# backslide

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**Archive Warning:** Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings  
**Category:** M/M  
**Fandom:** Naruto  
**Relationship:** Uchiha Sasuke/Uzumaki Naruto, Hatake Kakashi/future!Uzumaki Naruto, Namiashi Raidou/Shiranui Genma, Platonic Uzumaki Naruto/Uchiha Sasuke/Haruno Sakura  
**Character:** Uzumaki Naruto, Uchiha Sasuke, Hatake Kakashi, Shiranui Genma, Namiashi Raidou, Sanitobi Hiruzen, Uchiha Obito, Haruno Sakura, Mitarashi Anko, Yuuhi Kurenai, Dai-nana-han | Team 7 (Naruto), Uchiha Itachi, Tsunade (Naruto)  
**Additional Tags:** Time Travel, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, slow build romance, Angst, Humor, Fluff, Friendship, (Joking) Marriage Proposals, lots of them - Freeform, Gratuitous Fluff Story (Not Really Meant to Be Taken Seriously), You've been warned, Schmoop, Fox Summons!, Family Feels, Family Fluff, Families of Choice, Kurama adopts all the things, no really all of them, Genin Puppy Piles, team 7 fluff, Lots of that too, Kakashi is ridiculous, so is everyone else though, Self-Indulgent Ficcage Fluff  
**Collections:** Good Readings (ymmv), Fin, Nindo, Fics worth many re-reads, A Dragon's Hoard of the Best Fics, BestOfTheBestFanfics, The best Naruto Fanfics, AU Faves, Teamwork, The Special Collection, Quality Fiction, Terrific Time Travel Fics, Reading is one form of escape, Running for your life is another, Fics That Make Me Feel Good, Favorite Naruto Fanfics  
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**by** blackkat

### Summary

Naruto’s friends are gone, his lover is dying, Konoha is destroyed, and Madara’s second return has pushed the entire world to the brink. Hunted and harried, Naruto is sent back in time to upend Madara’s plan before it even starts, and sets about changing everything. Butterfly effect nothing: the world is at stake, and Naruto is hardly about to let it fall to ruin once more. Not while he’s still breathing.

### Notes
I freely admit, I've wanted to write a Naruto time travel story since approximately twelve minutes after I finished reading my first one. It's a very much overused trope, but it's brilliant. Please note that I'm definitely going to be using some fandom clichés, because I'm the type to really like them. Hopefully it won't come off as trite, but this is mostly self-indulgent fluffiness and not meant to really have actual substance. You've been warned.

(Also, because I have way too many WIPs at the moment, I'm going to tag this with monthly updates. Just so you're prepared.)
Alignment

He slides through the darkness of gnarled trees and jutting rocks, barely half a shadow in the gloom. There is no moon—there hasn’t been in a very long time—but shinobi eyes are more than capable of using the cold light of the stars. By their glow, it’s simple enough to pick his way around and over the well-hidden traps scattered throughout the clearing’s edge. They’re deadly, all of them, because they lost the luxury of mercy years ago.

“The amplification seals are in place,” he says, slipping over a jagged boulder and landing lightly in front of his partner. “With your genjutsu, that should be enough to hold them off for at least a day, probably more.”

Sasuke coughs, deep and wracking, but nods. “Surroundings?” he rasps, and his voice is rough and his breathing labored from a recent fit.

Naruto closes his eyes, not so much to shut out the fact that Sasuke is dying, but to strangle the despair that’s rising up inside him. They're the last of the Konoha shinobi, maybe the last living souls in the Land of Fire. Madara’s been thorough. “Clear,” is all he says, though, taking a seat beside the Uchiha and watching him pull himself upright with worried eyes. “You're—?”

“Fine,” Sasuke finishes, because after so many years they're all but sharing brainwaves. Not that the question is so hard to guess, given their situation. He leans back against the boulder behind them, clearly exhausted, but reaches out to wrap a hand around the back of Naruto's neck and drag him closer. Naruto goes with it, not about to resist, and he lets himself fall all but boneless against Sasuke's strong chest, pressing his forehead into the other man’s shoulder. Slim, deft fingers thread through his long hair, tugging lightly, and then still.

“It’s almost time,” Sasuke says, and for once his voice is nearly gentle.

Naruto keeps his eyes closed and doesn’t move. He knows, he’s known for weeks now, but that doesn’t make it any easier to accept. This is a one-way ticket for only one person, and as much as Naruto would like to argue that Sasuke should be the one to go, he knows better. That kind of foolish, heroic naivety was what got Sakura killed.

Apparently fed up with his silence—and isn’t that irony, the bastard—Sasuke yanks on his hair, making him yelp. “I said—”

“I heard you, teme,” Naruto hisses, jerking back to glare at his best friend. He almost loses a chunk of scalp in the process, but Sasuke doesn’t relinquish his grip and Naruto doesn’t move far enough away to make him. His expression settles, anger fading, and he lowers his eyes. “And…I know it is. But I still think—”

“Hn. Dobe.” But Sasuke's red-and-black eyes are warm in a way they only rarely are. “I thought I warned you about that and how it overtaxes your brain.”

Naruto makes a face at him, because end of the world or no, childishness is pretty much always satisfying. “Oh, funny. But…” He trails off, not meeting Sasuke's gaze, and then says softly, “I just… Is this really our best option?”

