-chan,” she scolded, “You undercooked the meat again.”

“Sorry, Mother;” the woman muttered obediently, too tired to even blush.

Kakashi cleared his throat. “The food’s been wonderful after a week of rations.”

Fukuda’s wife smiled thinly at him. “I think you’ll want to speak with Reiji-kun—“

“Not that’d it do you any good;” muttered the older woman. She huffed and waved her hand dismissively. “Girl has a handful of daughters that can’t shut up and one boy that can’t speak a word —“

“That’s enough, Mother,” the coldness of Fukadu-san’s voice appeared to be the only thing that could silence the woman, but it didn’t put her off her dinner and she continued to eat.

“I’m afraid Reiji-kun can’t speak,” admitted the timid Hana-san, fingers locked tightly in her lap. “But he disappeared for around a week about a month ago. We thought he’d been taken, but he reappeared after five days completely safe and sound. He was a little tired and jumpy, but he hasn’t been able to tell us who took him or where he went, so—” she trailed off, picking at her clothes.

“Boy’s fine.” Fukadu nodded gruffly. “But you might be able to find something out from him; maybe we’ve just not asked the right questions.”

Kakashi forced himself to keep up the small talk with his hosts until he’d cleaned his plate, making sure to ask his hostess to save Naruto’s unfinished one for later. Then he slipped outside, following the laughter of the children to find Naruto entertaining them with her kage bunshin. She raised an eyebrow when she saw him, but he shook his head, signaling that she should keep the brats occupied for a bit longer.

Instead, he headed for the boy who’d isolated himself from the rest, using a stick to draw things in the dirt.

“That’s pretty good.” Kakashi carefully didn’t react to the child’s jump of surprise. He kneeled down and peered over the boy’s shoulder at the drawing of the horse in the ground. “He needs a tail though, doesn’t he?” He picked up the stick and made a few marks to finish the drawing. “And maybe a dog, things are always better with dogs.” He tried to draw Pakkun next to the horse.

Tried.

The boy giggled.

“You can probably do one better than mine,” the copy ninja admitted, handing the stick back to the boy.

The child bent over, attempting to fix the “dog” that Kakashi had drawn.

“Your name is Reiji-kun, right?” Kakashi watched as the child nodded, hunching down and refusing to look up at the older man.
The jōnin rolled back his shoulders, wincing as something in his back popped before he settled into a more comfortable crouch. “I’ve been sent by my village to find some children that have gone missing and get them back to their homes. Your parents told me that you disappeared for a few days not that long ago, and that you came back. Did you come back on your own?”

The boy peered up at him silently from under scraggily brown bangs. He clutched his stick tighter.

“I just want to get everyone else home too,” Kakashi added mildly, watching as the child failed to react to the statement. The boy looked down at his drawing, and scratched out the dogs with his thumb.

“Someone told you that you weren’t supposed to talk about what happened, huh?”

Brown eyes looked up in fright.

“It’s okay,” Kakashi reassured. “I’m one of the best. And that girl over there,” he pointed over his shoulder, keeping his gaze on the child. “She is the best.”

The boy looked skeptical.

“That’s right,” Kakashi whispered conspiratorially. “She’s really orange and really loud, but don’t let that fool you, it’s all an elaborate act to make people underestimate her. She’s the scariest woman I know, and I know a lot of scary wome—“

“I can hear you!” Naruto’s voice came from afar.

Kakashi faked a shudder. “See. She’s so strong she’s going to be the next leader of our village, and she’ll be in charge of commanding all the ninja that live there. But first, we’ve got to make sure everyone is safe and where they belong, even the kids way out here.”

The boy bit his lip, eyes darting to the side toward his house. Then his eyes slid up, toward Kakashi’s hitaiate, and narrowed.

Kakashi brought his hand up toward the headband, tapping the symbol. “You’ve seen this before?”

The boy held his gaze, chin set stubbornly.

“Because if you have,” drawled Kakashi, “I really need you to help me. If somebody’s been taking children while wearing this,” he tapped the headband again, “they aren’t doing what they are supposed to and it’s our job to go get them and make them stop. If they were ninja from our village, we need to find them and take them back, and none of the kids they’ve taken are going to be safe until we do.”

The boy bent his head and picked up his stick, dragging it through the dirt some more.

Kakashi rocked back on his heels, smothering his sigh. He’d have to go get Naruto and see if she could work some of her “everybody loves me magic” and get something more from the brat.

Wait, the copy ninja thought, leaning forward slightly, that squiggle looks an awful lot like a river, which would make this a—“map.” Kakashi hummed the word softly and bent down to closely examine the landscape that was forming under the boy’s hands. Well, Kakashi thought, eyeing the very squiggly, not-to-scale marks, it’s an attempt at a map. He was lucky he had one in his pack to interpret it with. It’s not like the kid had cartography lessons, after all.
The pair of ninja set out the next day, mostly because Kakashi was eighty percent confident that Naruto wouldn’t tackle him while Kakashi was sleeping in a civilian living room which half a dozen children snuck through on their way to the kitchen for midnight snacks.

He considered himself lucky that his hypothesis was correct; although, judging from the increasingly impatient glances she was sneaking his way, if they found a similar sleeping situation tonight he’d bet the likelihood of confrontation would increase to 50%, no matter how many children might traipse through the room.

He was glad that she’d apparently decided to work with him again, instead of passively working against him. They did work well as a team when both of them were focused, and it was nice to have a partner he could trust to—

“Thank god we’re away from the mother-in-law from hell.” Naruto blew her bangs out of her eyes impatiently. “One more hour with her and I’m pretty sure some of my shuriken demonstrations would have awry.”

Kakashi made an agreeing noise deep in his throat as they crested the hill overlooking the river the Reiji-kun had drawn. He was equally pleased to escape the haranguing woman; the harridan wasn’t someone he wanted to waste too much time thinking about.

“I’m glad you got the kid to be helpful too,” the blonde babbled, tugging on the straps of her pack. “It was nice to see you getting along with him, nothing I tried seemed to pull him out of his shell to play with the other kids.”

Kakashi grunted as he surveyed the landscape. The boy had been taken too long ago for any of his scent to be picked up by the dogs on this trail, but the ninken should recall the scents of the ninja who’d been visiting that old stash of Danzo’s. It was possible they might be able to pick up a trail here, if one existed.

Naruto’s prattle took on a wistful tone. “Are we going to talk about—”

“No,” said Kakashi, abruptly cutting her off as he bit his thumb and flipped through the summoning seals.

Naruto made a displeased clicking sound and scuffed the ground with her feet.

“Yo, Boss,” greeted Pakkun. Guruko and Akino barked their own ‘hellos’ as they flashed into existence beside him.

Naruto scowled. “You can’t just keep ignoring me!”

“We’re looking for the ninja who we’ve been keeping watch for back in Konoha,” Kakashi plowed on, ignoring Naruto. “We don’t want them to know we’re here, so be quiet and subtle,” he stressed the word, looking pointedly at Guruko. “Don’t stray too far from us.”

“Right, on it Boss,” chirped Pakkun. Turning, the pug nosed the other two in the haunches and they ambled off in separate directions, faces to the ground. They snuffled through the grass, but made sure to keep pace with the two shinobi as the humans continued making their way down the hill.

“Are you really never going to talk about us?” The chūnin protested after they’d been exploring for most of the day and the sun was slinking beneath the horizon line.
“Not now,” repeated Kakashi, for what he felt was the tenth time in the past two hours.

Akino’s ears perked up and swiveled backward to better catch the conversation.

“If you would just tell me why,” insisted Naruto, wrapped up in her fit of obstinacy. “If you could give me one good reason—”

“Mission first,” he interjected, hand flying out automatically to catch her as she stumbled and slid down the incline a few feet. He steadied her and they continued walking.

“Well,” huffed Naruto, after what she probably considered to be an appropriately dramatic pause. “I liked it. And I wouldn’t mind doing it again—”

“Naruto.” The word came out pained, and Kakashi was grateful to notice Guruko’s body stiffening in a point, indicating that he found something worthy of their attention.

He reached behind Guruko’s ears, giving the dog a good scratch in just the way he liked as a reward for successfully holding back the barks he clearly wanted to emit.

Pakkun plodded over to the group. “It’s faint, but it’s there,” the pug agreed.

“I know,” Guruko huffed, offended. “I wouldn’t have called Boss over if I was wrong.”

Pakkun gave the younger dog a look, but refrained from explaining the idea of ‘second opinions’ to the other dog. Which was probably for the best, most dogs didn’t excel at oral argument.

Kakashi turned around and discovered that Naruto had her arms around Akino, cuddling the ninken and scratching under the dog’s chin.

He sighed, shoulders slumping, there were bigger issues to deal with than Naruto’s dog coddling tendencies (and his ninen’s encouragement of the behavior). He made the signs for “follow” and “slow” and dismissed the younger two dogs. Pakkun was enough now that they’d found the base scent to track.

Unfortunately, the sunlight was completely gone by now. They’d been traveling in darkness for a while and they needed to stop and get some rest for the night. No possible chaperones in sight, except for a pug. Kakashi felt his head start to pound again, but Naruto obediently followed his orders to make camp and they soon settled in the treetops, eating a dinner of travel-friendly leftovers carefully packed by Hana-san. Naruto sighed in the silence and then she was in front of him, Pakkun scooped up in her arms.

“It’s cold,” she said defensively, turning around to sit against him when he grunted in protest.

It might have been to her, a little. Kakashi felt fine, but they weren’t starting a fire tonight in an effort to minimize the chances they’d be noticed before finding their prey, and Naruto was wearing those orange shorts instead of the long pants Kakashi favored. He resigned himself to being used as her personal heater and kept his eyes focused forward on the darkness since he’d agreed to take first watch.

Naruto twisted to press her face against his shoulder and drew her sleeping bag more tightly around her.

“It’s not because you don’t want me, right?” She asked in an impossibly quiet voice.

Kakashi rolled his head back against the tree trunk.
“Kakashi?” She queried, voice managing to cut through the darkness in spite of its softness.

He waited a few more minutes, trying to find the words, the right words, to say to her. “That’s not it,” he admitted quietly, feeling his muscles relax in surrender, tired from fighting the inevitable conversation. “But I’m not what you need.”

Naruto pushed more closely against him, wrapping her arms around his chest. “That’s a bit presumptuous of you, don’t you think?”

Her voice was calm and familiar, her breath warm against the mask on his face.

“Shouldn’t I be the one deciding what I need,” she added, tone implying that the question wasn’t one he should answer. She pressed even closer.

“Naruto,” he groaned in warning. This was pushing the ‘using him as a heater’ privilege a bit too far.

“Kakashi,” she murmured, fingertips brushing his cheekbones, echoing the gesture he’d made earlier in the week. Only this time, the caress was far from an apology.

“Still here,” muttered Pakkun blithely.

A few seconds of silence.

Naruto gave in to the urge to giggle, and muffled her snickering against his vest.

“Just thought you should know,” confided Pakkun.

Kakashi rolled his eye, but one hand came up to cradle the back of Naruto’s head and the other wrapped around her waist. He rested his chin on top of her head as she drifted off to sleep, trying to come up with the argument that would counter the blonde’s. He wondered at how all the reasons why he’d been so vehemently against this had apparently been swallowed by the darkness.

It really wasn’t fair. How was he supposed to come up with reasons for her to leave when it felt so nice just to hold her in his arms like this? He sighed miserably into her hair. She remained asleep, her body warm against his, her steady breathing more comforting to Kakashi than it had any right to be.

When it was her turn to take watch, he rescued Pakkun from his stint as a stuffed animal. And then he pushed Naruto out of the tree.

Gently.

It wasn’t that far a drop.

However, the indignant screeching was inexplicably soothing to the frayed nerves he had accumulated the prior day.

“You’re supposed to be more mature than that!” Howled the blonde, throwing a handful of pebbles in his direction.

“Probably,” agreed Kakashi, shrugging nonchalantly.

The next morning, the trio kept tracking the scent trail. They followed it out of the woods, through a bog, a meadow, a few more hills, and back into the woods some time later.
Eventually, after much grumbling from Pakkun about being expected to follow old scents and dirty paws, and from Naruto about the accumulated mud in her hair and how Ino would never forgive her, they found a rundown cottage a hundred yards into a wooded area. It was off the path, but not truly hidden. Not hidden in the way it should be if a ninja never expected it to be found. Kakashi hesitated, Pakkun waiting at his ankles for further orders. He blinked at the blonde, but he’d only just signed “clones” before Naruto blared into sage mode, golden chakra fanning out around her.

Kakashi felt his eye twitch.

She straightened as she released the gathered energy. “It’s ok,” she assured her companion. “There’s no one around for miles.”

“Of course,” Kakashi bit out, “had there been, every single possible enemy would be alerted to your presence.”

Naruto frowned. “Well, no one did notice, because, as we’ve seen, the freshest scent we’ve found is several weeks old.”

“But it would have been safer to use kage bunshin, the chakra flare wouldn’t nearly be as noticeable,” countered Kakashi. “And that’s the order I gave you, you’re still my subordinate on this mission.”

“Sage mode tells me more than a kage bunshin can,” protested Naruto. “It’s the better option here, and I can tell you, there’s nothing troublesome about the shack!”

“You can’t know that,” insisted Kakashi, single eye crinkling with stress. “There will always be traps out there you’ve never run into, dangers you can’t see and can’t avoid. It wasn’t your decision to make!”

“Your being irrational,” the girl snapped back, lips pursing in displeasure. “And we’re supposed to be partners on this mission—and you’re supposed to be practicing letting me take charge of strategy, that’s what we talked about back in Konoha—“

Kakashi cut her off with an inarticulate noise and a choppy hand gesture. He took a moment to take a deep breath and forced himself to reign in his temper. Naruto was right in a way, he was supposed to be letting her take the lead in non-emergency scenarios, and there was no imminent danger or unusual pressure here. He was just upset she’d ignored his order and decided to do things differently.

“I’m going in,” muttered Naruto with a scowl, strutting forward into the shack.

Kakashi pushed his fingers up under his hitaiate and rubbed his head wearily. He was going to have to get used to her taking charge of the missions eventually. She was going to be the Hokage. One day.

Pakkun’s gaze slid up to meet his summoner’s.

“Don’t say anything,” warned Kakashi, not wanting another lecture from a canine about Naruto’s new position in the pack and how fighting the new roles would only be hurting the overall hierarchy.

“Wasn’t gonna,” denied the pug, trotting after the jōnin as they followed the impetuous chūnin into the dilapidated building.

Kakashi stepped into the ramshackle structure cautiously, testing the way the wood creaked underneath his feet and giving his eye a moment to adjust to the dim lighting. Pakkun stuck close to his feet sniffing curiously at the floorboards.
The dog snuffled further into the first room, which looked like it had once been a living area with a kitchen, although it lacked any appliances. Just a used fireplace and a rusty pot off to one side, abandoned kitchen utensils piled in the corner. No used knives or anything resembling weaponry.

Naruto strode back into the main room, resting her hand on the doorframe. “That one’s just a bedroom, nothing in there at all.” She ducked into the only remaining door. “This looks like it was an office though,” she called out, sounding excited.

“They were all three here, at one point in time,” muttered Pakkun, nose to the floor as he traced Naruto’s previous steps into the bedroom.

The copy ninja followed his human subordinate, grabbing her arm as she made to open a drawer.

“Careful,” he stressed, holding the girl’s wrist securely as he used his other hand to raise his headband and examine the area via sharingan. “Sage mode won’t catch every trap.”

Naruto made an exasperated noise, but let Kakashi complete his examination before she started opening the drawers. “Papers!” She exclaimed excitedly, handing the pile to the older shinobi.

Kakashi flicked through the pages, keeping most of his attention on Naruto’s continued exploration of the drawers and boxes in the room.

“More paper,” she brought over the new documents and put them on the desk. “Some scrolls too, but they’re all empty,” she set them down and went back to her search.

The majority of the papers in Kakashi’s hands were full of numbers that were meaningless to him. They didn’t match any code he knew (and he did know all of Konoha’s, thanks to the sharingan). They didn’t appear to be coordinates for anything. They seemed like mathematical calculations, but for what he didn’t know. This one looked like a grocery list and on the back a childish drawing —“Pakkun.”

The dog was there immediately, sniffing at the paper.

“Human puppies,” agreed the pug. “Don’t know them, though.”

“Didn’t expect you to—”

Naruto’s surprised gasp echoed in his ears, and he turned around as she fell to the floor, a puppet whose strings had just been cut.

Pakkun was by her side in an instant, sniffing at the scroll that had fallen to the floor with her.

Kakashi was frozen, his chest cold—pain, until he realized that the pain was because he wasn’t breathing. He approached numbly, hand reaching up to automatically check the pulse point in her neck—even though he knew Pakkun would have said something if—he still couldn’t help but collapse forward a bit when he found her pulse, slow and steady as if she was only sleeping.

“Some type of seal in the scroll,” growled Pakkun. “I can smell the chakra, but I don’t know what it does.”

Kakashi carefully pulled the scroll toward him, using his sharingan to watch the activated chakra seep slowly from the seal on the pages and evaporate into the surrounding environment, its purpose accomplished.

He didn’t recognize the design. It wasn’t something he’d seen Sensei use. Or Jiraiya. Or anyone else
for that matter.

Well, shit. He rubbed at his face tiredly.

He turned his attention back to his teammate with a frown. To Nar—no, his teammate. Just his teammate right now. He couldn’t think about how she was more. He wouldn’t stop thinking then, and he had to think to—to fix things.

Protocol.

He’d established she was breathing.

Basic diagnostic revealed nothing, even her chakra stores seemed at full capacity. He opened her eyelids, peering at the blue orbs beneath them. Nothing unusual. No demonic chakra hopefully meant that Kurama’s seal wasn’t affected, and yet, at the same time, it dashed the hope that this was something the chakra beast could remedy.

It was a seal, so genjutsu was probably out, but just in case, he ran his chakra through her system, trying to disrupt any illusion that might have taken hold.

Nothing.

She slept on, breathing steady and deep.

He pinched her cheeks. Called her name. Poured some water on her.

Nothing.

Eventually, he tore his gaze away from her and faced the other occupant of the room.

“Orders?” asked the pug, sounding far too calm for the situation.

Kakashi blinked at the dog, dazed, not entirely sure what to do. Nothing was working. He couldn’t wake her up—what if she never woke up—

“Boss,” barked the pug, “If you can’t fix her, we need to get her back to Konoha, stat.”

“Right,” agreed Kakashi, shaking his head, locking the things that were keeping him from operating into a box in the back of his mind. He shoved the papers he’d picked up into his pack, grabbed the problem scroll, tried to make it look like they hadn’t been there—but they’d stirred up the dust and he didn’t have time to—their scent—

“Let’s go, Boss,” commanded the dog.

So they went.

Kakashi didn’t remember much of the return trip to Konoha. He remembered releasing Pakkun, because he was faster alone. He remembered running, and taking soldier pills to keep going, and stopping to give Naruto water every now and then because he knew that she needed it but she wouldn’t wake and she needed food and he needed a medic—why was there no medic on this mission Tsunade-sama always had medics on the missions now that she was in charge and—

“Sensei,” gasped Sakura, as he slid into the Emergency Room, so thankful to find a familiar face on
duty—he’d bypassed the gate check and probably raised a few alarms, but he didn’t have enough energy left to be bothered by it.

“She won’t wake,” he managed to rasp, it had been a few days since he’d spoken, his throat was so dry. When did he last remember to take a drink?

He tried to follow them, as Sakura single handedly took Naruto from him and carried her away—but, she bossed some gawking aides into taking the copy ninja’s arms and pushing him into a chair. The weight of his teammate taken from him should have been a relief; she was getting help.

Kakashi just felt panic at the sight of the person he cared about most being carted motionlessly from the room. Out of his line of sight. Just like Sakumo, Obito, Rin, Minato, Kushina—

Someone pushed a cup of water into his hand, and he tried to drink it, but his hand was shaking so badly that he dropped it. Why was it shaking? Another cup was placed into his hand and the person helped guide it to his mouth this time. And then there was healing chakra flowing into him and the room grew dark.

He woke to the steady beeps of the heart monitor, reassuring in their repetitiveness, if annoying. He sighed and sank into the pillows as the familiar scents of the Konoha hospital washed over him.

Not again. His mind was fuzzy and struggling to pull itself back together but he had the inkling he should be more worried than annoyed. Ahh-chakra exhaustion, good to see you again old friend. He couldn’t feel his toes—nope, there was that strange electric tingling. Good. At least he still had toes.

He could smell the sodium chloride in the IV attached to his arm, the ache where the line connected, and the chakra of—

Bright lights, cold hands, he grimaced, flinching back and blinking his tearing eyes up at the intruder filling his line of sight.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” drawled Tsunade as she pulled away and brought his hitiaie down to cover his sharingan. Her voice was laced with enough irritation to make sure he knew that she was going to cut him up and serve him to Suna on a platter if he didn’t snap to it and answer her questions.

He shook his head and squirmed, trying to bring back the feeling to his limbs quicker so that he could respond, he needed to respond—he’d been on a, a mission, with his teammate—with Naruto. And Naruto had tackled him because she said—she said there’d been another mission—

Kakashi’s eyes flew open in indignation. “You! You owe me an explanation,” he said. Tried to say. It came out very slurred and dry because he’d not had water in forever and not at all as scary as he meant it to because Tsunade looked like she was about to laugh and, and—he tried to sit up and fell over on his elbow.

Tsunade reached over and righted him. “Well I’m not so happy with you either mister. What made you think you could take my successor out on what was supposed to be a hike in the woods and come back with her comatose?”

“Naruto!” Kakashi cried in alarm, she wouldn’t wake up and he brought her here because she couldn’t—he ran a palm over his face in frustration, fingers catching on his mask.
He accepted the glass of water Tsunade handed him and took a few minutes to sip at it while his brain reordered itself.

“She’s breathing, but stuck fast asleep,” explained Tsunade as the copy ninja collected himself. “It’s not a true coma, the brain readings are consistent with sleep not coma, but we can’t wake her. And the only person who knows what happened over did it and passed out from chakra exhaustion when he arrived at the hospital,” added Tsunade dryly.

“It was the scroll,” Kakashi elaborated when he finally felt like his throat was back in working order, ignoring the Hokage’s jibe at his propensity to ignore his own needs for the sake of his teammates. “She opened it and then just fell,” he gestured helplessly, “like that. There was a seal—“

“This thing,” asked Tsunade doubtfully, pulling out the scroll in question from Kakashi’s mission pack.

“That thing,” agreed Kakashi.

Tsunade frowned. “We found it in your belongings, but no one I’ve shown it to has recognized the design. I put someone in research on it just in case this was related but they haven’t found anything yet.” The village leader sounded cross, as if Kakashi and Naruto had done this purposefully, just to ruin her day.

Kakashi ran his hands through his hair. “Have they looked at Jiraiya’s journals?”

“No,” snorted the Godaime. “You have Jiraiya’s journals. And Minato’s. And Kushina’s. All carefully locked tight in your well-trapped apartment because you’ve presumably been using them to train Naruto,” she added cheerfully.

Kakashi scowled. “I’ll go get them.”

“Not today,” stated the woman firmly, pushing him back down on the bed. “Naruto’s status is completely stable and has been for almost a week now. You, however, are a mess.” She wrinkled her nose at the man.

“I need to help,” fumed Kakashi, batting her hands away.

“You need,” stressed Tsunade, “at least one more day of rest. What good are you going to be if you’re so tired you can’t think straight when you go through those notes? Get some sleep, get a bit more chakra, and then,” continued Tsunade, pausing before she stepped out the door, “when you can complete a shower without falling over—” She gave him a look that implied he needed one badly. “Then you can start your research.”

Kakashi shrank back into the covers.

He wasn’t sulking.

Really.

The next time he woke, it was to the smell of coffee and the sound of pages being turned precisely every forty-five seconds. It was easier this time to wake. It only took a minute for his mind to re-gather itself and for his heavy eyelids to blink open to greet his guest.
“Sakura-chan,” he murmured, watching as the familiar green eyes jumped up to greet him.

“Sensei,” breathed the medic nin in relief, setting her coffee and textbook on the table. She scooted her chair closer toward him and rested her hands on the edge of his bed.

“You’ve got to stop doing this to yourself. And you’re late for practice.” Her tone was a mixture of scolding and tearful, and Kakashi internally winced. He’d forgotten how good she could be at guilt trips.

“Naruto’s fault,” he said somberly, the words intended to be teasing but coming out dark and sad. It was an honest excuse, but not one in which he took pleasure making.

“I heard,” the pink-haired girl said softly, eyes dropping.

Kakashi reached over to pat her hand. “She’ll be fine.” He hoped he was projecting confidence.

Sakura’s weak smile implied she didn’t believe him.

“I just need to get up and get started on researching those seals,” he struggled to sit up to emphasize his point. His body was heavier than he expected it to be, and he held back his grumble at having to accept Sakura’s assistance.

“I heard that too,” Sakura admitted. “So I went and got your notes. I thought bringing them to you might keep you here a little bit longer and get you started on what you needed earlier.”

Kakashi blinked in surprise. “You brought my …?” He trailed off as Sakura leaned over and hauled a large box up onto his hospital bed.

“Your notes,” continued Sakura. “Or at least, all the notes in your apartment that had to do with sealing.”

“But I had them locked up,” wondered the copy ninja, picking a journal up out of the box and skimming through it, verifying that it was indeed Jiraiya’s.

“About that,” confessed Sakura, feigning embarrassment. “Hypothetically, some completely anonymous individual may have commissioned a C-rank mission specifically for Sasuke-kun, to break into your apartment and retrieve certain journals.”

Kakashi gazed blankly at her, not too sure how to feel about his students breaking into his personal belongings.

“Gai and Lee volunteered to supervise,” added Sakura. “So it was all legal.”

As if that was reassuring.

“And Sasuke appealed the ranking because he thought the level of traps should make it B-rank at least, but Iruka-san and Shizune were on the appeal board so he got shot down.”

“Wonderful. My apartment only rates a C-class mission.” Kakashi fingered the binding on the journal and tossed it aside, digging further into the box. He would need Minato’s notes most likely, he had always been better at sealing theory. Kushina acted more on intuition, and Jiraiya didn’t document his thought process with as much detail.

“Only for someone with a sharingan,” said Sakura in an attempt at consolation.
Once he was cleared to toddle around on crutches like some broken old man, Kakashi made his home in Naruto’s hospital room. He dumped out all his scrolls and notes haphazardly across the chairs and commandeered Naruto’s visitors (particularly Konohamaru) into running errands to the research department and fetching his food.

He’d not found the seal in any of the notes, not that he was surprised. He’d looked through all the pages before, and none of them had popped into his head when he’d first seen the problem seals design. However, supposedly, this seal came from a ninja who’d studied in Konoha. Someone who’d been working for Danzo. So, he’d copied the seal and sent it to Tsunade, who’d sent it off to whoever had sorted the recently discovered Root files to cross check them for anything resembling the seal.

They’d not found a match so far, but they had pulled a few articles on sealing out from the collection and sent them on for Kakashi’s review. They were not novel articles, and mirrored some discussions between Jiraiya and Minato. It was as if a third party had been involved in discussing the theories the two had developed.

Kakashi didn’t remember anyone else studying sealing with his teacher, apart from Kushina. And she wasn’t really into the theory. For Kushina, seals either worked or they didn’t. And mostly they did. Like Naruto. Which frustrated and baffled Minato endlessly, and wouldn’t Minato be flustered to realize Naruto took after her mother that way—

Kakashi shut the journal he was working on with a loud snap and threw it at the wall across the room. It smacked loudly against the plaster and then fell to the floor with a sad plop.

“Wow,” came the voice from the doorway. “What’d that poor book ever do to you?” Kurenai stepped into the room with some take out bags held in front of her like a peace offering. “My darling nephew said you needed dinner?”

The copy ninja sighed and waved her in, taking the food with a tired “thank you.”

“Ramen.” He said flatly, looking at the contents of the package as the door shut with a click.

“I suppose I thought that if we ate it in front of her, she might wake up.” Kurenai teased him wistfully, eyes dark as she watched the rise and fall of the girl’s chest.

Kakashi didn’t comment, stirring his food halfheartedly.

“Konohamaru-kun says you’re spending all your time here,” the kunoichi stated lightly. “Says you only leave to use the restroom when one of your students comes to visit.” She paused to take a dainty bite of food, but continued when it became clear the copy ninja wasn’t going to speak. “It’ll be ok if you leave to get some fresh air, you know, it might do you some good, be refreshing—“

“Stop!” Kakashi scowled, the word came out louder and harsher than he meant it to.

Kurenai paused, food half way to her mouth, eyes wide with surprise.

Kakashi glanced down at his hands, took a few moments to even out his breathing and relax his grip on the arms of the chair. He didn’t want to leave—if he left she might, what if something—she’d be gone when he got back if she left. She couldn’t—she couldn’t disappear if she was right in front of his eyes.

“She’s not going to vanish, Kakashi,” said Kurenai softly, as if she was reading his mind.
“I do,” insisted Kurenai gently. “I’ve read her charts, talked with Tsunade, she’s absolutely fine. Whatever’s happened isn’t affecting her chakra stores. It’s just sleep. She’ll be the most well-rested kunoichi in Konoha when we finally wake her up. Until then, her room is guarded by ANBU constantly, and that’s not including you—“

Kakashi snorted. He wasn’t much of a guard right now. He could probably get in one good whack with his crutches but otherwise—

“And she’ll be perfectly fine if you step outside—“

“Why did you tell her to take the mission?” Kakashi asked without preface, dropping his chopsticks into his takeout box with disinterest.

“I—what?” Kurenai stammered in genuine confusion at the abrupt topic change.

“The mission to seduce me,” hissed Kakashi, hands running over his face. “The one you and Tsunade-sama thought was apparently a brilliant idea, considering she has absolutely zero experience in that area and, of course, I’m clearly such a pervert that I’d go for—“

“Stop that,” snapped Kurenai.

Kakashi looked up at the thick anger in Kurenai’s voice and posture. To her credit, the woman didn’t ask how he’d found out about the mission, or even how much he knew.

“That’s not what we thought at all,” Kurenai was rigid, mouth pursed together. “I—“ she twisted, looking over her shoulder to make sure the door was shut. “I don’t know what Tsunade-sama was thinking. I was assigned only after Naruto took the mission.”

Kakashi felt his stomach knotting. His throat closed as his fists clenched once more. “You had no business interfering—“

“But I did!” Kurenai’s eyes flashed as she defended her actions. “The Hokage assigned me as an advisor to Naruto, and I admit,” she took in a deep breath. “At first I was going to tell her to let the assignment go, that it probably wouldn’t be worth it, it might ruin your relationship for good and the both of you—you both needed each other.”

An oppressive quiet settled over the pair, broken only by the heart monitor chirping its electrical reassurance of Naruto’s continued existence.

Kakashi felt the woman’s words settle into his bones with the heavy weight of truth. He worked to hide any embarrassment that he felt at the idea that someone else could see he hadn’t been—hadn’t been enough on his own.

“She doesn’t need me,” grunted the male jōnin finally, breaking the stalemate.

“Yes, yes she does,” sighed Kurenai wearily.

“Yes, yes she does,” sighed Kurenai wearily.

“Why,” Kakashi prompted, needing the answer, trying to figure out how to deal with the wounds Kurenai’s actions had left in his spirit and still trust her. Trying to understand why anyone would think Naruto needed him.

“Kakashi,” Kurenai said slowly, cautiously releasing her words, as if trying to minimize the damage. “When I sat down with her on my couch, and talked with her about what she was feeling, why she’d
accepted this mission—I realized she already loved you.” Kurenai gave a lopsided smile as she gazed at the floor. “And then, when I talked with you, I realized you loved her too.”

Kakashi made a wounded noise, and something in his chest throbbed in sharp pain, as if someone had lodged a kunai in his rib cage.

“Naruto is the type of person that needs to love others,” continued Kurenai. “And she so desperately wants that love to be returned. You were doing it so well already, but if you could each give the other just a little more—” Kurenai trailed off, staring out the window.

“You’re both my friends, you know” confessed Kurenai, still not meeting his eyes. “I just want you both to be happy. You were both so lonely, both so unhappy. It takes so much, for you especially, to let someone close to you like that, and she already was. If you both loved each other already,” the kunoichi hesitated, biting her lip before she finished. “If you both loved each other already, the only thing preventing you from being happier, was the misperception that such a relationship wasn’t ok, or the belief that the other didn’t want you that way, or,” she finished gently, “it was the belief that you weren’t good enough.”

“All of those,” Kurenai shook her head, pushing her hair back behind her head. “All of those were just excuses, false thoughts, lies. I wish I’d let myself have more time with Asuma, and not let stupid excuses get in the way for so long. I didn’t want you and her to have the same—the same regrets.”

She swallowed. “So I’m sorry. I know I probably hurt you. I’ve been manipulative, and perhaps what I think is in your best interest isn’t what you believe to be in your best interest.”

Kakashi said nothing, still running her words through his mind—lost in the assertions she made so confidently; trying to examine the situation from her perspective; considering the idea that Naruto needed him and how that might be true.

“I’m so sorry that I hurt you,” Kurenai rose to her feet, wrapping her arms around her chest. “And I truly hope this doesn’t ruin our friendship, but”—her voice broke, catching Kakashi’s attention.

He raised tired eyes to meet her torn expression.

“If she makes you happy Kakashi,” pleaded the kunoichi, “If you truly love her, the only thing stopping the two of you from being together is you. If you stop fighting yourself, it won’t be perfect. There will be fights and misunderstandings and disputes over who is taking up too much of the closet, but I promise it will be wonderful. It will be worth it. But you have to fight for it, Kakashi, not against it.” She snapped her mouth shut, visibly using all her will power to keep from saying anything more. She clasped her hands together and bowed deeply, dark hair falling over shoulders.

“Kakashi,” she stopped at the door, turned toward him. “You say she doesn’t need you, and yet,” she tapped her finger against the door frame, cast one more sad look at the bed. “You’re the one who’s here, aren’t you?”

And then she left.

Kakashi stared at her empty seat for hours, her rhetorical question ringing in his ears. Of course he was here. He was here because, because—

Konohamaru stumbled into the room with a pile of papers and a sneezing Udon.

Kakashi made the boy go pick up the book he’d thrown across the room before his aunt had so rudely interrupted him.
“It is unusual to see her so still,” Sai commented, although not in irritation, considering the contentment he was exuding as he ran sweeping brushstrokes across the canvas he’d set arranged on an easel in Naruto’s hospital room.

“I’m sure she’d appreciate you using her coma as an excuse to make a decent portrait,” drawled Sasuke, arms crossed in displeasure as he glowered darkly at the bed. He was either trying to set it on fire by using handseal-less ninjutsu, or personally offended that another person was sleeping when he decided to grace them with a visit. Knowing Sasuke, it was probably both.

“Yes,” agreed Sai placidly. “She complains so much about staying still for extended periods of time when she is awake. I’m sure she will find the fact that I made good use of this time most pleasing when she realizes I’m required to paint her portrait as Hokage.”

“Please tell me Naruto’s official Hokage portrait won’t be of her in a hospital bed,” groaned Sakura, looking up in alarm.

Sai hummed noncommittally.

“Have we been her only visitors?” asked Sasuke suddenly, the unusual question causing everyone in the room to turn their heads toward him.

Sakura’s response was stiff. “I’ve checked the visitor log, but so far it’s just been us, and Kurenai-sensei and Konohamaru-kun and his friends.”

Sasuke grunted and resumed his brooding.

“Were you expecting someone else?” Asked Kakashi, frowning at the odd tension between his two students.

“It’s just that,” Sakura flicked her green eyes at him hesitantly. “She’d mentioned meeting someone recently. We thought he might come see her.”

Sasuke shook his head. “It doesn’t matter, and it’s not any of our business” he said decisively. “Everyone important to her has come so…” he trailed off with a shrug.

“Has anyone told Iruka-sensei what happened?” inquired Sai, not bothering to pause in his painting.

Sakura blanched. “No.” She drank the last of her coffee and stood up, brushing imaginary wrinkles out of her hospital uniform. “I’ll go let him know now.”

“I’ll go too.” Sasuke rolled to his feet.

“Really,” Sakura squeaked, looking baffled.

“Kakashi’s the only one who’s being any help here,” Sasuke grumbled in discontent as they walked out of the room. “I’d rather feel like I’m doing something productive than sit and gossip—“

“It’s not gossip if we’re trying to figure out who it was. She really liked him,” snapped Sakura. “It’d be nice if he were here when she wakes up; you know how lonely she gets—”

Kakashi stared blankly at his notes for a few minutes as their voices faded down the hall. He wasn’t thinking about how Naruto was lonely. Or how he was lonely. Or how the loneliness seemed smaller when his apartment was full of vibrant, bubbly blonde chūnin.
He didn’t think about how it would come roaring back if she never woke.

“Sunflowers are a perfectly appropriate flower, Hinata-chan,” bossed Ino as she and the Hyuuga heiress hauled in another two vases of the ridiculous flowers. Shikamaru followed behind in beaten obedience with another table to hold them all. Chouji was eating an apple from a basket of fruit he’d brought for the girl—who wasn’t actually able to eat the food.

Shino stood awkwardly against the wall for three whole minutes before walking out.

Nobody paid him any mind; he’d be back tomorrow to do the same thing.

“And no, Kiba, I don’t care that they make you sneeze,” hollered the blonde, loudly enough so that her voice carried into the hallway. “You don’t need to be in here anyway!”

Kakashi let the girl rearrange his crutches and nodded along to her mindless babble. When the crowd left, the Hyuuga heiress stayed behind.

Kakashi raised his head to look at her when he registered that her feet had been standing in the corner of his vision for the past fifteen minutes.

“Can I help you with anything?” The girl asked quietly when Kakashi met her eyes.

Kakashi was about to shoo her away, politely of course, when his stomach growled loudly. He carefully did not look at the trash can in the corner that was overflowing with empty take out boxes. “I could use some food,” he admitted, “some real food.”

Hinata smiled back at him, perking up a bit. “I can do that.”

When she returned, she sat with him as he ate his meal.

“It’s nice to know she has you,” said Hinata, as he was trying to swallow a carrot.

Kakashi looked at the heiress carefully. “She has a lot of friends. I know she’ll appreciate that everyone came by.”

Hinata laughed softly. “But you’re the most important, you know?”

Kakashi froze, not sure what to say when faced with Hinata’s perceptiveness.

“I was worried about her for a while,” explained Hinata, as if she wasn’t exposing secrets Kakashi was struggling to face himself. “She’s so strong most of the time. But, where she’s weakest, it would be easy for another to take advantage of her. I’m glad you have each other; you complement each other nicely.”

Kakashi made a pained noise.

“It’s not that she’s said anything specific,” Hinata added gently. “But there are only a handful of men in the Village who can actually keep up with her Hatake-san. It wasn’t hard to figure out who she’s been mooning over the past few months.”

She stood, sweeping her hair over her shoulder with a graceful movement. “Please let me know if you need anything else while you’re here.” Her gaze travelled to the bed, eyes pained. “I know there’s not much I can do to help her right now myself; but I can at least take care of you, so you can take care of her. Right?”
She gave a small bow and left.

Kakashi rubbed his hand over his face.

*I’m here, because I care. She’s my teammate. Of course I care.*

Kakashi was a wonderfully terrible liar.

“—I have run 13 additional laps around Konoha today and I will run 14 tomorrow,” assured Lee vehemently to the nonresponsive body resting on the bed.

“You only ran ten,” countered Ten-ten from where she sat on the bed, brushing the snarls out of Naruto’s long hair.

“Oh no!” Lee gasped with dramatic sincerity. “I shall remedy my error right now by running 20 more laps. On my hands! Backwards!” His yelling continued as he ran down the hospital hall, but his voice grew muffled by the distance and Kakashi couldn’t make out his additional tasks of contrition.

“Ten-ten,” Gai said with a frown, “that was not very youthful.”

“I’ll stop when he stops falling for it,” Ten-ten replied, humming as she continued to braid Naruto’s hair.

Gai gave her his best disappointed look, and Ten-ten tied off the braid with a sigh. “I’ll go join him,” she grudgingly conceded, before taking a leap out of the window.

Gai took the seat next to Kakashi when she left, for once letting companionable silence fill the room as Kakashi scratched away at an outline of a counter-seal.

“I think I might have it soon,” said Kakashi wearily, tracing the design.

Gai grinned. “That would be most wonderful, Rival! I imagine she will be overjoyed to be awake once more. Such a sleep does not suit her at all,” the jōnin added, glancing at the bed.

“No,” mused Kakashi in agreement. “It really doesn’t.”

They sat together quietly for a few more minutes, the steady beeping of the heart monitor and the scratches of Kakashi’s brush the only sounds interrupting the afternoon.

“I think I love her, Gai,” murmured Kakashi with a sigh, shoulders slumping at the admission.

“What a youthful sentiment, Rival,” Gai hummed in acknowledgement. “It’s good to hear you say so.”

Kakashi spared the man a flat look. “You already knew.”

“Most certainly,” agreed the taijutsu expert, teeth gleaming.

“I didn’t know,” the copy ninja crossed his arms with a scowl.

Gai gave him a good-natured whack on the back which scooted the other ninja’s chair forward a good five inches. “I’m glad to hear that you’ve finally tapped into your youthful spirit!”
Kakashi leaned back in his chair, watching the sunlight filter in through the blinds. “You’re calling me old again, aren’t you?”

It took three weeks, four days, and thirteen hours for Kakashi to deconstruct the sleep seal and construct a counter. It took him ten minutes to test his creation on an overly eager Guruko. Two minutes to paint one on the back of Naruto’s hand. Five seconds to activate it. Thirty seconds of holding his breath while Naruto remained still, until her fingers twitched under his hand, and the blue eyes he hadn’t seen in far, far too long, finally opened.

“Hey,” she said weakly, voice rough from disuse, familiar smile widening at the sight of his face.

He blinked several times, Obito’s eye acting up again under his hitaiate.

Her smile fell a bit. “Why are you shaking?” She raised a hand up to his face, fingertips touching his mask gently.

Kakashi grabbed her hand and sank down in the chair he’d pulled up next to her bed. He dropped his head gently on her stomach, the hand clutching hers still gripping it tightly.

“Why are you shaking?” She repeated in concern, voice still hoarse, raising her free hand so that she could run her fingers soothingly through his hair.

“It’s ok.” Her voice was faint in his ears.

He was so tired.

So, so tired.

“It’s ok.”

It was two more days before Tsunade released Naruto from the hospital.

The Hokage wanted to make sure the girl was completely rehydrated and had put the younger blonde through a battery of various tests. Fortunately, the exercises that a Nara clan aide and Sakura had run Naruto’s body through routinely kept the muscles from atrophying too badly. Kakashi was sure that Tsunade would rather Naruto stay longer, but the older woman was rapidly tiring of her successor’s near successful attempts to taunt Sasuke into a spar in the exam room. Furthermore, Sakura was running out of clipboards with which to hit people.

“And so, I opened the scroll and the seal activated as soon as I did,” explained Naruto, legs kicking against the bed as she sat on its edge. “I wasn’t expecting it to do that, but the next thing I knew I was just so sleepy—"

Tsunade removed her glowing green hand from the girl’s head. “Well, there doesn’t appear to be any lasting damage, but please try not to repeat this episode. You’re lucky it wasn’t an area effect seal. You and Kakashi are our only sealing experts. If it had hit both of you— I might have eventually figured out what happened, but I have a Village to run,” the Hokage huffed and put her hands on her hips. “I wouldn’t have had the time to spend three weeks ceaselessly researching a solution.”
Naruto blushed and studied her bare feet. “I know.”

The Godaime leaned forward and ruffled her hair. “I’m releasing you from the hospital, but I still want you under supervision for a week or so. Just to make sure you don’t have some kind of relapse. With my luck it’d hit you while you were in the tub, you’d drown, and I’d be stuck with this damn hat forever.”

“I’m not going to be done in by a bathtub, believe it!” Naruto whined indignantly at the older woman.

Tsunade snorted. “So, will you be staying with Sakura-chan, or are you still fine staying with—”

“Yeah, no,” blurted Naruto. “I mean, I’m good. I’m still staying—” her eyes widened suddenly and her head turned toward the man slouching next to the doorframe. “I’m still staying with you, right? I mean,” she blushed. “We’re still good right?”

Kakashi smiled faintly, eye curving. “We’re good.”

Naruto beamed, grin so wide and bright that Kakashi could feel the warmth of it from across the room.

Tsunade rolled her eyes. “Then pack up and get out of here. I don’t want to have to deal with any more written reports about you getting into wheel chair races in the halls.”

“Kiba dared Lee and me!” Naruto huffed indignantly. “You can’t turn down dares—“

She continued to mutter protests as Tsunade strolled from the room, Kakashi following in her wake to give the chūnin some privacy to pack up and change.

The walk back to Kakashi’s apartment was quiet, neither party wanting to voice their current thoughts in public. Kakashi had ditched his crutches several weeks ago, but he’d only gone home for the first time yesterday, to make sure it was more habitable than not. He’d slept for ten hours and returned just in time to stop Naruto from summoning a toad to put in her neighbor’s bed.

He had no idea if Naruto’s own apartment was livable again; he hadn’t checked.

Naruto hummed happily as she followed him back home, cradling a vase stuffed with sunflowers in her arms which she set on the kitchen table.

Kakashi sat on the couch and interlocked his fingers, resting his elbows on his knees. He watched the blonde bob about the kitchen happily babbling about a recent conversation with Hinata. She retrieved an orange from the refrigerator and peeled it apart, picking at the slices. She slid up on top of the counter to eat her treat but paused when she caught Kakashi’s serious, contemplative gaze.

“Are you ok,” she lowered the fruit, brow furrowed in concern.

Kakashi thought about saying ‘yes, of course, why shouldn’t he be.’ The words lodged in his throat.

Naruto slid off the counter, abandoning the orange, and approached Kakashi cautiously. She stopped in front of him. Her knees bumped softly against his.

Kakashi swallowed, looking up at her imploringly. “You can’t ever do that again.” He wasn’t sure if he was giving an order or making a request.

Naruto leaned down, letting Kakashi pull her into his lap on the couch and draw her close.
He buried his face in her hair, trying to memorize the way she felt in his arms, warm, breathing, awake, and alive.

“That can’t ever happen again,” he repeated, firmly. It was more of an oath this time. It couldn’t happen again. It couldn’t ever happen again.

“You can’t keep me safe from everything,” protested Naruto, although she didn’t fight his hold.

“I can try,” he growled.

She hit him gently, laughing, and pulled back to look him in the eye. “No, you really can’t. But we were being safe you know, and there will come a time when even though we check you and I are going to miss something—”

The pressure in Kakashi’s chest felt immense, as if his heart were caught in a juicer and being squeezed.

“But it will be ok,” continued Naruto, running her hand up and down his arm reassuringly. “You know how I know?”

Kakashi humored her. “How?”

“Because I know I can trust you to have my back, and figure out what went wrong, and fix it,” Naruto smiled up at him. “And I need you to trust me to do the same for you.”

Kakashi released a shuddering breath and let his forehead rest against hers.

She pressed her lips against his cheek, a chaste kiss against his masked face. “I am sorry, though.” She buried her face in the crook of his neck. “I’m so sorry I worried you so much. But I’m so happy you stayed with me,” she swallowed, pressed closer. “And I’m so happy you were there when I woke up.”

She pulled back briefly, rearranged her legs so they were straddling his lap, bringing up her hands to frame his face. “Is this,” she hesitated, blue eyes gazing at him intently, “is this ok?”

Kakashi didn’t flinch when he met her gaze this time, didn’t pull away. “This is fine,” he said instead, felt his lips twitch upward underneath his mask.

Naruto’s eyes widened, hope spreading across her features. “Seriously?” She hesitated. The edges of her fingers were hooked into his mask, ready to pull it down but still waiting for him to give permission, testing to see if he’d pull away one more time.

Kakashi’s eye crinkled with smile. “This is more than fine.” His hands tightened around her waist, slipping under her shirt to stroke her sides encouragingly as she pulled down his mask so her mouth could crash against his own.

It wasn’t sweet and tender, not this time.

This time it was eager and forceful, the passion in the collision making up for any inexperience.

“It’s not going to be easy, Naruto,” said Kakashi, slightly breathless, when Naruto finally pulled away for a moment—which was due more to the fact that she was struggling to get his vest off than that she had any inclination to stop any time soon. Still, Kakashi thought he should take the time to explain while he could, however distracting Naruto’s fingers were as they scrambled to undo buttons or her thighs were as they tightened around his own. “I’m going to mess this up,” Kakashi
stammered, desperate to make her see that this was, most likely, yet another horribly bad decision in the string of inevitably horribly bad decisions that made up the life of Hatake Kakashi.

Naruto dropped her head into the curve of Kakashi’s neck, pressing joyful kisses against his jaw. “I’m going to mess up too, you dork,” she giggled, finally getting his vest undone and tugging it off of him, tossing it carelessly somewhere behind the couch. He heard it hit something that toppled over with a crash, but was a bit too distracted by the energetic blonde pressing against him to see if anything had broken.

“Naruto,” he protested, although it came out more like a moan than a plea for her to calm down. “This could go very badly, we should probably talk—“

She laughed in delight, pulling back so that she was looming above him, running her hands through his hair once more, only with more energy this time, more urgency, tugging off his hititate as she went. “I am so done with talking,” she said with a happy sigh.

His sharingan blinked open reflexively, capturing that grin she had, the one he’d seen once before, when she tricked him into falling in the mud after avoiding training her teammates all day—and the same feeling was back, that stirring in his gut that he’d known meant trouble and had, at the time, done his best to push away, ignore, deny, and re-direct. Now he let the heat grow, as his own hands moved up, bringing with them the edge of Naruto’s shirt, tugging it up and over her head before it was sent to join his vest. A lovely, anticipatory flush covered Naruto’s face as she surged back down, mouth melting against his fervently, yearning for contact—more, closer, warmer, frantic.

He certainly did not yelp when her cold hands pushed roughly up under his own shirt; but, he did enjoy the squeaks she made when his hands dipped into her shorts in retaliation, trailing around the curve of her ass. He pulled her even closer against him as she tightened her legs around him reflexively.

He obligingly rolled them over, pressing her firmly into the couch cushions.

They’d talk tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Beta(s): ElectraSev5n (who did an amazing job of being a patient sounding board for this chapter and helping me figure out why certain things were going wrong and what might be done to salvage this mess).

Remember this is not canon finale compliant, which means certain things and techniques that exist in Naruto don’t here. READ: IF ANYONE SNIPES THAT KAKASHI SHOULD HAVE USED KAMUI I WILL PRINT OUT YOUR REVIEW AND SET IT ON FIRE AND LAUGH MANIACALLY IN PLEASURE AS YOUR WORDS DIE, BURNING PAINFULLY AWAY INTO NOTHINGNESS. So, *cough*, other than that, I’d love to hear from you all.
Endings and Beginnings

Chapter Summary

In which there is cuddling. And missing nin. Not together. Really.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You’ve got to let me go.”

“Nooooooo,” Naruto mumbled sleepily, nosing closer to the broad shoulder she was nestling against; enjoying the warmth of snuggling with another solid body under well-worn covers.

“Naruto, I have to get up. I have somewhere to be.”

A distant part of Naruto’s brain spasmed at the irony of that statement, but she couldn’t muster enough energy to verbalize her derision. She merely tightened her arms around her sturdy companion. *Since when did he have to be anywhere this early anyway?*

“Naruto.”

“Mrfff.” She rubbed the tip of her toes against Kakashi’s calves.

“Your feet are cold.”

“Liar,” she shifted upward, sighing the word into the hairs at the base of his neck.

“I have to pee.”

“Ten more minutes.” She was firm in her resolve to win this argument.

She felt Kakashi’s muscles uncoil in surrender and he stretched out his arms, settling more comfortably into the bed. She hummed encouragingly and savored the moment, knowing that she’d really have to wake up soon enough—

A pfftt of air and she squawked in surprise as the weight of the human body in her arms was suddenly replaced with that of an eighty pound bulldog.

“Woof,” greeted Bull, complete with a thoroughly slobbery ‘good morning’ kiss.

“Tsunade-sama, Tsunade—“

“Later, Shizune.” The older woman protested as she brushed past her harried, flustered assistant and into her own office. “It’s seven in the morning, it can at least wait until I’ve had a cup of coff—“

Tsunade stopped short when she saw who was waiting for her inside, calmly leaning against her desk.
“—feee.” Tsunade blinked three times and then backtracked a few steps to bring her alongside her keeper.

“Shizune-chan.” Tsunade looked ponderously down at her coffee cup. “Shizune-chan, I think you should check the coffee. I could swear I just saw Hatake in my office.”

“That’s what I was trying to tell you, Tsunade-sama,” the brunette whispered in alarm. “He’s been there for forty five minutes now.”

Tsunade scrunched up her face in displeasure and tightened her grip. “Greeaattt,” she drawled, with an unsurprising lack of enthusiasm. She turned her back to the door and finished her coffee.

“Should I tell him to come back later?” Shizune offered as she flicked through the pages of the schedule on her clipboard to see if she could squeeze in the jōnin later during the day.

Tsunade grunted dismissively and finished the last of her coffee. She squared her shoulders and thrust the empty mug into Shizune’s already full hands.

“War waits for no woman,” she muttered, dusting her hands and gliding imperiously into the office. She sat primly, without so much as a glance in the Copy Ninja’s direction. Shizune trailed after her, carefully juggling papers and pens and discarded ceramic mugs.

“Shizune, my schedule,” demanded Tsunade with a sniff. The Godaime immediately busied herself with flicking through the nearest stack of documents.

Kakashi inspected his fingernails for dirt. Which might actually have been believable had he not been wearing gloves.

“Ah, well—” Shizune stuttered uncertainly, eyeing the masked intruder as if he were an unwelcome stray cat she might shoo out the door. “You have a meeting with the delegation from Kusa about possibly lifting the embargo on the trade of medicinal plants in an hour, but until then you’re supposed to be—“

“Meeting with me,” interrupted Kakashi glibly, crinkling his visible eye shut in a smile.

“Err—,” Shizune’s strained gaze darted rapidly between the Hokage and the elite jōnin.

The Hokage narrowed her brown eyes at the man and tapped her recently manicured nails against the desktop. “I don’t recall summoning you for a meeting.”

“Ahh,” Kakashi rolled back his shoulders and scratched his neck. “You did, two days ago I believe. I’ve just now had time to get around to answering you, sorry.”

The blonde tensed in irritation and hissed at the man grumpily. “I went and found you in the hospital, I don’t need to talk to you still—“

“Yes, yes.” Kakashi said impatiently, placing a guiding hand on Shizune’s back and somewhat forcefully escorting her from the room. “So much to talk about, and since I’m so late wouldn’t it be best to get this chat started right away?”

“Wait!” Shizune squeaked, trying to twist around. “You can’t just—“

Kakashi slammed the door in her face. “Come back in an hour,” he yelled with faux cheer, loud enough to be heard through the wood.
Tsunade looked at the copy ninja quizzically. “Is this about the Root mission? I told you that I’d sent out a team to clean up and I’d let you know what happened as soon as I heard—”

Kakashi made a sharp, negative motion with his hand.

The Slug Sannin laced her fingers together and levelled her best unimpressed glare at the copy ninja. “I suppose this must be important if you’re willing to offend the women who determine the level of care you receive when comatose.”

Kakashi remained nonplussed. “I suppose it depends how high you rank assigning missions to seduce me on your priority list.”

“Goddammit.” Tsunade huffed, slapping a hand to her forehead in irritation. “How is that girl ever supposed to govern a shinobi village if she can’t figure out how to keep her own mouth shut?!?” The blonde scowled irritably at the copy ninja. “You’re here on grounds of moral indignation then?” She braced herself for a drawn-out fight, fully expecting the boy to fuss and fume and—

“I don’t—“ The copy ninja slumped forward in unanticipated surrender. “I’m not actually sure.” The man kept his head bowed, voice low. “At first I was furious, but now I’d just like reassurances that this won’t happen again. And as her superior, for whatever short amount of time remaining that may be, I’d like it noted on her official record that she’s horribly ill-suited for seduction missions.”

Tsunade blinked, ignoring the man’s poor attempt at humor. “That’s it? No screaming or yelling or gnashing of teeth?” She squinted suspiciously. “Are you actually ill?” He had been worrying himself sick over the girl lately—she knew she should have made him stay one more night. “Come here and let me check your temp—”

“I’m fine.” Kakashi huffed childishly, taking a precautionary shuffle backwards. “I understand the rationale behind the mission.” He paused, folding his arms behind his back. “I don’t appreciate it. But I’m not an idiot. I’m honestly more upset at your involvement, and Kurenai’s, than anything else. But was this actually your order or was this political?”

Tsunade sighed and leaned back in her chair, gaze sliding away from the man. “These things are always political, but I also make a point of involving myself in these types of missions. I can sympathize with you, you know.” How I wish it wasn’t too early for a drink. She grimaced in distaste, flicking an imaginary speck of dust off her desk. “The council put me in your position a few times, and eventually it was Sensei who stood up for me and made them back down on the matter.”

She let Hatake absorb that information for a moment, let him understand that she knew how he was feeling from personal experience. Well, mostly. It wasn’t Shizune trying to---that was a horrible thought. Shizune was young enough to be her daughter. Practically was her daughter.

She cleared her throat, kicking that unproductive nightmare to the far recesses of her brain, may it never see the light of day again. “It’s my turn to take on Sensei’s role now. I always let the individuals involved know they have a choice to accept the mission; that they can back out at any time, and that they are not to force themselves on any target.” She would never assign such a mission if she considered that the remotest possibility. She did not condone the village inflicting trauma of that nature on its own soldiers. “I understand the council’s position, but I personally feel like it’s very easy to cross lines on these issues. It’s a difficult balancing act, every time this comes up.”

“And ordering my student to seduce me and bear my child wasn’t crossing a line?” Kakashi gazed flatly at the Hokage.

Tsunade’s grip tightened on her pen, only relaxing when she felt the plastic begin to give under the
pressure. “I didn’t order her to do anything. She was given a choice.” She opened her eyes, glare flaring at the copy ninja.

“Naruto isn’t stupid or foolish or a naïve child. She realized that if she didn’t accept, then someone else would be asked to do the same thing. She was more discomfited by the idea that someone who didn’t care about you might approach you with these intentions than anything else.” Sometimes she wished she could make the man before her share her mantle of responsibility for a month. Just one month. “I gave her the best person I could to either talk her out of the mission or help her through it.”

The silence was thunderous as Kakashi stared at the floor, berated into petulant contemplation.

“But this won’t be happening again, right?” He finally asked.

The Hokage snorted rudely. “You being the target or Naruto being asked to complete such a mission?”

“Either is unacceptable.”

“I can’t guarantee that,” said the blonde with a sigh. “There are only so many fights I can pick with the council.” How she wished she was as all-powerful as her subordinates believed. “However,” she cleared her throat. “I can promise that any women who approaches you will have had a choice to take the mission—and that you will always have the choice whether to accept their advances. Naruto too.” She tried to soften her voice. “That’s the only protection I can offer on these matters, but it’s one I personally ensure.”

Tsunade watched the man in front of her stand in contemplative silence, digesting her words.

“But whatever choice I make, you won’t interfere with it?” Kakashi’s dark eye slid upward to meet her gaze. “Correct?” His thoughts were once more locked behind his carefully crafted mask of lethargy and nonchalance. Whatever emotion he’d been bullied by circumstance into revealing was again securely contained.

“Correct.” She watched speculatively as Kakashi relaxed at the answer. Was he afraid she would pressure him to say yes to the girl? Or is he afraid I’d pressure him to say no?

The copy ninja turned to the door, apparently satisfied with whatever information he’d collected in response to his inquiries.

“I would, of course,” Tsunade called out, just to make sure he was clear on where she stood on the matter, “prefer that you make the choice which makes you happy. No matter what the Village or Naruto or Kurenai advise you to do.”

Kakashi stopped, generously allowing her to finish her commentary.

“Remember,” she pulled the nearest stack of papers toward her, shuffling them blindly so she could pretend she was about to occupy herself with Very Important Business. “You are still on leave until you can answer my earlier question, Hatake.” She tsked thoughtfully. “The one about your goals—“

“I understand.” He cut her off abruptly, shoving his hands in his pockets and heading determinedly toward the exit.

Shizune slipped in as soon as Kakashi opened the door, stopping to observe the man walking down the hallway with rabid curiosity. “What was that all about?” the brunette asked in a whisper, eyes wide. “You’ve got him so out of sorts that he’s actually leaving through the front door!”
Tsunade wished she felt better about the conclusion of that conversation, but she was still as uncertain about the man’s state of mind as she was at the start of their heart-to-heart. She sighed, resting her head on her hand. “I suppose that means he’s still figuring things out.” Maybe she could corner Naruto or Kurenai later and get a better idea about what was going on in that man’s head. Or maybe she should just resign herself to never understanding the pain-in-the—

“Figuring out what—” Shizune gasped as Tsunade absentmindedly put pen to paper. “No, don’t sign that one; sign this one!”

“Well don’t put it on my desk if you don’t want me to sign it!” Tsunade grumbled haughtily as Shizune’s scrambled to re-sort papers into the correct piles.

“How did this happen?” Fretted her assistant, fingers flying. “These were all in order when I left last night!”

“No idea,” said Tsunade briskly, blinking owlishly at the mess.

“And that’s where we are.” Kakashi scuffed his foot once through the gravel at the base of the memorial stone. Despite knowing that Obito had once used the words he’d said here against him, Kakashi still couldn’t break himself from his routine visitations. Besides, at least now he knew that Obito’d been listening. In the end, that was what mattered.

In his mind, he could see Obito nodding along with disbelief at his summary of recent events; hear Rin’s giggling; see Sensei looking heavenward, as if praying for divine intervention.

“It’s not that I don’t know what I want anymore,” Kakashi said, keeping his confession low. He shifted his weight from one foot to another, eyes locked on the dirt, as if visually sifting through the individual particles of earth would help him find the words he needed.

“But when I take things, they break.”

Wow.

So that’s where his inner angsty fourteen year old self had gotten to.

He knew he was around there somewhere.

Kakashi rubbed the palm of his hand against his covered eye.

Obito was rolling his own eyes, looking like he’d swat him if he had the privilege of physical presence.

Rin was frowning, pretty brown eyes big in doe-like concern.

Sensei had a crooked, knowing smile, tinged with amusement.

“Ah,” Kakashi agreed. “I suppose you would be the one with the personal experience to know that’s ridiculous.” If nine bijū and the end of the world couldn’t break Uzumaki Naruto, it was highly unlikely a one-eyed jōnin who’d exceeded his life expectancy was going to manage the feat.

Kakashi nodded his head, partially conceding the argument to his well-meaning ghosts. “It’s pretty tiring, living your life like it’s permanently on pause.” That statement seemed heavier once he uttered it, as if the very air around him began to sink under the weight of the confession.
The purposeful crunching of branches and gravel and the heavy padding of familiar paws caught his ear. He tilted his head, eye crinkling at the sight of Naruto walking down the path with Bull, bento boxes carefully stacked in her arms.

“I made lunch,” she called out cheerfully. “And guess what?”

“Hmm?” He turned toward her fully, patting Bull on the head when the dog came up to butt against his knees.

“The kitchen is still standing and doesn’t have a single scorch mark.” She prattled on proudly, hooking an arm through his and adamantly tugging him away from the stone to sit down among the roots of a nearby tree.

He rubbed his knuckles against the back of Bull’s head, the dog’s tongue lolling out in pleasure. He took the offered food and pulled down his mask to eat, relaxing in the seclusion of their grove of trees and Bull’s competence as a vigilant guard.

Maybe Obito was right. He watched the sunlight flicker through the tree’s upper limbs, painting everything green and golden and adding a hazy warmth to the day. Naruto’s continuous narration was soothing in its constant rhythm. The occasional twittering of birds added a pleasant harmony to the soundtrack.

Maybe they were right. Maybe he should start spending just as much time talking with the living as he spent with the dead.

“---about us?” The fall of Naruto’s voice into an expectant quiet drew Kakashi from his thoughts.

“What?” Kakashi re-focused his attention on the girl perched self-consciously next to him, drumming her chopsticks nervously against the tin holding the remnants of her lunch.

“You said we’d talk about us today. I just--,” she blushed, looked away, bit her lip. “I wanted you to know I wasn’t ignoring you, and that I did want to hear what you have to say.”

“Oh.” He supposed Naruto had been rather insistent that they spend their time on other things last night.

He wrapped an arm around the blonde, tugging her close and leaning them both back against the tree trunk. “I suppose I meant to say we’d just keep doing what we were doing…and see where it goes.”

He stole one of her carrots. Not that she minded.

Naruto blinked up at him inquisitively as she set down her almost empty bento box. Out of the sunlight, the blue of her eyes took on a darker, less boisterous shade.

“But we’re together, right?”

“Ah,” he agreed, lacing his fingers through hers and drawing her closer. “Together,” he murmured the words against her forehead and then tilted his head down, so that his lips met hers in a soft kiss. He pulled back for the briefest second, and then bent down for another. She pushed up against him, food forgotten, turning what was meant to be a single kiss into two then three then four, until it was pointless to separate the actions into any kind of incremental unit. The lazy, cozy coil of contentment in his gut tightened and burned, but just as the pleasurable idea of taking this elsewhere crept up on the edges of thought—Naruto reluctantly pulled away from the embrace.

Kakashi made a sound of disappointment in his throat, swallowing as she drew back. Watching her
closely, grey eye dark with hunger.

Naruto licked her lips, probably in an effort to gather her thoughts rather than to provoke him but—

“Didn’t you tell Sakura-chan and Sasuke-kun that we would start training together again this afternoon?”

“I want to go see the new Kunoichi Keiko movie; it’s supposed to be really good.” Ino’s whine was carefully calculated to aggravate her best friend/rival from the safety of the tree branch in which she was reclining. The blonde kicked her feet against the trunk as she waited patiently for a response.

“Oh yeah,” Sakura said, somewhat breathlessly as she pulled out of the end of her sit-ups. “Izumi-san—one of the nurses I’ve been doing rounds with lately—she went to see it with her boyfriend last weekend and said it was lovely.” It would be nice to do something fun after the stress of the last few weeks.

“I do not understand why a visual re-telling of the massacre of the Yukimura clan would be lovely.” Sai didn’t look up from drawing—whatever it was he was drawing from his crouch amongst the tree roots. To be honest, Sakura wasn’t entirely sure why he was here.

Actually, she wasn’t sure why either of them was here.

“Wow, this one’s just a ball of sunshine, isn’t he?” Ino tossed her hair dramatically over her shoulder and proceeded to shred some leaves, purposefully letting the debris fall on the placid boy below. “It’s not about the storyline,” scolded the blonde briefly before her speech took on a dreamy tone. “It’s about counting how many times Takeshi Asano takes his shirt off—“

“Less talking,” grouched Sasuke, continuing to count his own repetitions under his breath.

“Oh Sasuke-kun, I do so admire men of few words.” Ino fluttered her eyes and mimed swooning against the tree.

Sakura’s lips thinned in an effort to bite back her mirth.

Sai contemplatively tapped the end of his paintbrush against his chin. “But if the enjoyment solely stems from watching the actors in stages of undress, wouldn’t the more efficient and lasting experience be to view pictures at your own leisure?”

Sasuke turned his head so he could glower at her, but continued his sit-ups all the same.

Sakura raised an eyebrow. Trying to explain the difference between porn magazines and movies to Sai was not on her to-do list for the day. She’d give that job to Naruto. As soon as the girl showed up.

In the meantime—“Ino-chan,” Sakura called up to the girl, sitting up and pulling her arm behind her head in a stretch. “Are you sure you don’t want to practice with us today?”

“No thanks.” Ino brushed off the suggestion, pulling a magazine out from…somewhere. “I don’t plan on working up a sweat today.”

“Then why come at all?” Sasuke rolled over to begin his pushups.

Sakura groaned internally, mentally slapping a hand to her head. *Sasuke makes it so easy*
sometimes—

“I’m not working up a sweat, but watching you work up a sweat?” Ino let her gaze wander appreciatively over the Uchiha. “Just too tasty to pass up.”

Sasuke ignored the blonde, but Sakura sat on him. He paused to adjust to her weight and then kept moving.

“Don’t you have your own boys to go gawk at?” Sakura huffed up at the Yamanaka, shaking a fist at the girl. Why’d she have to come bother Sakura’s team?

“It’s just not quite as satisfying as this tableau.” Ino pouted, twirling the end of her ponytail around her fingers.

“Wait.” Sakura narrowed her eyes, fingers curling in the back of Sasuke’s shirt. “Are you here to leer at Sasuke or me?”

Ino feigned a look of confusion. “I have to choose one?” She fanned herself with the magazine. “Such difficult decisions.”

“Yes,” Sai agreed, eyes fastened on his sketchbook. “Their training routines are aesthetically pleasing.”

Sakura froze at the implication that she and her teammates were being used as eye candy. Just what is he drawing anyway?

Ino grimaced and clutched her magazine tightly. “I’m not sure I like it when you agree with me.”

Sakura ignored their banter in favor of looking around the clearing with a disgruntled sigh. Where was Naruto when you needed her? “I didn’t expect Sensei to arrive on time,” she complained softly enough so that her words would reach only Sasuke’s ears. “But it’s not like Naruto to be late too. Do you think we should go look for her?” She addressed her question to the back of Sasuke’s head, pretending not to hear Ino reading an article on cuticle care aloud in the background.

“We’re here, we’re here! So sorry we’re late!” Naruto came crashing into the clearing brimming with pent up energy, dragging a lethargic-looking Sensei by the hand.

“We’re not that late,” countered Kakashi, sounding disproportionately disappointed.

Naruto turned to scold him, hands flailing aimlessly about in the air. “Twenty minutes late is still late —”

“We could have been later.” Kakashi straightened, but Sakura could tell from his tone that the man was still sulking.

Naruto pulled on her pigtails. “There was no need to be later. You were late enough. We’d have been here on time if you hadn’t been, well, you!”

“I wouldn’t have minded being later,” Kakashi stated blandly. “Things were just getting interesting.”

For some inexplicable reason, Naruto turned bright red and started stuttering incoherently; pitch rising into unpleasantly squeaky territory.

“What the hell?” Ino’s displeased query shook Sakura from her stupor.

Sai raised his head, looking more surprised at Ino’s alarm than the actual exchange.
Sasuke paused momentarily, his muscles going still under Sakura’s hands.

“Oh, Ino-chan!” Naruto latched on to the girl’s presence as if it was a life line and she was sinking with the ship. “Are you sparring with us today too?”

“Are they always like this?” Ino ignored her fellow blonde, gesturing at the pair with her rolled up gossip rag and gaze demanding an answer from Sakura.

The medic nin blinked. *What is Ino’s problem?*

“Mah,” Kakashi waved at Ino absently. “Sorry, we’re late. I had a hot date.”

“Ah,” said Sai in understanding. “I believe this is the appropriate gesture for the scenario.” The pale boy stretched his mouth wide in that strange grin that showed all his teeth and didn’t reach his eyes and held both hands out in a ‘thumbs up’ gesture.

Then a sandal dropped on his head.

“Stop that,” snapped Ino scathingly. “You’re scaring the children!”

Naruto spluttered in dismay and buried her burning face in her hands.

Sakura felt an uneasy shiver run up her spine. Sasuke-kun did too. Sakura would know, she was sitting on top of him after all.

“Well then,” Kakashi cleared his throat, as if this were just another start to a perfectly normal day. “Let’s get to work, shall we?”

“I can’t believe you,” grumbled Naruto despairingly in the bathroom that night. She brushed her teeth vigorously, venting loudly so that Kakashi could hear her from where he was changing in the bedroom. “You spent the entire practice slipping in lines from Icha Icha books!”

“It’s not like they’d notice,” Kakashi said mildly, still in good humor from the afternoon’s game. He popped his back as he pulled on some sleeping pants and dropped his dirty towel in the hamper, wondering how hard it would be to coax Naruto to try and work out the annoying knot in his shoulder.

“I noticed!” Naruto cried, banging her toothbrush noisily against the sink. “And you don’t know they didn’t notice. I know Sakura’s read Icha Icha Violence, at the least, and I’m sure Sai did. He’s read all of them you know, because you told him to and he’d never ignore orders from a superior—“

*That would be a good one to read before bed.* Kakashi swiped aforementioned book off his shelf and settled under the covers waiting for Naruto to—

Kakashi let out a brief, shrill yip, that was not a shriek (it wasn’t, he’d deny it to his death) as something small and cold and breathing brushed against his legs. He jumped out of bed, covers and pillows flying, and glared balefully at Naruto who was suddenly cackling gleefully against the doorframe.

“Forgot to tell you; I was talking with some of the toads while you were taking a shower!” She smiled mischievously at him and twirled away.

Hey, that was *his* shirt. He’d been wondering where that had gone. That made three shirts she’d
commandeered now. If she kept this up, he wasn’t going to have any old shirts left. Although, when she wore them, they did provide a nice view of those toned legs he enjo—

“I was sleeping.”

The annoying, nasally amphibian voice pulled Kakashi from the more pleasant train of thought and reminded him of the presence of his uninvited houseguest.

Kakashi growled deep in his throat and batted the offending toad off the bed with his book.

“Rude,” croaked the creature, nictitating membrane sliding over its eyes as it regarded the copy ninja distastefully.

Kakashi gave it a withering look, which the toad promptly ignored. He and Naruto were going to have a discussion about toads in the bedroom.

But first, it’d been a while since he’d summoned Bisuke.

The following cacophony of barks, croaks, and high pitched squeals reminded him why it’d been a while since he’d let Bisuke handle matters in his sole discretion.

“Well, that probably wasn’t the most efficient way to handle things,” summarized Naruto. She perched on the kitchen table, idly kicking feet that didn’t quite reach the floor and gazing with a prankster’s admiration at the upturned shelves and the variety of household items that now lay scattered haphazardly across the floor.

Bisuke barked happily from the kitchen sink, where Kakashi was washing the foam off his face before rinsing the dog’s mouth out.

“I caught the toad,” crowed Bisuke, tail splattering water across the countertop as it wagged happily to and fro.

“You’re foaming at the mouth because you were poisoned, Bisuke.” Naruto crossed her arms, unimpressed. She had snatched her own summons away before it became a meal, but her toad hadn’t enjoyed his brief time playing food on-the-run.

“You can’t sic your summons on my summons,” she scowled at Kakashi’s back. It was hard to stay upset and not be distracted by the movement of his muscles as he wrestled the dog in the sink. Is it a good or bad thing that he’d been too distracted to put on one of his night shirts? Her eyes trailed slowly down the curve of his spine as it disappeared into his— A wave of heat flashed across her face and she hastily re-focused on the back of his head. Good thing.

“Meh, they seem evenly matched to me,” mused Kakashi, unaware of Naruto’s inner turmoil. He reached over and pulled out a dog treat from a ceramic jar on the counter.

“Don’t reward him for bad behavior!” Naruto cried in dismay, leaning forward in protest.

“I’d say he behaved perfectly well.” Kakashi patted the dog on the head and then dismissed him, smoke filling the sink where a canine once cavorted.

“Well, if that’s what you think then you are going to be cleaning up this mess all on your own!” Naruto gestured to the room at large, encompassing the torn pillows bleeding puffs of stuffing,
upturned books dangling off shelves and sofa arms, senbon scattered across floorboards from an upturned weapon box, and the television precariously balanced on the edge of its stand.

Kakashi turned around as he dried his hands on a dish towel and took the few steps needed to close the gap between them. He had a playful glint in his silver eye, and Naruto didn’t think he had any intention of actually cleaning the apartment. He reached across her thighs to set the rag down on the table and frame her body with his arms.

Naruto fought down the blush that threatened to spread across her cheeks, her hands suddenly had nowhere to go but up—Why does he have to be shirtless? She whimpered mentally. She could be brave and look at his face or be a coward and stare at the wall. It really was unfair how pretty the man was without his mask and how much he could unnerve her simply by closing any distance between them. She just wasn’t used to it yet. Or the whole casual skin to skin contact thing—the way it caused the flames in her gut to lap up and outward, a gentle wave of heat setting every nerve ending she had on fire.

Kakashi paused an inch away from her face.

Naruto swallowed, feeling hot and fidgety, simmering with expectation. She wanted to do—to do—something. She wasn’t sure what—except that it in no way, shape, or form involved picking up the apartment.

Kakashi locked his eye with hers.

“You have feathers in your hair.” Kakashi’s voice was deep and husky and the way he ran his hands up and down her arms, stroking her skin—it was very distracting.

“What?” Naruto blinked, dazed. She’d been focusing on other th—feathers?

Kakashi reached forward and pulled the item in question out of her hair, spinning it between his fingers before dragging it tauntingly across her nose.

“I’m fairly certain it’s from my pillow,” mused Kakashi quietly, trailing it down to touch her lips lightly. “I better go find the rest of them, then, since it’s my job to clean up—”

“You are such a goddamn tease,” hissed Naruto impatiently between clenched teeth. She reached out to grab his hips and yank him forward, savoring the slight widening of his dark eye before bringing them crashing together.

And then to the floor.

Because that was when the kitchen table broke.

Not that they let that derail certain activities.

“Well for curry rice it doesn’t matter if you use pork or beef or chicken. They’ll all work fine, just pick your favorite.” Kurenai brushed her dark hair over her shoulder.

Naruto huffed thoughtfully. “I think I’ll go with the chicken, then.”

“Oh, is that Kakashi’s favorite?” Kurenai teased the younger woman, finishing up her own purchase and stepping to the left to make room for Naruto at the butcher counter.
Naruto shook her head. “No. I’m just less afraid of cooking it.”

Kurenai tossed out a laugh. “It’s not going to bite you—“

“I’m pretty sure the last dish I tried to make with more than five ingredients crawled off the table,” Naruto said with alarming sincerity. “Besides, Kakashi was called in by Tsunade-sama for something this morning and hasn’t come back yet. I think he may have left on a mission or something.”

“Your cooking can’t be that bad.” Kurenai waved her hand as if that would sweep Naruto’s cooking-skill concerns under the rug and away from the possibility of becoming a public health hazard. “Wouldn’t Kakashi have told you if he went out for a mission?”

“I hope so.” Naruto accepted the bag of chicken from the butcher with an appreciative nod. “But we’re both still new to this ‘being considerate of living with another person thing.’ Maybe I’ll find a note when I get home. Or,” Naruto continued with dry amusement, “maybe he just wandered around for a while in passive aggressive protest of something before actually going to see Tsunade and that’s why he was taking so long.”

“Anyway,” Naruto hefted her bags up so that they would rest more easily on her hips. “Kakashi is a much better cook, but he’s too lazy to see it through most of the time. I think he gets bored. He spends most of the time procrastinating adding the ingredients or ‘trying to remember’ the recipe until your stomach is growling so loud that you throw everything in the pot just to be done with it all.” She sighed in resignation. “In the end it’s just easier to do it myself now that what I make tends to be more edible than not, but I think that was his master plan to begin with.”

Naruto peered around the corner of the next building with cautious concern.

“What’s wrong?” Kurenai asked curiously, looking about to see if she’d missed someone following the pair or any other reason for alarm.

Naruto sagged in relief when she realized the coast was clear. “It’s nothing serious.” The blonde started walking once more. “Shino-kun has just been really insistent about helping me with chores and errands lately. I feel like every time I turn around he’s asking to take my bags home or pay for my stuff or something.”

“Oh,” Kurenai said weakly, hands clenched tightly around her own groceries. “I’m sure it’s just a phase or something. He’s a really polite kid; he probably feels like he’s done something to offend you and wants to make up for it.”

“Right.” Naruto eyed her mentor suspiciously. “You wouldn’t have anything to do with his inexplicably guilty attempts to out-kind the world, would you?”

“I’m sure it’ll stop soon.” Kurenai coughed lightly. “He may feel a little guilty about how things went with your apartment—”

“And why would he need to feel guilty about that?” Naruto began to glower. She had liked that space. Sure it was a crappy apartment, but it was her crappy apartment.

Kurenai feigned a smile of reassurance. “No idea, but how are things going with your landlady anyway? I remember you had some problems with her.”

Naruto bit her lip, she’d corner Shino and get the truth out of him later. After she’d decided whether whatever he’d done merited any punishment. Termites. Right. Ninja termites, more likely.

“I think I’m done with her. It’s probably for the best,” the blonde admitted with a sigh. “We never
got on anyway. That place is just cursed or something, I give up on it.” Her bitter smile lasted for a moment before she brightened in epiphany. “I mean, it’s kind of sad, because it’s been home for forever, but, my home is somewhere else now. And I think that’s a good thing.”

“Oh?” Kurenai grinned at the younger ninja. “It sounds like things are going well between you and Kakashi then?”

“Yeah.” Naruto smiled up at the jōnin. “Yeah, they are.”

Kurenai’s expression turned wistful. “He’s doing well then? I haven’t seen him since I visited you in the hospital last week.”

“As far as I know.” Naruto noted the disappointed slump of Kurenai’s shoulders. “I could tell him to go see you?”

“No,” Kurenai shook her head. “He’ll come find me when he’s ready to talk. I’m happy just knowing the both of you are happy. And you both know where to find me if you need me.”

“Yeah. We do. And I’m sure I’ll be over soon enough!” Naruto agreed, waving goodbye as she parted ways with Kurenai to head to her own home.

Naruto hummed happily as she pushed the door open with her foot and then backed up inside the apartment, her arms full of groceries. “Would it kill you to help with the…?” She trailed off uncertainly, absorbing the fact that there were two men inside of the apartment instead of the one she anticipated.

“Yo,” greeted Kakashi, eyes riveted on his book as he sprawled back across the couch.

“Hello Naruto,” Yamato’s greeting was more subdued. He waved a table leg in acknowledgement of her presence as he examined the pieces in his lap with a frown. “I’d come help, but, as you can see; my hands are kind of full right now.” He squinted as he examined a break in the wooden joints.

“You’re fixing the table?” Naruto squeaked, blue eyes blown wide. She hefted up the grocery bags to hide the flush spreading across her face. “You asked him to fix the table?” She hissed at Kakashi, kicking the couch as she passed.

“How’d you break this thing anyway?” Yamato scratched the back of his head with the hand that wasn’t holding one of the table legs.

Naruto turned bright red and refused to answer, stiffly setting the groceries down on the counter top.

“Meh,” Kakashi drawled, “Naruto doesn’t know her own strength.”

“Shut up,” stammered the blonde, chucking an orange at the lounging jōnin.

“That’s a lie, Yamato-taicho.” Naruto ducked her head in the fridge under the pretense of finding room for the milk. “Kakashi has horrible timing.”

“What does that have to do with how the table got broken?” Yamato asked, bewildered.

Kakashi calmly flipped to the next page of his book. “Naruto’s impatient.”

“Kakashi’s furniture is cheap,” Naruto snapped back, rubbing her open palm against the back of her head and tense and fuming and red, red, red.

Yamato rubbed his forehead ruefully. “I’m never going to understand you two.”
An awkward, thick silence followed.

“I’m making dinner!” Naruto bellowed with a vicious wave of a ladle, as if fearing her declaration would be met with belligerent opposition.

“That’s nice,” Kakashi’s reply was surprisingly simple.

“You’re not going to help?” Naruto eyed him suspiciously, lips twitching downward in a scowl. “Not even going to peer over my shoulder with a fatalistic expectation that something will go wrong?”

“I’m sure Yamato can put out a fire.” Kakashi quipped, dismissing her concern with a bored wave of one hand.

“Ok!” Naruto flexed her arm and patted her bicep. She bounced about the kitchen, pulling out the pots and ingredients to tackle her newest cooking project.

“Yeah, I can—wait!” Yamato looked up from his project with alarm. “Why would I need to put out a fire?” He shook his head fiercely. “I’ll have this done in, like, five more minutes, Senpai. I’ll be out of your hair then.”

“But you have stay for dinner!” Naruto turned teary eyes on the brunet. “How else am I going to thank you for—”she looked in trepidation at the remnants of the kitchen table. “That,” she whispered, toeing the object of her consternation as if checking to ensure it was truly deceased.

Yamato gazed back in confusion. “It’s a table. It’s really not that hard to fix, it’s just a matter of getting the joints right. But, uh, I have other dinner plans and—” he gulped, trailing off into beaten quiet at the mournful slope of Naruto’s shoulders.

“No, I get it.” Naruto’s head dipped dejectedly. “You don’t want to try my cooking, it’s ok. I know I’m new at the cooking thing and not that good yet.”

Kakashi cleared his throat.

Yamato turned in his direction slowly and then promptly cowered at the older ninja’s raised eyebrow.

The younger man dropped his own head with a flat, resigned sigh. “I’d be happy to stay for dinner.”

“Yay!” Naruto crowed her triumph, immediately brightening and launching into her project with gusto. “I’m trying curry tonight. Kurenai’s told me all about how to make it and I just know you’re going to love it,” she regarded Yamato with a smile that showed too many teeth.

Yamato grimaced, clutching the wooden table legs tightly to his chest. “I feel like I’ve been tricked.”

“That’s wonderful,” Kakashi nodded along as if in agreement with the universe. “We can talk about tomorrow’s mission then.”

“What mission!?!?” Naruto and Yamato yelped in unified alarm.

Kakashi winced and woefully rubbed his ear. “So loud,” he pouted in protest at the pair.

“You have to get up.”
Kakashi was not going to acknowledge the soft voice invading his sleepy brain. It couldn’t even be seven yet. The light wasn’t right. And it’d been a late night. Clearly, this voice had evil intentions and should not be obeyed.

There was something soft and warm and pliant pressed up against him; he pulled it tighter. It moved as he tugged, rolling in his hold the way a human body would, familiar scent rising—Naruto, right. He kept his eyes shut, resting his head in the curve of her neck, nose nudging her collarbone.

It was too early to get up.

Sleep.

They both needed sleep.

“Ka-ka-shi,” she sang the words playfully in his ear and he felt her fingers begin to card gently through his hair. “We have a mission, and you said we needed to meet at the gates in thirty minutes.”

He grunted dismissively, fingers firmly gripping her hip to keep her from trying to leave the bed on her own. She should know by now that meant they had at least one more full sleep cycle before they actually needed to show up.

The chest underneath him began making quick, jerky movements and some part of his brain registered that she was laughing at him.

He grumbled and twisted a bit, using his weight to pin her down even more.

Laughing was not sleeping. That needed to stop.

“Kakashi.” Naruto’s voice was a little louder, equal parts chiding and amused. She wiggled until both her hands were free, but Kakashi didn’t protest too much. She kept stroking his hair, which was soothing enough an action. Then her free hand moved from massaging his scalp to his neck, then to his shoulder, tracing a scar that began on his upper back and ran down his spine and—

Well.

His eye opened wide.

Her leg slipped between his, bumping intimately upward.

*I’ll sleep when I’m dead.*

---

Kakashi and Naruto startled Yamato out of a standing doze when they dropped down to his side from the nearest rooftop shortly before eight that morning.

“You’re late,” Yamato said automatically, as soon he jolted awake. “Wait,” he blinked at the pair in confusion, noting the position of the sun in the sky. “You’re not even thirty minutes late.”

Birds tweeted, heralding the start of a beautiful morning.

“That’s practically not late at all,” Yamato said slowly, scrunching up his face in growing alarm, eyes darting left and right. “You said the mission wasn’t urgent. That we were just going to back up a team that was a little late checking in—that we might not be needed at all.”
Kakashi shrugged. “Naruto makes a convincing alarm clock.”

Naruto snorted and crossed her arms, but wore a smug look of self-satisfaction that Yamato found disturbing on a sub-conscious level.

Surely they’re not? No. Yamato shuddered internally. I’m not going there. Not again. I’ll just be wrong, and Senpai will use it to embarrass me.

Suddenly, Naruto’s fact took on an unbecoming sun-burned shade and her blue eyes went wide, white showing all around.

“Shut up, Kurama!” She shouted into the air, stalking forward stiffly. “I don’t have to explain myself to you!”

Kakashi put his hands in his pockets and wandered after her, as if this were a regular occurrence.

No. He reminded himself, somewhat hysterically. It’s not what it looks like.

Yamato cursed under his breath when he realized he’d spent a good minute staring at their backs and mentally rambling nonsense. He broke into a jog to catch up with them, nodding at the two chūnin guarding the gate.

“Wait!”

Yamato stopped at the feminine cry, turning along with Naruto and Kakashi to greet the latecomer.

“We’re coming—“ Sakura waved some papers in the air, stopping to catch her breath once she realized she had their attention. “We’re coming too.” She straightened with a glare at Kakashi as Yamato took the papers for inspection. “Since when do you leave on time?”

“Well we’re not on time now,” Kakashi commented dryly. He peered over Yamato’s shoulders at the documents with a noncommittal hum.

Naruto invaded Yamato’s personal space more directly, latching onto his arm and blinking in surprise as she read the memo’s contents.

“Wait,” protested Yamato. He didn’t even have canine enhanced senses and he could smell the trouble wafting off this note. “Why weren’t we briefed on this? Tsunade-sama told Senpai that this was going to be a three-man mission. She didn’t mention additional members. Right?” He turned to Kakashi for confirmation.

Kakashi gave an unconcerned shrug. “No, but those papers seem clear to me. It all looks in order. That’s the correct seal and the Hokage’s signature.”

Yamato gaped at his senior. “This doesn’t seem odd to you? Aren’t we obligated to at least check this out?” He lowered his voice in concern, turning his back to the now curious chūnin gate guards visibly eavesdropping on the conversation. “This gives permission for not only Sakura to join this mission, but for—“

“Me.” A pale young man strolled calmly up to the gathering at the gate, holding one of the two packs he carried out to the female medic-nin. “I’ll be joining you today as well.”

Yamato stiffened.

Naruto hiccupped, hastily bringing her hand up to her mouth to smother a giggle. “Sai,” she
managed to squeak out, “so good to see you!”

Sai’s eyes narrowed and he spared her a flat, dangerous grin. “Bimbo.”

Naruto guffawed and promptly turned on her heel, apparently deciding to head out now that the ‘complete’ group was gathered.

“Nice of you to join us.” Kakashi nodded.

Yamato’s frown conveyed his disagreement with that sentiment.

“We might need the back up,” said Kakashi, infuriatingly insincere. He turned toward Sakura, who was rummaging through her pack. “Have everything?”

“I think so,” Sakura muttered. “It all seems to be here.” She looked up at Sai. “Did you get my anti-toxin kit?”

“Of course, Ugly,” responded Sai. “It’s at the bottom of your pack.”


“Shall we?” Kakashi asked cheerfully, strolling after Naruto without waiting for a response.

Yamato swallowed his complaints. We are going to be in so much trouble.

Ten miles out, Sakura promptly slugged Sai in the shoulder with enough force to send him skidding five feet. The boy’s visage shimmered, melting from the pale, dark-haired ex-Root member into that of the pale, dark-haired Uchiha heir.

Sasuke grunted and clenched his fists to keep from reflexively rubbing his shoulder.

“Easy, Sakura-chan,” Naruto teased. “You can’t be mad at him for staying in character.”

“Your genjutsu is getting better,” Kakashi observed, tone mild.

“That’s it?” Yamato’s shoulders slumped as he regarded the team leader with dismay. “You’re not going to ask them what’s going on? How this happened? Why they’re here?”

Sakura huffed as Yamato grew increasingly hysterical. “We’re here because Tsunade-sama gave us permission to be here.”

Yamato gave an inarticulate gurgle of disbelief. “He’s on probation!” He pointed dramatically at Sasuke. “He’s forbidden from leaving the village for at least, what,” he gazed around in bewilderment. “Another year? Two? What were the terms, I didn’t pay attention—“

“The Hokage has given me permission to leave the village briefly to accompany you on this mission.” Sasuke adjusted the straps of his pack and gazed appreciatively out at the forest, seeming to relax at his new-found, if temporary, freedom.

“She said it was time off for good behavior,” added Sakura innocently.

“She lost a bet, didn’t she?” Naruto nudged Sakura’s shoulders with her own conspiratorially.

“Well she did,” Sakura interrupted with a sniff. “And it’s a little late to do something about it now. You should have spoken up before we left the Village if you were that upset about it.”

Yamato choked and turned purple.

“Hey, Yamato-taicho,” Naruto placed a concerned hand on his shoulder. “You need to calm down and breathe. Kakashi?” She turned toward the jōnin when it became clear that all Yamato could do was move forward stiffly and gurgle.

Kakashi waved dismissively from his position in the back of the group. “He’ll be fine.”

“Yay!” Naruto tossed her hands in the air with a cheer and walked to the front of the group, taking point and leaving Yamato to recover on his own. “Team Seven together again! This is going to be so much fun!” She crossed her arms behind her head and hummed happily.

“I can’t wait,” Yamato gasped, burying his head in his hands. “Oh, the things that could go wrong,” he muffled his moan into his gloves.

Naruto scoffed at the non-believer. “We’re Team Seven, nothing goes wrong on our watch!”

“Except for the world nearly ending?” Sasuke drawled, beginnings of a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“Oh my gosh, Sasuke!” Naruto tugged on her pigtails in exaggerated exasperation. “That was one time!”

“Well, we are missing one,” Sakura pointed out dryly.

Naruto scoffed. “Sai’s here with us, in spirit.” She waved her arms. “He let the Bastard use his face to get out of the village, didn’t he?”

“Yes, yes, he’s in our hearts,” Kakashi agreed.

“Actually, he’s probably in the library,” Sakura said quietly.

Naruto gave her a dirty look.

They set a somewhat leisurely pace (for ninja, anyway) following the trail of the team that’d gone before them. As no Konoha hunter-nin showed up attempting to arrest them, Kakashi assumed Konoha politics would wait until they returned.

The foreign ninja they encountered at the border check-in of Rain were polite and professional, and confirmed that the Konoha team who had passed through several weeks prior had not checked back on any return trip to Konoha.

“Shouldn’t we be more concerned about that?” Sakura asked, taking a swig of water from her canteen at they stopped for a brief rest before beginning a long trek across flatlands. She ignored Naruto’s pleas for her to share and scolded the blonde for not remembering to fill her own at the check-point.

“Not necessarily,” Kakashi replied as he scanned the flat plains for any signs of life. “They were a
good tracking team. They may still be hunting down the targets. Or, they could have chosen to go another route home entirely and we’ve missed them. We could be chasing smoke, for all we know.” He felt Naruto pawing through the back of his pack for his own water bottle and let her take it without protest. He took it back after she had a few sips and drank his own fill.

Sakura put her hands on her hips and scowled. “You’re both going to come down with colds and I’m not going to play nursemaid.”

“I don’t get sick.” Naruto stuck out her tongue and then tapped her nose. “I’m the healthiest person here, believe it!”

“Yes,” murmured Sasuke, seeming to enjoy sitting for a moment and letting the wind ruffle his hair. “The three weeks you just spent in the hospital can attest to that.”

Naruto gasped in mock-offense. “That’s not because I was sick, jackass!”

“Still,” Tenzō interjected, rising from his own crouch and crossing his arms. “The ‘targets’ did take you down quite easily, Naruto. I know Senpai’s created a counter-seal to that technique, but it makes me worried about what other skills they might have that we don’t expect. Especially since the group that went out before us didn’t have Kakashi Senpai’s research.”

“Who was on the team Tsunade-sama sent out?” Sakura asked the team leader, green eyes thoughtful.

Kakashi shook his head. “No one you would know, I think. Tenzō and I have worked with this team before. I probably have more often than Tenzō due to my specialties. It consists of two Inuzuka clan members and a branch member Hyūga. They’re an older team, very seasoned. All retired from ANBU around a decade ago. They only take a few tracking missions a year when specifically requested by the Hokage.”

“It sounds like you’re fond of them,” Naruto murmured somberly, shoulder brushing against Kakashi’s own gently.

“They’re good men.” Kakashi straightened his spine. “Based on my research regarding the targets, restraining the targets, if found, should have been well within that team’s capabilities.”

“But based on your research, you and Naruto should have been able to handle them on your own, shouldn’t you?” Sasuke’s voice wasn’t aggressive, but that didn’t stop Kakashi from flinching at the contents of the message.

Sakura sighed and dropped to the ground, bracing for a fight. “We really can’t take you anywhere, can we?”

Tenzō tensed, but Naruto rallied in his defense first.

“Sasuke,” Naruto’s rebuke was unusually authoritative. “You’re in no position to challenge Kakashi’s decisions.”

Sasuke brushed the dust from his pants as he stood. “I’m just saying that his mission record seems to land him in the hospital an awful lot lately. It’s one thing to risk his own health, but it does become our concern when he risks our own too.”

Kakashi felt Naruto bristle beside him, but didn’t rebut Sasuke’s arguments on his own. He couldn’t. He had been risking his safety on his missions more often than not lately, Tsunade’d raked him over the coals about the fact not that long ago—parading the files, statistics, and private reports to back up
the allegation. He didn’t think that was what caused Naruto’s injury. As he recalled, Naruto had been complaining that Kakashi was being overly cautious on that mission, but he couldn’t say Sasuke’s concern was unfounded.

“You’re wrong.” Naruto’s voice was low and serious and unwavering. Her blue eyes dark and unyielding as she focused on Sasuke. “It is our concern if any of us starts acting that way. We’re a team; that’s what teammates do.”

Sakura nodded in agreement, as if Naruto’s words were a truth that made up the moral fiber of the universe.

Something in Kakashi’s chest kindled at the words, spreading warmth into limbs he hadn’t even realized were chilled. His throat grew thick, Obito’s covered eye prickling in irritation.

“But that’s not a problem right now, is it?” Naruto directed her question to Kakashi, gazing up at him with a grin wide and blinding, joy and trust and devotion dancing in her eyes.

“No.”

Kakashi knew the word was his, even if it felt as if it was spoken into existence by another person. In another time.

“No, it’s not.” Kakashi promised twice over.

No, his decisions and regard for his own safety wouldn’t be a problem.

No, they didn’t need to worry about him. She didn’t need to worry.

He understood what he wanted now.

He realized his hand had reached out to cup Naruto’s cheek and cleared his throat, letting his fingers fall away despite the brief flicker of disappointment the action brought to Naruto’s eyes.

“We’ve spent long enough here.” He picked up Naruto’s pack and held it out to her as Sakura rose in a stretch and Sasuke finally looked away. Apparently the boy was content enough with Kakashi’s response to let the mission continue without further commentary.

Tenzō still scowled at the normally taciturn chūnin, visibly determined to keep an even closer watch on the kid.

Kakashi crinkled his eye in a smile. Tenzō had never worked with Sasuke the hurting, angry child—he’d only known the two girls that had been left aching and mournful in his abrupt and arguably treasonous departure. It was harder for Tenzō to trust Sasuke, to understand his motivations or interpret his passive aggressive challenges as veiled expressions of concern.

But, Kakashi thought, watching his team scuff out their footsteps, That’s ok.

Kakashi knew where Sasuke came from—he knew where they all came from, even the weird one stuck in Konoha probably turning Sasuke’s military police office into an artist’s studio.

He knew where his pack was going.

And they were all going to be fine.
“But Sousuke,” sobbed Nina-chan, bosom heaving in distress as her beaded headdress tilted at a perilous angle. “I thought you loved the freedom of travel? A new city every week? Experiencing all the cultures and foods and fun—“

Nina brushed her tears away roughly with her hand, smearing her mascara. She wasn’t pretty when she cried, but it still didn’t make his decision any easier.

“Oh, Nina-chan,” Sousuke said, wishing they were having this conversation after the show. It was hard to be taken seriously while covered in clown paint, after all. “I thought I would love the life the circus could give me—

“You are fine, right? You’re not going to risk your safety needlessly, are you?”

Kakashi peered over the rim of his book as Naruto perched on the edge of his bed, watching him with serious, hooded eyes.

He knew from past experience that this was the last city that would be on their route for days and, as it was the first time this trip that they wouldn’t be camping out, he didn’t see the harm in letting the team splurge for one night in civilization with hot showers and clean, fresh bedding. That the rooms worked out so that he claimed his own while Naruto and Sakura and then Sasuke and Yamato shared two between them—well, benefits of being the team leader.

He let the dog-eared book fall limply on his chest and waved toward the anxious blonde with his palm down, gesturing her closer. Naruto didn’t need any more encouragement to crawl up toward the headboard and snuggle into his side, tucking her head into the crook of his neck.

“It’s never just been about you, you know,” she murmured softly into his chest, voice disarmingly wobbly. “We’ve always needed you to come home. We would have been so broken if you didn’t.”

He rested his chin on top of her damp hair. “You would have been fine.” He kissed the top of her head and hushed her protests. “It would have hurt, but you’d keep living. That’s just our way of life. On any mission, one of us might not come home. That’s not changed.”

The blonde twisted unhappily, squirming so she could lift her face and glare at him. “I know that.” She thumped a fist against his chest. Well, against the book on top of his chest, which Kakashi promptly moved aside in concern for its physical safety.

Naruto scowled at him. “I’m not asking for you to change your career or retire or anything. I just want you to promise that you’re trying to come home; that each time you go out on a mission you’re doing your best to come home.” She sank back down against him, sudden burst of energy drained. “Can you do that?”

Kakashi brushed her bangs out of her eyes, and let his fingers linger in her hair. “I can do that, as long as you do too.” It was easier to say that now than it would have been a week ago. He tugged on her ear. “Is Sakura expecting you back?”

“No.” Naruto cuddled against him more firmly, grip tightening as if she was daring him to try and send her away. “I told her I was taking first watch and not to wait up.”

Kakashi made a noise of protest in his throat. “You should probably actually be taking the watch then.”

“I am.” Naruto assured him. “Well, at least three of me are.”

Kakashi sighed, and resigned himself to playing stuffed animal for the night.
“Read to me?” Naruto mumbled sleepily, words coming out more like a demand than a request.

“It’s Icha Icha,” Kakashi warned. As if it would be anything else.

“That’s fine.” Naruto yawned. “I just like to listen to your voice.”

Well, that was odd. But probably no odder than Kakashi liking the way Naruto smelled fresh out of the shower, happy and healthy with that faintest trace of miso and curling in contentment against him in her own particular version of a sun-spot nabbing cat nap.

He turned the book around to brief her with a plot synopsis, hoping to preempt any questions Naruto might have about the plotline. He cleared his throat. “We’re still at the beginning, the heroic Sousuke and the well-endowed Mina ran away to the circus as teenagers and now Sousuke wants more from life. But they’re about to be raided by religious zealots, because unbeknownst to them they’ve traveled to a country in the midst of a civil war—“

“Pft,” Naruto snorted impatiently against his chest. “I know that, just start reading already.”

“You—” Kakashi blinked down at her in surprise. “You really have read it?” He thought she’d been having him on when she mentioned she’d read some of the books.

“Yes.” Naruto leaned up to press a chaste kiss against his cloth-covered chin. “I travelled with Jiraiya for years and I edited everything he wrote during that time. This is one of the newer ones; I can even tell you what he was planning for the sequel if you really want to know.”

“Really?” Kakashi asked, distracted by this unexpectedly delightful knowledge.

“But that should probably wait until we aren’t on a mission.” Naruto smiled up at him coyly. He narrowed his eye in response to her teasing tone and pressed his fingers to the curve in her side, wiggling them lightly just so—

She shrieked. “No tickling, not fair!” She snatched up the nearest pillow and lobbed it at his head.

A knock on the door had Kakashi grabbing the pillow and using it to muffle Naruto’s laughter rather than retaliate in kind.

“Senpai, is everything ok in there?” Tenzō’s voice carried clearly despite coming from behind the wooden door. “I thought I heard a yell.”

“All good,” he called back, leaning his weight further into the pillow in an effort to quell Naruto’s fit of giggles.

“Ok then.” Tenzō’s voice was only slightly hesitant. “I’m going to relieve the watch from Naruto. You’ll take the last watch, yes?”

“Yes, that’s fine.” Kakashi did his best to sound as apathetic as normal, which was difficult to do when your girlfrien—partner, partner was a better word. It was difficult to do when your partner was trying to wriggle free from being pinned underneath you.

Tenzō’s footsteps faded from his hearing and he loosened his grip to fall back on the bed in boneless relief.

Naruto bounced up with a gasp. “I can’t breathe, you dork!” But she laughed the words as she spoke them.
That was the second time he’d been called a dork in the space of a week. He didn’t think anyone had called him that since he was twenty and Anko had discovered that he owned no clothes aside from his jōnin uniform.

His reminiscing was interrupted as Naruto resettled herself on top of him, crossing her arms over his chest and resting her head on top of her hands.

“But seriously,” she said, voice suddenly soft and eyes intensely studying the weave of his shirt, “are we going to tell them about us? About being together?”

“Mmm.” Kakashi pondered the question as he ran his own hands up the smooth bare skin of her arms, tracing the familiar contours of her shoulders before running them back down again. “I suppose they’ll find out on their own sooner or later. I’m not going to try and hide the fact, if that’s what you’re asking.” It was always more fun to let people draw their own conclusions about your personal life, after all.

The top of Naruto’s cheeks turned red. “You’re not embarrassed?”

“Of us?” Kakashi raised his eyebrows in surprise. It took him a minute to pinpoint the exact nature of her question. “Of you?” His heart dipped unpleasantly when he read the truth of the question in the way she wouldn’t meet his eye and the increasing tension of the muscles under his hands.

Well, that just won't do.

He cupped her chin and brought her gaze back up to him. “Never,” he said firmly, as solid as any promise he’d ever made. “Never of you.”

Naruto’s fingers tugged down his mask and he closed his eye as she leaned in for a heated kiss. He allowed himself to enjoy the intimate contact for a minute before pulling away—just enough time to reassure her of his earnestness before he acted further on the urges which currently had him shifting uncomfortably underneath her. He really shouldn’t let them get caught up in such activities while on a mission, even if neither of them had the watch at the moment.

“Mission.” Naruto sighed in bitter understanding, shoulders sagging in defeat. She readjusted his mask and then leaned away, untangling herself from him.

Kakashi watched, eye widening in silent protest. I didn’t mean for her to go—

She dropped his book on his chest and slipped back under the covers, molding herself to his side like she’d taken to doing most nights since she’d woken up from her three week fuinjutsu induced nap.

“Read.” She commanded, closing her eyes and rubbing her cold toes against his calves.

Kakashi grumbled a half-hearted complaint about socks, but obligingly found the place where he left off in the chapter. He held the book in his left hand so he could wrap his right arm around Naruto. He snuck his hand underneath the hem of her tank top, so that he could run his thumb in soothing circles above her hip. He cleared his throat: “But Sousuke,” sobbed Nina-chan, bosom heaving in distress as her beaded headdress tilted at a perilous angle. “I thought you loved the freedom of travel? A new city every week? Experiencing all the cultures and foods and fun—“

“Where were you last night? You never came back,” Sakura grumbled, more out of desire for intrigue than concern. She sat down across from Naruto at the table in the common room of their current lodging. The innkeeper’s wife had offered to prepare the shinobi breakfast, and Kakashi had given his permission for the team to enjoy the meal before hitting the road.
Sakura piled a riceball, an egg, and some strawberries and bananas onto her plate to start with. On second thought she went back for more fruit before the rest of the boys came down.

“Don’t steal all the oranges.” Naruto whined pitifully, only stopping once Sakura rolled one of the fruits across the table to her.

Naruto happily set upon it, peeling the skin.

(Of course you’d like oranges,” muttered Sasuke without any feeling. He sunk into the seat next to the blonde looking in desperate need of a cup of coffee. He eyed the fruit unhappily and, unsurprisingly, settled for simply sampling the riceballs.

“Leave some for Kakashi,” scolded Yamato, actually tapping Sasuke’s hand in disapproval when the chūnin tried to add a fifth to his plate.

Sakura snickered at Sasuke’s put-out expression, and then again when Sasuke made a rude hand gesture in her direction. After that, her male teammate ignored her in favor of food and she let her eyes wander over to Naruto. That girl still hadn’t answered her earlier question.

Sakura swallowed the last bite of her egg. “You gonna tell me?”

“Tell you what?” Yamato sat down next to her before launching into the task of devouring his own meal.

“Naruto didn’t come back to bed last night.” Sakura smiled sweetly as she tattled to her superior, ignoring Naruto’s betrayed gaze and subsequent sulk.

“Wait.” Yamato lowered the riceball he’d been about to consume. “Was I the only one who actually stayed in my own room last night?”

Sakura paused and eyed her senior officer curiously.

“Where did you go?” The impact of Yamato’s accusatory point at Sasuke was somewhat lessened by the accompanying ball of rice. “You were supposed to come back after your watch and you never did.”

“I decided to finish up the watch and let the girls sleep,” Sasuke said, breezily careless.

“Right.” Yamato’s disbelief was clear as both girls studiously gazed at the table and their diminished plates. “Where were you then Naruto?”

“I was having trouble sleeping, so I went to borrow a book from Kakashi and fell asleep reading it on the couch in the common room.” Naruto gave a defensive sniff at odds with the blush forming on her cheeks.

Yamato crossed his arms, suspicious gaze alternating between Sasuke and Naruto. “You two know that if you have a more, err, personal attachment you shouldn’t be engaging in such on missions.”

Naruto spluttered in embarrassment at the accusation while Sasuke gave Yamato a look implying that while he was surprised to find the dirt on his shoe could talk, it still didn’t have anything intelligent to say.

Sakura snorted and bit into a strawberry. She wasn’t worried about that at all. Sasuke had been with her for a bit, and then had gone out to train. Like he always did. He wouldn’t be able to get away with that when they were all huddled around a campfire in the upcoming nights. *Naruto, on the other*
hand… Sakura let her eyes linger on the jinchūriki’s flustered form. It would be a cold day in hell that Naruto chose reading a book over sleep. **Wait.** The natural conclusion of the described scenario caught up with her.

“You went and borrowed Icha Icha?” Sakura blurted the words in equal parts horror and disbelief, even more concerned at this development than the mystery of Naruto’s nighttime whereabouts.

Sasuke went back to his food, but at least Yamato looked as aghast as she did at the thought.

“Well, it’s not like I carry other reading material with me, is it?” Kakashi interjected cheerfully, stopping casually at the head of the table.

Sakura pursed her lips. “You are a terrible influence.”

“Duly noted.” Kakashi winked jovially at her.

Sakura shivered, rapidly shaking her head to get rid of her discomfort.

“You’re late,” recited Yamato dutifully, as if he knew the day wouldn’t actually start without saying the magic words.

“Well, late night.” Kakashi explained, leaning back and resting his hands in his pockets, clearly pleased to have an opportunity to voice his latest outrageous excuse. “It’s just so hard to keep Naruto entertained an entire evening, you know, now that we’ve been together for a while—”

“Oh stop it,” Yamato slammed his hands onto the tabletop, face flustered. “Not that again. I get it; I’m an idiot and shouldn’t jump to conclusions so quickly. I’m sorry.” He rose with a testy huff, picking up his plate before stomping sullenly away, presumably to eat the rest of his breakfast by himself. “You say one wrong thing and you never live it down—” he muttered under his breath as he tactically retreated.

Sakura blinked, baffled. “What was that about?”

Naruto sighed, picking up her own used plate and eating utensils before heading into the kitchen. “You’re enjoying yourself far too much.”

“Maybe a little,” Kakashi admitted. He grabbed a riceball and disappeared upstairs.

Sakura wondered at the reality she found herself in and opened her mouth to speak but stopped when she saw Sasuke’s thoughtful gaze toward the kitchen.

“What?” Her fingers curled around the last riceball, deciding to snatch it while Sasuke was suitably distracted.

“I had a kage bunshin on watch for most of the evening,” Sasuke murmured, brows furrowed. “I can’t recall seeing Naruto in the common room. I don’t remember seeing her at all, anywhere.”

Sakura frowned. **If Naruto wasn’t in the common room then the only place left for her to be was** — “You don’t think Kakashi was telling the truth?” She dropped the riceball on her plate, appetite fleeing. Maybe she’d just grab an orange for the road.

Sasuke scoffed. “No.” He shook his head. Then he reached forward and plucked the riceball off her plate. “She probably fell asleep reading in his room and was just too embarrassed to say so.” He bit into his stolen treat and began to gather up his own empty plates.
“Right,” agreed Sakura quickly, her smile weaker than her words. After all, she and Sasuke were here because she’d won her bet.

Maybe she should have asked a few more questions about the terms and conditions before skipping merrily away in victory.

“Urghh!” Sakura slapped what seemed to be the fiftieth mosquito off her arm. “Blood sucking little menace,” she hissed at the now painfully and thoroughly deceased insect.

“Ick.” Naruto wrinkled her nose at the buggy remnants on her friend’s arm.

“Why are they all biting me?” Sakura couldn’t help but whine. “Why don’t they ever bite you or Sasuke-kun?”

“Because my blood is badass and Sasuke’s blood is death itself,” reasoned Naruto, trudging determinedly through the marsh.

Sakura picked up her foot as she sloughed through the sucking, mushy-clingy ground with a grimace of distaste. She would have packed long sleeves if she’d known they’d be spending extended time in wetlands. She knew that on tracking missions bug repellents couldn’t be used, but still—She slapped another one at the base of her neck. She was going to itch like crazy later tonight. Maybe Sensei would let her use calamine at the base camp if she promised to wash it off by morning.

She eyed her male teammate’s outfits, eyes lingering on the footwear. At least she’d thought to wear her tallest pair of boots instead of the Konoha’s standard issue shinobi sandals. Sasuke’s feet must be soaked. She didn’t know how he was keeping his face so serene given the circumstances. Or keeping the bugs away. Blood of death indeed.

“We’ll hit solid terrain in about twenty minutes,” reported Kakashi. One of his ninken barked and bounced happily in front of him, completely unbothered by the mud. In contrast, Pakkun, when summoned, had taken one look at the marsh and said ‘no way, not again, ask a puppy,’ and un-summoned himself. She hadn’t known summons could do that. From the twitch of Kakashi’s eye, she wondered if Kakashi had known the dog could do that either. Anyway, it was somewhat consoling to know that her distaste for the current environment carried across species.

“The cabin shouldn’t be much farther than that,” Kakashi continued, ignoring Naruto’s under-the-breath muttering about the word choice of “cabin” to describe their destination. “So please be alert and keep your chakra suppressed.”

“Great,” muttered Sakura, unhappy with the continued restriction that kept the group from using the water walking technique which would allow them to easily traverse the muck.

Kakashi gave the ‘all clear’ sign as soon as they reached the cabin, dog eagerly sniffing at his side. Sakura tilted her head as she studied the building. She had to agree with Naruto, the word ‘cabin’ really didn’t accurately describe the dilapidated hut.

“I’ll take Yamato and Sasuke in to check out the building again; Sakura and Naruto, stay on guard outside.” Kakakashi ordered. “Bisuke, stand guard too. See if you can find where the Konoha-nin’s trail picks up again.”

“Ok! Yes sir!” The dog gave one bounding leap in the air and then pressed its nose to the ground, frantic to fulfill Kakashi’s demands.
Naruto, on the other hand, made a rude sound of displeasure. “Really? Shouldn’t I come in to look for changes since we’ve last been here?”

“Naruto, please.” Kakashi sounded unusually stressed, to the point that Sakura reached out to put a placating and restraining hand on Naruto’s arm. It was clear that Naruto needed to stay out of the building for the sake of Kakashi’s mental health. She couldn’t blame him, considering the events that occurred the last time he was inside the place.

“Naruto-chan,” Sakura tugged on the girl’s jacket. “Let the men go play house, huh? It’s just an empty building; any fun to be had will be out here, right?”

“Fine,” Naruto conceded with a bitter grumble. She kicked at the dirt as the men slipped silently into the house.

Kakashi gave Sakura an appreciative pat on the shoulder as he brushed past.

Sakura waited until the men were inside before she followed Naruto away from the house and closer to the tree line. Bisuke sniffed furiously in front of them, ignoring their supervising presence.

“Naruto-chan,” Sakura asked tentatively.

“Yeah?” Naruto bent down to examine her left boot, taking out a kunai to try and remove a rock that got stuck in the grooves of the sole.

“You were right you know.” Sakura smiled and rubbed the back of her head sheepishly. “About the bet? That I had with Tsunade?”

“Oh?” Naruto paused her efforts and peered up at her curiously. “You mean that is how you and Sasuke got on the mission?” She grinned. “I knew it, crazy old hag gets on me about my bad habits —”

“It was about you.” Sakura said bluntly, giving their surroundings a cursory examination.

“What?” Naruto squawked. “Why were you betting about me?” She scrunched her eyes closed in confusion and dread. “What were you betting about me?”

“I don’t work as closely with Tsunade-sama as I used to,” Sakura said in lieu of providing a straightforward explanation. It wasn’t exactly nice to admit they’d been gossiping about the girl, she’d need to set this up properly. “But I still see her often. We were talking one day while looking over your stats, this was back when you were in that coma, and she made a joke about your boyfriend being a pain-in-the-ass.” Sakura gestured toward Naruto with her palm facing upward. “I thought that meant that you’d told her about the guy you liked and so I made a joke back—“

Naruto slapped a hand to her forehead. “What’d you say to her!?! What’d she say to you?!?”

“Nothing much!” Sakura protested her innocence; however doomed the effort might be at this point in time. “I just said that I knew you had a crush on someone and things seemed to be going well but that I didn’t know you’d gotten together yet, which made her laugh---well, more like cackle demonically, but you know what I mean—“

Naruto moaned, whether in pain or acknowledgment of Sakura’s words the medic-nin didn’t know. The blonde sank into a defeated crouch so she could wrap her arms around her legs and bury her head against her knees.

“Anyway,” Sakura decided to ignore her peer’s behavior for the moment. “Tsunade-sama seemed to
know more about it than I did even and said she actually didn’t think you were ‘officially’ together
and that she wasn’t so sure things would work out and I said I’d bet you’d get together within a
week of waking—“ Sakura was aware she was rambling but couldn’t bring herself to stop now that
she’d gotten started.

“—So I was on your side, really. And then Tsunade said she’d take that bet and the next thing I
know you were awake and fine and she called me into her office and said she’d lost and what did I
want and I asked for Sasuke to go on a mission because he was going stir crazy and I think he might
actually have carried through on his threat to tsukiyomi on a couple of the new military police
recruits and then we’re here!” Sakura felt her lungs twitch from lack of oxygen and took the time to
take a few deep breaths.

Naruto remained curled in the fetal position on the ground.

Sakura decided to take that as a positive sign.

“So,” Sakura began, finally getting to the point of the conversation. “If you really have gotten
together, will you tell me who he is now?”

Naruto brought her hands up to grip at her pigtails. Then she raised her head and took a few deep,
calming breaths of her own. “Well,” Naruto sighed. “Actually, it’s still pretty new but I’m—“

“I found it! I found it!” Barked Bisuke, demanding their attention by eagerly running circles around
them.

“We’re talking, dog!” Shouted Sakura, probably more rudely than intended.

Bisuke growled at her, baring his teeth. “I found it.” He insisted, snapping at Naruto’s sleeve and
tugging at her in agitation. “Come see, it’s this way. I did good,” he barked. And barked again. “I did
good, come see.” He whined and pawed at his nose and continued to badger the girls with
aggravated dog noises.

“Mah, Bisuke-kun, calm down.” Kakashi came out of the house, most likely drawn by the racket.

Sakura ground her teeth together in irritation. “It’s fine!” She said with false cheer. “We can handle
him, go inside and finish up—“

“No, we’re done here.” Yamato walked out of the doorway behind Kakashi, followed by Sasuke.

“There really wasn’t that much to see.” Yamato smiled at them amiably, as if trying to comfort them
for their exclusion from the investigation.

Sakura seethed. So close.

Yamato took an alarmed step back, putting his hands up as if to prevent her from attacking.

“Move out,” Kakashi called over his shoulder after bending down to pat Bisuke on the head.

Sakura put her fingers to her temple. “We’ll finish our talk later,” she said with a smile at her blonde
teammate.

“Oh—ok.” Naruto stammered uncertainly, eyeing her friend as if she expected to be hit for
something.

“I’m not mad at you,” Sakura snapped.
Naruto ‘eeped’ and slid to the other side of Sasuke.

“No, really,” Sakura insisted, following her as they began the next part of their traipse through the wood and marshlands. “I’m not!”

Naruto frowned; the trees were beginning to look awfully familiar.

Bisuke apparently thought the same, because the dog began to hesitate. The canine slowed down and danced uneasily on his front feet, alternating paws hitting the earth in an uneven tempo. “We’ve been here,” the dog insisted, tail tucked between his legs. “I don’t understand. They were here, but we’re here now too.”

“It’s fine, Bisuke.” Kakashi reached down to pet the dog between his ears. “You did good.”

“I did good?” The dog’s ears perked up in question.

“You did good.” Kakashi repeated, slipping the dog a biscuit from a pouch on his vest and dismissing his summon with a final grateful scratch under the animal’s chin.

Yamato crossed his arms and frowned in concentration, focusing on the air in front of them as if he could see past the dense trees.

Sasuke’s sharingan spun into existence, red eyes searching for any clues to solve their current mystery.

Naruto bit her lip, she wanted to transform into sage mode and stretch her senses too, but the chakra flux would be very noticeable. Kakashi was heading up this mission and he hadn’t given her permission yet. She huffed impatiently and rocked back on her heels. She hadn’t allowed Kurama to enhance her own senses, since even the most minute use of his chakra was enough to set off the least sensitive sensor.

“Do you see it?” Kakashi asked calmly, hand resting on his hitiate, as if he were considering using the sharingan but had decided to rely on Sasuke’s observations instead.

“ Barely,” Sasuke murmured with a hint of disappointment. He closed his eyes and opened them again, black and distant once more. “It’s a barrier of some sort, it’s like a film.”


“Alright,” Sakura grunted. “Stop the mysterious stuff; please speak plainly for the people burdened with the curse of normal 20/20 vision.”

Kakashi glanced at her, amused with her impatience. “I think it’s an area concealment fuinjutsu. We’ve been following the trail, but we’ve gone in a complete circle now without the scent leading anywhere else. It wouldn’t seem so odd if there wasn’t a complete lack of scent, or anything really, coming from the area we’ve circled.”

“That seems a little obvious.” Sakura hesitated. “Why would you use a seal that erased the presence of everything?”

“Well,” Kakashi crossed his arms, inspecting the foliage gravelly. “It could be that they’re confident enough in their abilities to face any ninja who come looking for them. It could be meant to deter
forest creatures, or civilians, or low level ninja. This is an old seal, if I’m correct, and it will alert the seal master if we try to cross into the concealed area, but it won’t prohibit us from crossing.”

“Why haven’t we seen these in use before then?” Sakura took the opportunity to pull her hair back in a ponytail, regathering all the strands that had come loose in their trek.

“Because it has an easily exploited flaw.” Kakashi gestured toward their blonde teammate. “Naruto?”

She felt a fleeting flash of joy as Kakashi looked toward her, pleased that he both expected her to know the answer and was allowing her to share it.

“If it covers an area this large,” she added up the distance they’d traveled in her head, “which here is about a three mile radius, then it will have several anchor seals along the exterior border of the concealed area. If we can find one the anchor seals and destroy it, then that section of the seal will go down and we’ll be able to enter. This old type of area seal requires constant maintenance. While the seal master can tell if someone enters the area while the seal is fully functioning, they can’t tell if a section of the seal goes down unless they do a physical inspection of the anchor seal. And they won’t be able to tell if anyone enters the failed section while the anchor is down.”

“Correct.” Kakashi nodded approvingly. “It’ll give us a limited window to move into the seal, go to the center and assess what’s inside, and then either retreat or make ourselves known. Of course, the closer we get to the center, the more limited our movement will be.”

Kakashi bent down to pick up a stick, drawing a circle in the ground and dividing it into sections, like slices of a cake. “If we take out an anchor seal on the edge, the sections on either side of that anchor seal will fail. The other sections will stay ‘active’ and we’ll need to move as straight as possible to avoid stumbling into them and alerting the enemy of our presence.” Kakashi used the stick to stir up the dirt and ‘shade’ the failed sections. “We’ll need to move to the center anchor seal, or the master anchor seal, here,” he pointed to the middle of the circle. “We’ll have to destroy that to destroy the entire field concealed by the seal. However, the center anchor seal probably has either human guards or other protections to both alert the enemy if the seal is triggered by unauthorized entry and to protect the center anchor seal from being destroyed.”

“So the best bet would be to get in quickly, assess the situation, and determine if we should get out or do whatever needs to be done at that time.” Sakura finished Kakashi’s explanation and straightened from where she’d crouched to examine the jōnin’s diagram.

“Correct.” Kakashi dropped the stick and stood himself.

“That’s a lot of territory for two Root members to maintain by themselves.” Yamato looked forward in concern.

“They may have help,” agreed Kakashi. “There is no guarantee that my research uncovered every missing Root member. While I haven’t picked up any distress from the scents of the Konoha team we’ve been tracking, it’s clear they didn’t come out from this area after they entered it. If they entered it,” he amended with a shrug. “We can’t tell what’s happening within the concealed area or how elaborate the fuinjutsu actually is, or if they have additional security measures. It’s very possible that they’ve already noticed us circling around out here.”

“Should we have Naruto send kage-bunshin in? Or use a summons?” Yamato suggested.

Kakashi mulled over the younger jōnin’s suggestions for a few moments. “No.” Kakashi sighed. “I’m worried that if we do still have the advantage of surprise, we’ll lose it if we take down a section
of the seal and don’t go in ourselves. I’m sure they are aware of the weakness of the seal and will be
patrolling the barrier periodically. By the time it takes a bunshin or summon to get in, investigate, and
come back to report, they may have noticed the breach. I don’t want to take the chance they execute
prisoners at the first sign of an additional breach.”

Naruto grimaced. She didn’t want that either. “We’re an elite force of Konoha shinobi,” she said
with determination. “We can handle it.”

A bird chirped. Someone inhaled.

Oh, wait—“Shut up, Sasuke.” Naruto added pre-emptively.

Sakura smothered her giggle into her fist.

Yamato coughed. “Where will we find these perimeter anchor seal then?”

Kakashi looked at Yamato as if the answer should be obvious. “Trees.”

With Kakashi’s sharingan, and his knowledge of what to look for, it was easy to find an anchor seal.
He let Naruto have the honor of destroying it and leaving a single kage bunshin as a guard before the
party merrily trooped into the enemy’s camp in an orderly single file fashion.

The coverage of the trees ended suddenly, and a clearing with a half dozen run-down single story
buildings appeared. Kakashi slid into a crouch at the edge of the tree line and motioned for silence.

The group waited as he took in and interpreted whatever information he could about their
surroundings. Kakashi tilted his head, as if puzzled, but eventually signed that the enemy numbered
three adults, a snake, and twenty children.

Wait. Naruto blinked. That’s strangely specific.

Kurama scoffed, curling further into a ball somewhere deep inside her. She got the sense that he’d be
more concerned if Kakashi couldn’t differentiate between adults and children and snakes by smell
alone.

Still, snakes made her think of a certain problematic Sannin. Her eyes flickered toward Sasuke,
catching her concern mirrored in Sakura’s own green gaze.

There was a reason Konoha jōnin standard had a sign specifically for snake.

Kakashi made some rapid movements in what must have been a mix of jōnin standard signs and
ANBU, because Naruto only caught about half of it. Dammnit. She worried a piece of her hair
between her lips. She’d been studying jōnin standard for the upcoming exams (normally you would
learn those after promotion, but you could get an exception from a sponsoring jōnin of sufficient
rank, like Kakashi); but she didn’t know any of the ANBU signs. She probably couldn’t get an
exception to learn them early either. She’d have to talk to Granny about—

Apparently Yamato understood Kakashi’s instructions, because he and Sasuke took off in the cover
of the tree line to circle around toward the largest building in the back.

Wait, Naruto thought indignantly, when did Sasuke learn the ANBU signs? She pouted mutinously,
but joined Sakura in following Kakashi toward the building in the center, quickly. Apparently, they
were just going for strolling boldly into town since the enemy would, most likely, be scrambling to track down Yamato and Sasuke.

Naruto straightened with a grin. Bold was a strategy at which she was particularly adept.

The buildings in the compound, while still in bad shape, were made of cement and seemed sturdy enough. The walls had sporadic deep chunks gouged out, but there didn’t appear to be a full break through the wall to the interior at any point. The doors were metal and rusted, giving the compound the appearance of an old military bunker.

The windows were thick portholes of some kind of plastic, dull, scuffed screens firmly bolted into the cement. Even if removed, which would be noisy, they wouldn’t be wide enough for a human body to fit through.

Eventually, Kakashi stopped skulking about the exterior of the building and straightened in front of the metal door, the only entrance or exit to the unit. He scratched the back of his head, still looking slightly puzzled at the unnatural silence, and motioned for Naruto and Sakura to flank him. Then he opened the door and stepped inside.

Naruto peered into the room curiously, eyes blinking to adjust to the dim light as they entered the rectangular building. The structure was a large, open space filled with four tables covered in scrolls and a desk built into the far wall which spanned its entire length.

There was an elderly man with bowed shoulders and white, thinning hair bent over the desk along the wall. He was writing something. Or reading. It must be reading. He didn’t seem to have heard them open the door. Naruto watched him dubiously. Maybe he was a civilian.

Kakashi walked over to the nearest table and brushed aside the first few scrolls on top of the pile of papers to reveal a large seal with a dark red glow. Naruto approached and studied the master anchor seal, the throbbing glow seemed to be its version of an alarm system—probably triggered by Sasuke and Yamato stepping outside the seal’s bounds.

*This is like, an even older version of the seal than the one Kakashi showed me.* The ‘early’ version she studied allowed the master anchor seal to be laid on top of a scaled map of the area being ‘concealed.’ It also indicated which ‘portion’ of the seal was being breached should someone invade the premises. This seal simply activated in its entirety in response to a breach, which didn’t help pinpoint the location of any intruders.

Kakashi caught her eye and silently instructed her to destroy it.

The jōnin and Sakura tensed at the flair of Naruto’s chakra as she pressed her fingers to the document to deconstruct the seal.

The man had no reaction.

*Maybe he’s dead,* Naruto thought, horrified.

Sakura seemed to come to the same conclusion as she shifted uneasily from one foot to another opposite Kakashi.

Kakashi cleared his throat.

No reaction.

“Hello?” Kakashi finally verbally inquired, at loss of what else to do.
The man remained facing away, still as stone.

*Oh stop it. He’s not dead, you moron,* grumbled Kurama. *He’s just asleep. And old. I can hear his heartbeat.* Kurama’s own long ears flicked back and forth.

“Kurama says he’s asleep,” Naruto offered in a whisper to her companions.

Kakashi sighed. “Secure the door, Sakura. Naruto, we’re going to approach. I want you to wrap him in chakra chains and then I’ll wake him.”

Naruto nodded and moved forward, bringing her hands together in the seals that helped her form the chakra for her thin chains, bringing forth the golden instruments and wrapping them gently, yet securely, around her prey.

The man still didn’t wake, even as the chains bound his arms tightly to his side and his spine was forced to align with the chair.

Kakashi inspected the work on the desk. Naruto couldn’t see what he found, but he didn’t appear to be alarmed by any of it. He still swept the papers out of the man’s reach, as a last precaution. His fingers lingered on a small device on the table. It looked like to be electronic. He picked it up in his palm and examined it curiously. Then he crushed it in his palm and dropped the destroyed device to the floor.

“Comm. device.” Kakashi said in response to Naruto’s perplexed gaze.

Naruto double checked to make sure the man couldn’t reach into any pockets once woken.

Kakashi cleared his throat. “Excuse me,” he said loudly.

The man let out a loud snore and then his head rolled to the left.

From somewhere behind them (the door, presumably), Sakura giggled.

“Well.” Kakashi scratched the back of his head, then leaned forward and flicked the man’s forehead, hard.

Naruto’s prisoner jolted awake.

“What?” Yelled the cranky man with a start, jerking the chains a little as he jumped in surprise, but he didn’t fight against his restraints.

Naruto tightened the chains from her position behind the man and he settled instantly.

“Who are you?” He yelled again.

Kakashi was too professional to show his surprise to the prisoner, but Naruto made a face at Kakashi herself.

*There aren’t many people in the ninja world who don’t recognize Kakashi on sight. Maybe he is a civilian?*

“I’m from Konoha and we’re here—“

“No use.” Shouted the man up at Kakashi. “I think ya might be talking but I can’t hear ya. I’m mostly deaf. I can read lips if you want, but you’ll have to take that crap off yer face.”
Kakashi stared blankly at the man.

_Ha, Kurama wheezed. I like him._

The old man continued to yell. “Or you could hand me my hearing aide. I think it’s on the counter over there.”

Kakashi locked eyes with Naruto over the man’s head.

“Seriously?”

Naruto was uncertain if Sakura’s cry of frustration was with the old man for being difficult or for Kakashi for being so paranoid he destroyed an elderly’s man’s hearing aide.

“Oops.” Naruto giggled.

Kakashi slumped with a sigh. “Turn him around Naruto, you do the talking then.”

Naruto grinned and did just that, raising the man with her chains, chair and all, to turn him about to face her.

He swiveled his head left and right, and finally squinted up at her with beady, watery eyes dulled by age and cataracts. “Oh,” said the man, still loudly. “Hello young lady.”

Naruto cheerfully set the man down and opened her mouth to speak—

“You look just like your mother,” said the man gruffly.

Well. That wiped the smile off her face.

She faced the man with a grim expression, and realized that Kakashi was suddenly standing next to her shoulder.

“So you’ll be the Konoha-nin, then?” The man continued his monologue on high volume. “I told Fancy Face you’d be coming, but he thinks he’s such hot stuff.”


“We’re taking control of the compound.” Naruto said finally, watching as the man trained his eyes on her lips. “It’d be in your best interest to cooperate with us.”

The man ‘hmphd.’ “Well, yes. I suppose so then.” He looked about the room curiously, squinting as if he was trying to tell if Sakura was actually a person or a shadow in the back of the room.

“Huh.” He finally settled for saying. “Well, I surrender then.”

Naruto blinked and exchanged a glance with Kakashi.

“What?” The man called out. “Isn’t that how this goes?”

Naruto turned around to look at Sakura, bewildered.

“Are you deaf, too?” He yelled out sincerely, even more loudly than before.

Kakashi put a hand to his face.
Naruto, still holding the chakra chains, twitched forward nervously and began her interrogation.

Hashimoto Masao was a wealth of information, if the information proved to be true. At 85, he was one of the oldest (former) Konoha ninja that Naruto had ever encountered. Naruto had a feeling that he should be shouting war stories at a horde of unruly grandchildren rather than confessions to members of his former Village, but, well, here they were.

“I have a photographic memory you know, but I can’t fight worth shit.” The man blinked his eyes at them, doing his best to focus on the dim shapes. “I worked a desk job in intelligence. I knew all the codes from Hashirama’s reign through Sarutobi’s, but eventually my hearing failed me, and then my eyes started to as well.”

“Do you have any connection with Root?” Naruto asked, wanting to wrap this up as quickly as possible, despite all the delicious gossip this man had on…probably everyone, really. She wanted to check on Sasuke and Yamato. And the other Konoha team. Had to find where they went, too.

“Yeah.” The man readily admitted. “Danzo tasked me with personally handling all his reports. Then he took me and gave me another job once my sight started failing. I thought I was transitioning departments. He moved me somewhere underground, I think. I had a room and all my food and needs were provided for. I did eventually figure out Root wasn’t just another department; but, it’s hard to report anything when you don’t know where you are to begin with.” He shrugged as best he could while tied up with chakra chains. “I just went with it.”

“How did you get here?” Naruto was beginning to feel pity for the guy, but told herself she would never have become complicit with kidnapping and experimenting on children.

“No clue.” The man yelled cheerfully. “Think Danzo died. Fancy Face decided we needed to move and so we did. He has me teaching code and handling some basic fuinjutsu. Can’t do much else.”

“How many are here at the compound?”

“Four adults. Fancy Face is the leader, and then that snake kid freak. They’re both jōnin level, but I don’t know much about their actual skills. They’ll be the most difficult I imagine. And then there’s Mariko-san. She’s a chūnin medic. A bit on the weird side, that one.”

“Mariko?” Sakura’s voice piped up from the back. “Does she have a last name?”

Naruto repeated the question for the man.

“Nah, think she was one of those war orphans. She’s in her forties, red hair. I don’t think she’s much of a fighter. And then there are the kids of course.”

“How many?” asked Naruto.

“Beats me. They’re fast little buggers. Can’t tell ‘em apart.” The man yawned, energy visibly waning.

“Sakura,” Kakashi called. “Come take a look at him.”

“They’re safe though, right?” Naruto got her last question in quickly. “The kids?”

“Far as I know,” said the man with another large yawn. “Although, I’d have to say I don’t think I’d know if they hurt any of them. I teach sometimes,” the man was struggling to keep his eyes open, and jerked in weary surprise when Sakura’s green hand rested on his hand, as if he hadn’t seen her come up to him.
“I teach sometimes but I can’t really see the brats so I don’t know,” he shook his head as if to stay awake. “I don’t know how they really are.”

Sakura lowered her hand slowly. “You need to ask any more questions you have quickly, he won’t be awake for long.”

Kakashi looked at her sharply. “You can’t force him awake?”

Sakura pursed her lips and shook her head. “It’s not something I can fix and forcing wakefulness would be cruel if not absolutely necessary.”

Kakashi crossed his arms, thinking. “You can wake him later?”

“Most likely.”

The man barked a laugh. “She found the thing in my brain, did she? Makes me awfully sleepy, sorry.”

“It’s a tumor,” Sakura hurried to explain. “Very advanced, operating would do more harm than good considering his age and the size of the growth.”

“What about the other Konoha ninja, was there a team before us—maybe a few weeks ago?” Naruto hurried to ask her question before the man succumbed to his nap.

“They’re fine,” grumbled the man. “I think the Hyūga is with Fancy Face. You should find the others in the med bay. Mariko might be watching them.” The man’s head dipped with fatigue.

Kakashi sighed. “We’ll let him sleep then, but I want him secured to the chair.”

Sakura retrieved a length of rope from Naruto’s pack and wound it around the man as Naruto slowly withdrew her chakra chains.

“Let’s get a move on,” Kakashi said grimly. “Med bay first, Sasuke and Tenzō should be keeping an eye on the main group for us.”

Naruto brought out storage seals to hold all the documents in the room, quickly working alongside Kakashi and Sakura to secure the information.

“That Mariko name rings a bell,” murmured Sakura in frustration as she closed up her scroll. “I think I’ve heard it before, but I can’t place it.”

“Let us know if you remember,” Kakashi said, giving the room a once over with his sharingan to see if they missed anything.

Then they were out the door and creeping across the grounds in the shadow of the buildings. It was still mid-afternoon, and the shadows were growing longer, the better to hide the trio. No noise came from the largest building in the back, which is where she assumed Sasuke and Yamato and the children might be. Hopefully their luck would hold as they scouted out the rest of the compound.

Kakashi wasted no time surveilling the next buildings that they entered. The first turned out to be some type of barrack, with rows and rows of neatly kept bunk beds. The second was an ordinary kitchen. It contained the expected and appropriate contents in the fridge and pantries, Naruto checked.

The third though, was the med bay. It was mostly empty when they entered, no ‘Mariko’ or other
moving ninja in sight. However, there were six beds in the back, arranged in a semi-circle, and two of them were taken with snoozing Inuzuka men.

Naruto could hear Sakura grit her teeth in irritation. “This gives new meaning to ‘sleeping on the job,’” growled the medic nin.

Naruto paused as she observed the snoring men. Bright clan-marking were visible on their cheeks and they had the same messy brown hair as their clansmen, Kiba. They seemed healthy enough, i.v. lines trailed from drip bags to their wrists, even though no heart monitors or other machinery accompanied them. Still, something about the scene that was bothering her, something not –

“Naruto, the door,” Kakashi commanded as he strode forward alongside Sakura.

There were no charts for Sakura to inspect so she held out a glowing green hand for a preliminary scan.

“Wait,” Naruto said. In hindsight, she should have been more vocal with her protest, even if she really wasn’t sure anything was wrong at that point.

However, Sakura and Kakashi both ignored the complaint, and Sakura grabbed for her a wrist to take a pulse at the same moment that Kakashi put a hand on the railing of the second bed as he leaned over to further examine its’ occupant.

Simultaneously, both toppled to the ground in a slump.

“What the hell!” Naruto felt the panic bubble up in her chest as her internal scream echoed in her skull.

Stop Monkey! Kurama’s snarl froze her feet and she forced herself to still and take a deep breath and take stock of the situation.

What's wrong with this picture? Kurama hissed furiously, teeth sharp and shining. He didn’t like Naruto’s pack getting hurt anymore than she did. Or skulk, or leash, or whatever he referred to as a group of foxes. Family the deep voice that was both Naruto and Kurama and other supplied from the depth of her mind. Naruto shook her head; there had been far too many people inside it at one point or another. She didn’t need to start thinking she was hearing other voices.

She catalogued the details of the scene, eyes eventually settling on the floor. There was a strange pattern on the cement floor. Who decorated a cement floor? It was like tiling at first glance, but—

Take a step back, put the picture in perspective. Kurama hissed in encouragement. She tried to relax, knowing that Kurama would be much more riled up if he didn’t already know the solution to their dilemma.

It’s a pattern, thought Naruto. The same as the floor of the barracks, which—her mind finally recalled where she’d seen the repetitive details before—It’s the sleeping seal! The one I touched at the other cabin!

Naruto skipped back from the lines on the floor. Is it touching the seal itself that sets it off—No. It wouldn’t work like that, or Sakura and Kakashi would have fallen sooner. Or they all would have, back in the barracks as they crossed the floor in that building. The floor is lava, the hysterical eternal child part of her giggled deliriously. She shushed it quickly and studied the lines once more.

It’d be easier in sage mode, Kurama advised.

Naruto bit her lip. I don’t want to endanger Sasuke-kun and Yamato-taicho—
If they had a sensor that person would have come running when you destroyed the concealment seal or brought out your chakra chains, Kurama interrupted her concerns with a slam of his paw.

Right. Sage mode activated, it was much easier to see the coiled knot that was the center of the seal, how the chakra of it’s maker flowed through the design. Delicate lines furled outward toward each bed from the center point, like petals of a flower. As similar as the seal was to the one Naruto had touched weeks ago, this larger version was still slightly different.

Naruto re-played her recent memories, focusing on Sakura and Kakashi’s actions immediately prior to their collapse. It activates when they touch the bed? What a weird seal. No, Naruto thought, as she continued to study the symbol. There were two switches to this seal. First the seal in its entirety had to be activated from the center point, and then each bed served as an activation point on its own.

The seal was already active when they walked in, agreed Kurama lazily. Then they touched the secondary switches and—

BOOM. The two spoke together with corresponding sighs of satisfaction at solving the puzzle.

Naruto frowned in discomfort, as did Kurama. Don’t do that. She scolded the chakra beast. It’s weird when we think the same thing.

Kurama retreated with a sulk, and Naruto got the sense that he was thinking dark, despairing thoughts about lower lifeforms rubbing off on him.

Naruto approached the seal’s center point carefully, avoiding the inked lines across the floor even though she was mostly confident that contact with them would be harmless. Now was not the time to test ‘mostly confident’ theories. She crouched down and bit her lip as she studied the seal. Touching the center point wouldn’t make her fall asleep, it was only the secondary switches which would activate that part of the seal—otherwise the seal master would never be able to turn the seal on and off.

Kakashi had made her memorize the counterseal he created and he’d applied it directly to her. She pulled back and looked at the crumpled sleeping bodies. She could do that—but it might not hold unless she removed the bodies from contact with the secondary ‘switches’ and she’d run the risk of touching the secondary switch herself—or, Sakura had touched the guy’s wrist, not the bed. So as long as a body was touching the secondary switch they’d be a conduit.

She huffed and turned her attention back to the center point seal. Ok, the counter seal would be similar enough. She pulled her own ink and brushes from her pack. If she used Kakashi’s seal as a base and then added the normal deconstruction symbols—The seal glowed tauntingly back at her as she completed her work, appearing unaffected from her efforts. The nagging sense at the back of her head that she was close to the answer but not quite right tickled infuriatingly at the back of her brain.

She really wanted to add the flourish they used on explosive seals to the eighth ring of the concentric circles—

“Ah, screw it,” she muttered aloud. It’s not like I have a better idea at this point. She made the stroke and removed her hands holding her breath as the chakra sustaining the seal started leaking from it’s design, escaping the bounds of the seal and, well, dying for a lack of better word. Jiraiya had, at one point, explained to her about chakra re-absorption but she honestly didn’t care she just wanted—

She scrambled over to Kakashi, pulling his head into her lap and pressing her fingers to his neck to gently find his pulse.
It beat strong and slow and steady beneath her fingers, but he didn’t wake.

She pulled him further away from the bed, even though he hadn’t been touching it any longer, just in case. She slipped off sage mode like a cloak, letting the glow fade away as she cradled her most important person.

Peripherally, she now knew that the woman they were after was moving about the kitchen building they’d previously explored. Sasuke and Yamato were patiently waiting outside the largest building, within which were the three adults with the chakra strength of jōnin and the missing children. Everyone seemed whole and healthy for the moment—but what did that matter if she couldn’t wake him up.

In a fit of temper, she sent a jolt of chakra through his system, like an electric shock, angry and wanting him to feel anything at the moment and---

His eye was open, dazedly gazing up at her own.

“Hello,” he said gruffly.

Naruto hiccupped. “Hey,” she attempted a grin, finding the gesture unusually difficult, and then brushed off the droplets of water that had suddenly appeared on Kakashi’s cheek. Was the ceiling leaking? She looked up—oh, no, she rubbed her eyes, which she now belatedly realized were teary—

“We should stop meeting like this,” said Kakashi blandly, as if nothing had happened.

Naruto choked on her laugh. “You dork,” she hit his shoulder, but there was no force in her punch.

Kakashi sat up carefully, peering around ruefully. “What was the name of the train that hit me?”

He leaned over to grab Sakura’s wrist, letting it drop as he found a reassuring pulse.

“It was that stupid seal.” Naruto hiccupped again. “I tried to tell you and you ignored me and then you both just went—“ she made a choppy falling motion floor. “Splat.”

Kakashi ran a hand through his hair. “Sorry?”

Naruto felt her eyes fill with more tears, and Kakahsi’s grey eye widened in alarm.

“Don’t cry,” he insisted, pulling her close.

She wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Don’t cry.” He repeated. “I’m fine. “ He rubbed her back soothingly, slowing as he felt her breathing grow more even, his own temperament calming in turn. “You kept your promise. We’re all fine. See?”

Naruto nodded into his shoulder and then raised her head, pulling his mask down just low enough so she could press her lips against his own, seeking the warmth—

The clatter of equipment hitting the floor had Naruto peeling back in shock, whirling around to meet the equally shocked look on Sasuke’s face of all people—

Sasuke fumbled with the jar of pencils he’d knocked off the desk nearest to the door.

Naruto felt her face flush red, but Kakashi’s reassuring hand on her shoulder kept her from fleeing.
“Sasuke?” Kakashi asked, voice still rough.

“I just—“ Sasuke tried to put the pencils back on the desk and knocked them over again. He left them this time, rubbing the back of his neck. “Just came to check--,” he stammered uncharacteristically, looking at the floor, the ceiling, anything other than the couple on the floor in front of him.

He straightened suddenly, eyes firmly focused on his toes. “I was not mentally prepared for this.” He turned on his heel and took stiff, measured steps toward the door, letting it slam behind him.

“Ah.” Kakashi said, thoughtfully optimistic. “I think he took that well.”

Naruto fell limply into his shoulder, muffling her laugh.

“We should probably wake everyone else up.”

“Yeah,” Naruto agreed, drawing away with one last swipe to dry her eyes. “That sounds good.”

Once awake, the Inuzuka men, who turned out to be twins, were thoroughly confused.

“When did you get here?” mumbled Takeshi. “And why do I feel like I tried to drink Tsume-sama under the table last night?”

“Last week you were still unconscious in the hospital,” agreed Takeo with a yawn, pointing an accusatory finger at Kakashi rubbing his eyes. “You have got to stop pushing yourself like this. You’re going to ruin your back.”

“Yeah.” Agreed his brother. “And your sleep cycles too. They’re going to be totally off.”

Kakashi bore the scolding from his seniors with feigned patience and the barest twitch of his eye.

“Actually, I think it’s about two weeks later than you remember.” Sakura tried to explain patiently.

“What.” The twins chorused flatly.

“Why don’t you tell us what you remember after arriving at the compound?” Kakashi asked, his tone making it clear that this was a request to report rather than a friendly inquisition.

The men shared a look with each other that their audience couldn’t interpret and then straightened.

“Heisuke-kun was lead on this mission.” Takeshi scratched the stubble on his chin, then blinked in dismay. “Man, that’s like two weeks growth, we really have been out of it, huh?”

His twin slapped him on the shoulder jovially, and was then chided by Sakura who demanded he stay still so she could finish his vital scan.

“We got here and Heisuke-kun said he knew the guy in charge. Said he was a cousin. Asked us to let him handle it.”

Kakashi frowned. “He tried and failed to take down his cousin? Was it a branch seal issue? He couldn’t bring himself to be aggressive enough?”

“Nah,” Takeshi waggled his eyebrows. “Even worse. He was tryin’ to reason with him.”

Naruto and Sakura shared a commiserating look. They knew about ‘reasoning’ with Root members.
“They were polite enough an’ all.” Takeo cast an assessing gaze about the room. “They didn’t smell like they were lying. And all the pups were accounted for and unhurt. Didn’t see a reason to be violent from the get go if Heisuke thought we could resolve things peacefully. They said they had spare beds in the med bay, so…” Takeo trailed off with a shrug.

“That’s the last I remember,” said his twin, nodding his agreement. “Heisuke took first watch.”

“So what happened then?” Takeshi peered at them curiously. “We got hit with the seal they put on the girl?” He tilted his head toward Naruto.

“That’s what it looks like.” Kakashi looked at the dead seal on the floor with a scowl. “I’m still not sure what it’s for, why would you create—“

“I have a theory,” interrupted Naruto. She kicked her feet idly on the bed opposite the one currently being used as a seat by the twins.

Kakashi wore a pained look, but motioned for her to continue.

Naruto huffed. “Well, the same seal is in the barracks that are being used by the kids, and since the seal is tied to all the beds…” she trailed off and looked at the men meaningfully, waiting for them to come to her conclusion.

They stared at her blankly and she sighed in exaggerated disappointment.

“Ha.” Sakura smiled, sitting next to the blonde. “I get it.”

“Get what?” Takeo asked, clearly unimpressed at being taunted with the answer.

Naruto rolled her eyes. “Well, how would you like a way to make sure twenty noisy kids stayed in their beds all night and weren’t trying to run away or use the restroom or come to you because they had a nightmare or ask for a glass of water or—“

“I get it, I get it!” Takeshi rubbed the back of his and muttered darkly under his breath. “Sure would have been nice to have that time we got tricked into babysitting Hana and Kiba.”

“You can’t use that on children,” Sakura puffed up indignantly. “It’s unethical!”

Takeshi looked at her unrepentantly. “Have you ever had to babysit Kiba?”

Naruto tuned out Sakura’s response and nudged Kakashi. “How does it feel to know that three former ANBU, elite jōnin of Konoha, fell prey to a seal used to send naughty children to bed?”

Kakashi winced. “Maybe we’ll leave that part out of the official report.”

Then, what’s the plan?” Yamato ran his gaze across the rather large assembled group. “We just march in and take the place by force?”

“Won’t they know we’re here by now?” Naruto twirled a pigtail around her fingers. It would have to be a really oblivious group to not notice the seven shinobi running loose through the compound.

“Heisuke probably knows,” Takeo nodded at the large building. “But I don’t think his cousin’s byakugan works right. He might actually be completely blind.”
“You don’t know?” Yamato raised an eyebrow.

Takeshi shrugged. “He had a blindfold, but he moved and responded to people without a problem. That other guy keeps close. Calls him Hebiko. I think they may rely on each other to maneuver.”

“Strange thing.” Agreed Takeo with a grimace of distaste. “Smells more like snake than person.”

“Won’t Heisuke have told his cousin we’re here?” Sasuke avoided looking in Naruto and Kakashi’s direction.

“Nah,” protested Takeshi. “Heisuke’s cool. He probably just didn’t know how to wake us up and got stuck. Couldn’t leave without us, couldn’t wake us up, couldn’t convince his cousin to wake us. His best bet would be to maintain status quo and wait for backup.”

“That’s a terribly optimistic and forgiving attitude,” mumbled Sasuke in disquiet.

“Meh, Sasuke-kun,” Kakashi slapped him on the back, sending him stumbling forward a few steps. “Not everyone has morals as bad as yours.”

“As bad as mine?” Sasuke turned to him with a hiss. “You’re the one who— “ Sasuke blushed and looked away.

“One who what?” Kakashi asked, calm tone contradicted by the sharp gleam in his eye.

“This is not the place for this conversation.” Admitted Sasuke finally, looking away with a bow of his head.

“You’re right, it isn’t.” Kakashi turned to assess the group cheerfully.

“Sakura and Tenzō will go secure this ‘Mariko’ person; the rest are with me. We’ll confront Fancy Face. Naruto’s taking the lead.”

“Really?” Naruto was practically bouncing in her excitement.

“Takeo and Takeshi, looks like you might contest the wisdom of this decision, but held their tongues. Despite their seniority in age, Kakashi was still the highest ranking ninja on this mission.

“If we’re going to barge in and try to reason with an extremist faction fanatic, you’re certainly our best tool,” confirmed Kakashi.

“I can’t believe I agree with that logic,” Sasuke muttered in bewildered resignation.

Sakura winked at the blonde, before bounding after her own quarry. “Last one back to Masao-san has to pay for dinner when we get back!”

“Challenge Accepted!” Bellowed Naruto, before she spun around and threw open the doors of the main hall.

“Wait, that’s it? What’s the plan?” She heard Takeo hiss hurriedly behind her back.

“This is the plan,” said Sasuke in resignation, following obediently in Naruto’s wake.

They were greeted by a sea of surprised children’s faces turned toward them, all the small bodies frozen in the middle of kata practice.

“You, Fancy Face!” Naruto shouted in greeting. “Let my people go!”
“I always wanted to say that,” she whispered excitedly over her shoulder.

Her companions returned mixed expressions, ranging from of stoic forbearance to stressed dismay. Kakashi simply appeared mildly amused. She grinned fiercely at all of them, and then re-focused her attention on the foreign adults.

The man, who must be Heisuke-kun, looked at them with a strange mix of exasperation and relief. Naruto felt a brief nostalgic pang of Neji and then catalogued him as a non-threat, trusting the twin’s assessment of their colleague of three decades. After all, Sasuke-kun is a special kind of pain-in-the-ass. It’s statistically impossible for everyone to be that contrary, believe it.

The snake man was concerning, but she’d already mentally prepared herself for encountering something that seemed like one of Orochimaru’s failed experiments. Thus, she unsurprised to see someone who looked like one of Orochimaru’s failed experiments. Why wouldn’t Danzo have some of those lying around? She forced herself to remember that snake man, slinking behind Fancy Face, with eerie, slitted yellow eyes and scales speckling his skin, was a human too. Had once been even more human, and probably hadn’t asked for what Orochimaru had done to him.

He can work it out later in therapy, snarled Kurama, interrupting her thoughts. Keep your focus on the enemy!

Right. “Go back to your barracks kids.” Naruto made a shooing motion to her audience. “I’ve gotta’ teach your boss who’s in charge here.”

The kids stood collectively still, clearly bewildered.

“Who are you?” Sneered Fancy Face. It’d be easier to tell what the man was feeling were his face not, as indicated by the twins, covered with a bandana over his eyes. He wore a plain, traditional yukata. Naruto sighed, she really missed the fashion sense of the more refined villains. It wasn’t always what Ino would call visionary, but it was at least more interesting to look at. Would it kill him to add a little color to his wardrobe?

“I’m Uzumaki Naruto, the most badass Konoha kunoichi ever. But there’s no way you don’t know that.” Naruto huffed when she realized the kids were still standing around in confusion.

“Look,” Naruto stated, peering out at the small heads--not a one could be older than ten. “Is Nakamura Yuuichi here?”

A small clearing developed around a terrified looking boy with familiar sandy hair and quivering brown eyes.

“Your Mom says hi,” said Naruto bluntly. “And that she misses you. I’m going to take you back to her, and all the rest of you to your own Moms, after I’m done with this jackass--“

Kakashi cleared his throat in a reprimand.

Naruto rolled her eyes, “Oh, I’m sure they’ve heard worse.”

“You’re not taking anyone anywhere—“interrupted Fancy Face, with a vicious, bitter scowl that spoke of years of being a misunderstood special snowflake.

Naruto huffed. “You don’t have permission talk. I’m taking you all back—“

“What if we don’t want to go home?” piped up a small girl.
“I’m open to negotiations,” Naruto responded, not missing a beat.

“No one is going anywhere—“

“But you’re not staying with this dude, he’s a lunatic and you should never willingly stay with someone who is going around kidnapping children and trying to brainwash them into becoming his own small, private army.” Naruto spoke loudly and enunciated, both to be heard over the hissy fit Fancy Face was having and because this was important life advice that parents seemed to continually fail to provide to their children. “That’s an indication of bad life choices that you should not be trained to repeat—Sasuke you should be taking notes.”

“Listen here girl, you are in my domain and—“

Naruto lashed out with her chakra chains, effectively entrapping, disabling, and silencing Fancy Face and Snake Co.

“See,” she gestured toward the children. “That took like, twenty seconds, and his life ambitions are over. Don’t be him when you grow up. Be me. I’m going to win my bet and have my dinner comp’d when I get home and not spend the next week in a cell in T & I. That’s such a better option.”

And with that example, Naruto drug her two captives outside toward the central bunker housing Masao-san so that she could officially beat Sakura, followed by twenty obedient ducklings, four mildly annoyed men, and a thoroughly entertained boyfriend/lover/important person—she was really going to have to come up with an official word for him, soon.

“Is she always like this?” Takeo twitched in concern as they followed the blonde toward the central building.

“Mostly.” Kakashi surveyed the tableau in front of him. “But you have to admit it’s effective. No bloodshed, live captives for questioning, and not even one crying child.”

“It just seems,” Takeshi hesitated. “It seems awfully anticlimactic.”

“I don’t know, I’ve found that I kind of like it when my opposition turns out to be underwhelming and mediocre.” Kakashi drawled. *It certainly means less time spent recovering in the hospital.* He took out Icha Icha and flipped to the last chapter he’d read, the one where Sousuke realized he really was in love with Mina-chan, even if she’d converted to a religion where she vowed to only be with women—

“This,” Heisuke bit out bitterly, “should not have worked.”

Sasuke grunted and crossed his arms. “How did those two weeks of familial negotiations work for you again?” He matched the Hyūga glide for glide as they walked further into the compound.

Kakashi crinkled his visible eye in amusement. It felt so rewarding when Sasuke exercised his fledgling sense of humor.

Naruto had brought Masao outside by the time they caught up, and the children were sitting attentively in two rows as the old man entertained them with some story of dubious truth and origin about the Senju brothers.

Naruto approached them slowly, brows furrowed. “Sakura-chan’s still not back—“
“I am so done with this mission!” Sakura yelled as she rounded the corner, looking frazzled and fuming as she dragged some poor woman by the back of her dress up to the pile of Naruto’s own prisoners. Tenzō kept a weary and wary ten feet behind the pair.

In her defense, Kakashi noted, she and Tenzō appeared to be wet, singed, and coated in flour and maybe some kind of syrup.

Their hostage was completely clean, aside from being unconscious.

Sakura tossed the woman in the prisoner pile, green eyes visibly sparking in anger. “I remember this woman! She was wanted in the hospital for improperly filing intake paperwork and lethally overdosing terminally ill patients without their consent. Shizune-senpai noticed the irregularities and filed charges to be reviewed by the Board, but she disappeared before her hearing and took three cases of Penicillin. We have to bring her back to face the Board for her ethics violations!”

“And to be questioned for treason,” added Tenzō tiredly.

Sakura huffed. “Yeah, that too. But first, her hearing before the Board for ethics violations.”

Kakashi nodded seriously. “Always good to keep your priorities straight.”

Tenzō gave him a dirty look, which Kakashi decided to graciously ignore. The poor boy clearly had gone through a stressful time capturing his chūnin target. “Would you like to shower before we go?”

“That would be nice.” Tenzō slumped in defeat, turning away to head for the showers in the barracks.

“It shouldn’t have gone like this,” repeated Heisuke, eyes darting about as if he expected reality to crack at any moment.

Sasuke looked strangely sympathetic.

Kakashi clapped them both on the shoulder. “Why don’t you all go help the kids pack up?”

The men twitched in alarm, but Sasuke straightened and bravely walked forward, catching a few kids by the back of their shirts to haul along with them.

“Aren’t you coming?” Sasuke called back over his shoulder.

“Naruto and I have prisoners to watch,” Kakashi politely demurred, enjoying Naruto’s laugh as the group dispersed.

In the end, Kakashi did take pity on the older jōnin and let them take the easy task of escorting the prisoners back to Konoha. The trio gave Sakura repeated assurances that they would report the woman’s return to the Hospital Ethics Board.

His team took the children.

Fortunately, most of the stolen children were old enough to remember the homes they were taken from and were welcomed by relieved, grateful sobbing parents happy and appreciative of the miracle of their children being returned alive and well.

Unfortunately, life wasn’t perfect, and two turned out to be orphaned prior to abduction, one child’s
parents couldn’t be located, and a fourth returned with Sasuke with no explanation other than Sasuke’s grim frown and fierce conviction that the household wasn’t suitable for the child.

The kid seemed ok with Sasuke’s determination, so Kakashi left it at that and they determined to escort the four remaining children back to Konoha. They’d be the Hokage’s problem then.

Kakashi could already hear her throwing things at him.

The return trip, and the return of the children, had cost them an additional two weeks of time, but no one was in a hurry to rush the mission to its conclusion.

“I’m really surprised no one’s been sent after Sasuke,” commented Tenzō, when Kakashi finally determined to send the man on ahead to personally apprise the Hokage of their progress.

“They probably don’t know he’s missing,” said Sakura with an unconcerned shrug.

Sakura gave Sasuke a heavy look, and the boy finally caved with a grunt. “So the Replacement might not be completely awful,” admitted Sasuke reluctantly.

Sakura grinned charmingly at him. “I told you Sai was better at acting than you give him credit for!”

Naruto nodded slowly. “He’s really into atonement lately though. You’ll probably find out you apologized to a lot of people.”

Sasuke blanched.

“You might even find you’re somewhat socially respectable,” she mused.

Sasuke’s face took on a murderous quality.

After Tenzō had been officially dismissed, they stopped at the same inn they’d last stayed at on their journey from Konoha.

With the children asleep for the night, and Sasuke on watch, Kakashi felt perfectly entitled to settle down with his book and relax into his evening routine.

This now included a flirty blonde slipping into his bed and rubbing her cold toes against his calves when he was about five pages into his story.

“Read to me.” Naruto demanded sleepily, pressing a chaste kiss against his shoulder.

Kakashi cleared his throat: “But I don’t love you, Sousuke-kun,” said Mina-softly, green eyes trembling with regret. “I realize now I never did. I loved you as a companion and a friend; but when I compare what we had to the passion that I have with Chiziru-chan, what we had pales in comparison—“

“I knew it!

Both Naruto and Kakashi jumped as the door to their room burst open, hitting the wall with a loud ‘thwack,’ and Sakura flew in, crowing victoriously.

“You’re sleeping with Sensei!” She hissed, pouncing on the bed and whacking the blonde with a pillow she’d brought.

“Oh my god, you’re sleeping with Sensei!” Sakura gasped as her words caught up with her brain and she buried her face in the pillow, curling up into an embarrassed ball of muddled med-nin at the
foot of the bed.

Kakashi had never been more thankful he’d insistently enforced the ‘no sex on missions’ rule.

Sasuke leaned in the doorway with a completely unapologetic frown. “She kept bothering me about it so I told her she should go check and see for herself.” He came in and sat on the edge of the bed in a manner as dignified as possible, considering the circumstances.

Sakura made an incoherent high-pitched whining noise that was muffled by the pillow she was curled into.

Eventually she lifted her face, presumably a concession to the necessity for breathing. “Oh my god you’ve seen his face!” Sakura’s own face was still as red as the tomatoes that Sasuke loved, and she sounded as if she couldn’t decide to be more awed or horrified by current events. “Oh my god, you’ve seen him naked!” She hissed at Naruto and then returned to her pillow-hugging fetal position.

“I think you broke her,” Kakashi mused observantly.

“That was—,” Naruto’s face started to thaw from its shock and begin to match Sakura’s. “I didn’t—“ she spluttered, fingers twitching. “Ino made that all up! I had not!”

“That’s past tense you brat!” Sakura apparently cared enough about the statement to unwind and resume hitting Naruto with the pillow. “Why didn’t you tell me?” She whined.

Naruto recovered enough to defend herself. “It’s none of your business!” She hissed, returning fire with one of Kakashi’s own pillows.

Sasuke sat stoically, but raised his eyes to look at something interesting on the wall past Kakashi’s shoulder.

“I’ve been practicing Amaterasu,” said Sasuke conversationally.

Kakashi set his book down in his lap and rubbed Obito’s eye, which was twitching rapidly underneath his hitiate. His chest ached too, but it wasn’t the old, familiar ache of missing loved ones long gone.

He was just trying too hard not to laugh.

“You know,” Naruto said, fingers intertwined with Kakashi’s as they walked up the stairs to his apartment. “We never did talk about the whole baby part of that mission I was assigned.”

Kakashi became uncomfortably still, mind racing for any way to change the topic of conversation. Honestly, he’d forgotten that part of the ordeal and wasn’t ready to address it yet.

Naruto opened the door, and Kaksahi had no choice but to follow her inside, one hand still caught in her own and the other holding the grocery bag.

She took the bag from him as if everything were perfectly normal and began sort through the items as she chatted. “It’s ok, though, right? If we wait to talk about it until after my jōnin exam?”

Kakashi couldn’t contain the sigh of relief. “That’s fine,” he said hurriedly. “Not a problem.”

Naruto’s blue eyes lit up in laughter as she chirped mirthfully at him. “You’re such a dork.”
Kakashi huffed. It wasn’t his fault that she had a talent for springing unexpectedly challenging emotional dilemmas at him in the course of every-day-conversation.

She stood up on her tip-toes and kissed his masked nose. “I love you, though.” She beamed up at him and leaned against his chest. “You’re my dork.”

He felt his own eyes go soft, and he backed her up against the wall, looking down at her contagiously joyful expression with a gaze that he could only hope sufficiently conveyed his own feelings. “I know,” he said.

And promptly felt her kick his kneecap in irritation. “Ow,” he dropped her and backed up so he could sink into the couch, rubbing his now throbbing knee.

“You can’t quote Icha Icha at me every time I say ‘I love you!” Naruto yelled, stomping her foot in frustration.

“Was not.” Kakashi lied.


He gave a soft ‘umfph’ as Naruto abruptly collapsed into his lap.

“I love you.” Naruto said, clearly giving him the chance to try again.

Kakashi’s eye danced. “My love is a fleeting thing, fit for no—“

Naruto covered his mouth with her hand and muffled her groan into his shoulder. “Stop, stop, stop. That’s so horrible. Now you’ve moved onto Tactics and next it will be Paradise and then—“

She started in surprise when Kakashi crashed his lips into her own. She hadn’t realized he lowered his mask, but she hummed her contentment into his lips as he pressed her down against the couch.

“My favorite moment of the day is waking up with you in my arms.” He murmured against her cheek, pushing their foreheads together before pressing soft kisses against her brow, her eyes, her chin. “My favorite sound is your laugh, and it’s even sweeter when I’m the cause of it.”

He ran his hands down her spine, enjoying the way she arched her back as he gently kissed down her throat. “I want you today, tomorrow, and for eternity hereafter.”

He loved the way her eyes widened at his words, the way the blue burned liquid and bright. “You’re strong when I’m weak.” His hands traced the curves of her hips. “You’re fearless when I’m a coward.” That kiss had teeth. “You’re full of hope when everything is ending.” His hands cupped her face. “And that makes you the most unbelievable, impossibly beautiful person I’ve ever seen in my life.” He didn’t know how to make her believe that, but from the way her eyes seemed to break, he thought she understood.

“Yeah, okay.” Naruto said, somewhat breathless, trembling underneath him even as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders encouragingly. “It’s cheesy as hell, but I guess it’ll do.” Kakashi laughed into her skin, and proceeded to do his best to make her take that statement back.
Beta(s): ElectraSev5n—thank you, thank you, thank you.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

7 years later.
Or something like that.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Daddy!”

Small hands tugged insistently on Kakashi’s pants. “We’re gonna be late. Uncle ‘Ruka said late is not ok.”

Kakashi bent down obligingly to sweep his daughter up in his arms. “Where did I go wrong with you?” He gave a mournful sigh over his child’s distressingly time-abiding nature.

“Wanting to be on time isn’t a bad thing,” Naruto chided, shooing them all out the door.

The ANBU guard on the roof gave her a dirty look.

“As I say, not as I do!” The blonde called up to Hawk with a jaunty wave before setting a brisk pace down the street.

The five year old mimicked her mother and waved to the masked ninja cheerfully. “Buh-bye Birdie!”

“Hawk, puppy.” Kakashi corrected, already knowing he’d be ignored. Hawk and Raven and Eagle all went by ‘Birdie,’ in his daughter’s world.

“Do you have your bento?” Naruto asked, prattling off a list of items— more to remind herself that she hadn’t made a grievous error as a mother than because she was worried the girl had forgotten anything.

“Yes.”

“Pencils?” Naruto tried to wrestle her blonde hair into a twist that she could pin in place.

“Yes.” The girl’s hair was already smoothly styled into pigtails, not a strand out of place.

Kakashi did their daughter’s hair.

“Notebook?” Naruto mumbled, mouth full of hair clip.

“Oh-huh.”

“Crayons?”

“Yes.”

Naruto paused, brows furrowed, clearly trying to recall what else her child was supposed to bring.
“Smoke bomb?” Interjected Kakashi, attempting to be helpful.

“Maybe.” His daughter admitted with a sly giggle.

“Oh no,” moaned Naruto fitfully as they arrived at their destination, joining the throng of other parents and children eagerly anticipating the first day of school. “Not on the first day. I mean, that’s totally ok, but I’ve already had your teacher in my office every day this week on the verge of a nervous breakdown about leading his first class this year. You should really give Konohamaru-Sensei at least 24 hours. He’s already a bit of a mess.”

Kakashi nodded gravely. “That’s right. It’s always best to lull your opponents into a false sense of security.”

“What horrible advice are you giving my god-daughter?” Sakura peered suspiciously over Kakashi’s shoulder, as if summoned by the mere mention of mischief.

“You look so pretty, puppy!” Sakura cooed at girl, reaching out to playfully tug one of the ribbons holding her silver pigtails. “You go in there and charm their socks off! Remember, you catch more flies with honey.” Sakura winked at her.

“Right.” The little girl nodded obediently. Kakashi doubted Sakura heard his daughter mutter that she had that too. His child probably had a different interpretation of Sakura’s words of wisdom.

“Down, Daddy.” Demanded the kid, squirming to be released.

Naruto knelt down to give out a hug. “Have fun, ok? And be mostly good.”

“Big kids don’t need hugs,” sniffed a familiar childish voice.

“Ryosuke,” scolded Sasuke tiredly, as if he’d said the same name in the same tone ten times today already. The man stopped next to Sakura, their son shifting impatiently as far in front of them he could be without being reprimanded to stand closer.

Kakashi eyed his god-son and once again prayed fervently to whatever deity might actually bother to still pay attention to him for Sasuke and Sakura’s continued good health.

“He’s going through that independent phase,” Sakura said with a strained smile.

“Ah,” Kakashi nodded knowingly. Ryosuke had been going through that ‘independent phase’ since he was a day old. The boy’s first word was ‘no,’ followed closely by ‘mine.’ Then the brat promptly refused to speak at all until he could verbalize complete, grammatically perfect sentences.

His own child continued to give her mother a prolonged hug, just to spite the boy.

And then she reached up to him. “Hug, Daddy.” Kakashi knelt down, hugging her tight and kissing the top of her smooth silver hair. “Be good pup.” He leaned in close, as if sharing a secret. “That means don’t do anything I would have done, and do everything your mother did.”

“Right!” She laughed at him and clapped her hands, and stood on tip-toe to kiss his cheek.

The bells chimed and the Academy doors opened. Kakashi could see a flustered Konohamaru trying to identify his own students among the multitude of milling children.

They locked eyes briefly and Konohamaru made his way over to them.

“You, Little Miss Blue Eyes!” He pointed at Kakashi’s daughter, who had her fingers clenched tight
in her father’s pants.

“And you, Sullen Sulky Brat!”

Ryosuke scowled, offended.

“You’re both with me got it!” Konohamaru rose with a sigh.

“Tough first day?” Kakashi tried to appear sympathetic. Naruto was making her best understanding hum at his shoulder.

“How am I supposed to find them all,” Konohamaru whined, eyes darting around wildly. “They’re all so short and they all look the same!”

“It’ll get easier with time.” Kakashi advised, as if he actually knew what he was talking about.

Konohamaru sighed and walked back toward the building, motioning for the children to follow him.

“That’s our teacher?” Ryosuke frowned up at his parents. “He looks stupid.”

“He’s the grandson of the Sandaime,” corrected Sasuke. “He’s stronger than he seems.”

Ryosuke gave a huff of disbelief. “Then why is he stuck teaching five year olds?” He took off without waiting for an answer, briefly gazing back at his peer. “Are you coming? I won’t be in your class for long, but I suppose it’ll be nice to have someone I know to beat while I’m there.”

“Oh my god.” Sakura held a hand to her forehead. “I don’t even know where he comes up with this. I’ve told him we won’t sign the paperwork for him to graduate early.” She punched Sasuke’s shoulder lightly, “I’m blaming this on you. I think you reincarnated early. Or something.”

Sasuke rolled his eyes.

Ryosuke was one of the youngest in the class, but clearly determined to be the biggest pain in the ass.

Kakashi smiled down at his daughter with amusement. “Are you going to catch up?”

The girl was busy scowling at Ryosuke’s back, but she looked up at him when he spoke.

“I’m gonna break his face.” She promised seriously.

“That’s my girl!” Kakashi beamed at her and waved her off. She ran up the steps, looking back briefly one last time as she reached the top.

“We love you, Aiko-chan!” Naruto called out, cupping her hands to her face, as if she needed assistance to be heard over the crowd.

“I know!” Yelled back their daughter, beaming before she turned to run into the building.

Naruto’s grin turned thin. “That,” said the blonde, turning on Kakashi. “That is entirely your fault!”

Sakura frowned. “Wasn’t that a line from one of the Icha Icha books?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Kakashi replied, voice mild.

Naruto sighed and leaned into his shoulder. “Should I be worried? About her?” She lingered as the
crowd dispersed, resting against him before heeding the inevitable call of the endless work waiting for her at her desk in the Hokage’s office.

“No.” Kakashi shook his head and smiled. “Not at all.”

“Is that—“ Naruto narrowed her eyes. “Kakashi, is that Akino?”

“Where?” asked Kakashi nonchalantly.

“Over there, by the fence—that is Akino!” She scowled up at the man. “You promised. She’ll be fine, Kakashi.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Kakashi wrapped his arms around his partner and turned her away from the school, intent on walking her to her office. “Besides, he’s completely inconspicuous.”

“He’s wearing sunglasses, Kakashi. That’s hardly ‘inconspicuous.’”

“It’s not like you didn’t send any toads,” retorted Kakashi.

“Of course I didn’t send any toads,” protested Naruto. “I have complete faith in Konohamaru’s capabilities.”

Kakashi waved to a shopkeeper, nodded to another jōnin, walked a few steps forward.

“Ok,” admitted Naruto reluctantly. “I sent one toad.”

Chapter End Notes

FINAL A/N

Thanks. To everyone who read this and spared a moment to drop me a note and tell me how happy it made them. If you hadn’t, I would have abandoned this long ago. I’m so happy to be at the end and be able to say I finished a long story. It was your help that got me here.

An extra thank you to those who were sounding boards for the early chapters, including Eurwen and CrystallineX. Thank you to LadyWinterFic, who both partially inspired me to write this and then took interest in it and encouraged me to take it in more interesting ways.

Finally, a very, very big thanks to ElectraSev5n, who came in and took over being my pre-reader somewhere in the middle and stayed through the end. I had so much fun trading chapters with you (although you wrote something like ten times as much as I did during this period). I had some severe writer’s block in ¾ of the way through this thing, and probably would have stalled permanently had it not been for some of her advice and for learning from how she her tackled her own writer’s block issues on Vapors and Clarity. I’d give you a hug, but I know you’d probably run, so I’ll content myself with sharing sentiments of thanks and beaming smiles from afar.

FAQ
Sequel. No, I have no plans for a sequel. Originally, what was written was Part I of a II Part story, but I realize I don’t want to write that Part II anymore. This is enough. However, I have posted another story called Making Arrangements: Scrapbook. It is on AO3, because it was easier to put it there than on ff net. There you will find cut scenes that didn’t make the story as well as bits and any future drabbles I might want to write in this verse. For example, it currently contains the story of how Aiko got her name (chapter four of MA: Scrapbook). If you want further children fluff, you’ll find it there —assuming I ever get around to writing more.

Biggest Struggle. Point of view and plotting. The point of view of this fic is all over the place, I acknowledge that. I tried to start it out as third person omniscient and failed epically at that, falling back into third person limited by the end of the fic. As far as plot goes, I pretty much suck at creating plot on my own. I’d much rather focus on character development to the exclusion of plot. Which I pretty much manage to do…but the story reached an end anyway and the characters grew, so there plot. I win.

Sakura/Sasuke. They are their own characters with their own goals and actions independent of Naruto and Kakashi. Interpret their story however you wish, but they weren’t the focus of this fic, which is why you only see their actions as they impact Naruto and Kakashi.

Shino. Does not have a crush on Naruto. He just feels immensely guilty because Kurenai had him damage the apartment as part of training exercise. He didn’t realize it was Naruto’s apartment until after the fact, at which point he awkwardly expresses his guilt (which he has been forbidden to directly explain) in his awkward Shino way. However, even if he did have a crush, Kakashi wouldn’t do anything about that. He knows Shino is no threat to his relationship with Naruto. He’d probably just sit back and continue to get as much work out of the boy as possible.

Any more Kaka/FemNaru? No. I think I’ve said all I have to say on the subject. I’ve done Inconceivable, the short story. And now I’ve done the long story too. I wrote them because I wanted good Kaka/FemNaru fiction and couldn’t find anything I liked. That’s not a problem anymore, although I reserve the right to add drabbles in this verse in MA: Scrapbook on AO3.

What’s Next.

By Any Other Name. Sasuke/FemNaru. I’ve started this Romeo/Juliet parody and do hope to finish it one day. It’s strictly comedy and will have a happy ending. It’s more of a Road to Ninja interpretation of Sasuke which I find very fun to play with. (only on ff net as of now)

Leaves of Grass. SI, no pairing. This is a world-building self insert Naruto piece that takes place in the third shinobi war. It’s more of a slice of life drama with hints of comedy. It focuses on familial relationships and the Sanin, for the main part. I’m not really sure where it’s going. I’m having fun exploring the difficult aspects of Naruto that the story lets me explore. (only on ff net as of now)

Where/How can you find me.

FF Net-CrownsofLaurels
AO3- CrownsofLaurels
Tumblr- crownsoflaurels1020
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