“Yes,” Sasuke answers instantly. He reaches out again, pulling Naruto closer, until their foreheads are resting together and their breath mingles, warm in the cooling night air. “We’ve already gone over this, Naruto. You know it is. What is this about?”
Naruto hesitates, because he knows Sasuke will call him a moron for this, and while that’s hardly a new thing, right now he doesn’t want to hear it. “I…” He looks up, meets Sasuke's level eyes, and tries for a smile even though he knows it falls very far short. A sweep of his hand takes in the small clearing, the two of them pressed so close they might as well be sharing a heartbeat. “This,” he whispers, and it’s jagged. Naruto’s lived a while now—longer than he ever expected to, certainly—but he has never, ever been able to want anything, have it, and then keep it. “Us,” he finally manages. “If I go back, if I change everything, then this—”

“Has already happened,” Sasuke interrupts inexorably. His free hand slides around Naruto’s side, up the line of his back to curl around his neck again, his other still twined in deep garnet hair. But his eyes are resigned, as much as he tries to hide it, sad though there’s a hint of wry humor there as well. “You’re going back to change the future, Naruto. The past—our past—has already happened. The timelines will split. We’ve gone over the theory enough for you to know this. We can’t change what’s already happened, but you can change what will happen. This, us, it’s always going to be there. But I’ve got two days left, three at the very most, and I’m not going to leave you alone in this hell when there's a way to fix it.”

Naruto smiles at him, small and sad. “No one would ever believe me if I told them the great Uchiha Sasuke was a closet romantic,” he jokes, but the lines in his face have eased a bit, and he breathes out as he leans forward, gently pressing his lips to Sasuke's pale throat.

Sasuke chuckles, even as his fingers wind more deeply into long tresses and tug the other man closer still. “No one,” he agrees, looking down at the man in his arms. He pulls gently, dragging Naruto against his chest once more. Burying his face in silken red strands, he breathes out a long, quiet sigh and then says, apropos of nothing, “I miss your blond hair.”

It’s Naruto's turn to laugh, muffled as it is by Sasuke's shirt. “You and me both,” he offers in amusement. “I spent twenty-four years of my life blond, before the stupid fox decided to go all noble on me.” He picks up a lock of hair and surveys it with bemusement, then lets it fall with a shrug and rests his cheek on Sasuke’s shoulder again. “But at least I won't have to use a henge, once I'm back. With the Hyuuga still alive, that would just be asking for trouble.”

Sasuke rolls his eyes at his friend’s incredibly awful planning skills, but says nothing. As bad as he is at strategy, Naruto’s always been brilliant at tactics, and with Sasuke helping him plan out his return, things should go at least a little more smoothly than they otherwise would.

At the thought of what’s coming, Sasuke closes his eyes and tightens his arms just a bit. He knows his own expiration date is rapidly approaching, but knowing is different than accepting. Far different than liking. Naruto has been his rock for years now, a safe harbor in the storm of war their land has fallen to, and Sasuke doesn’t believe it’s hubris to think he’s been the same for Naruto. And now Sasuke is going to cast him away to the tides, send him spinning through places no human, jinchuuriki or otherwise, was ever meant to go. Alone, without allies, facing some of the most dangerous people in any world, and there's nothing more he can do to help. They’ve prepared and planned and schemed and made arrangements for the worst case scenario. But all of that only goes so far, especially when Naruto will be alone in what is essentially enemy territory for as long as it takes to complete the first stages.

But for the moment, at least, there's nothing between them, not even air, and Sasuke curls around his partner, his best friend, his lover as much as he can, holds him tightly and wonders just how long the world will let them stay like this. Not long enough, never long enough, but they’ll have to make do.

“You'll save me, right? Him,” he whispers, suddenly insecure, adrift. “I—we, all of us could have been so much more. What we became wasn’t what we were meant to be. You’ll fix it, won't you?”
Naruto breathes out against his skin, warm-damp and faintly laughing. “Of course,” he says, twisting his head to look up at Sasuke with one ocean-blue eye. At least those are the same, even if his hair has changed and the whisker-marks are long-since vanished. “I know I'm going back to save the world, but our team is a huge part of that. Just think of it, what we could have been.”

“The next coming of the Sannin,” Sasuke finishes with some feeling between amusement and resignation. “As long as you don’t turn into Jiraiya.”

“As long as you don’t turn into Orochimaru,” Naruto retorts, but his gaze is unwavering as he meets Sasuke's eyes. “Don’t worry, Sasuke. I won't let it happen again.”

Naruto's word is worth everything in the crumbling world, and Sasuke nods, just once. He tips his head back, checking the position of the stars, and then murmurs, “Naruto…”

With a soft sigh, Naruto pulls back, if only a little. He follows Sasuke's gaze and nods, expression resigned. “Yeah, I know.” Then he leans forward, and Sasuke meets him halfway in a slow, careful kiss, the goodbye they’ll never be able to speak out loud, the tears that will never be shed for a loss they’ve both helped to orchestrate. Naruto’s mouth is warm and soft under his, and Sasuke tastes the sweetness of the apples they had for dinner. Naruto wraps an arm around his shoulders, pressing close again, and it’s the work of half a moment for Sasuke to topple them to the ground.

Naruto arches up as the other man settles on top of him, still taller and heavier even after so many years, and though he’s not quite sure who initiated it, the kiss is desperate now, sharp and carelessly hungry when they’ve both kept themselves tightly controlled in every aspect of their lives for so long now. But he buries his fingers in raven hair, ghosts over smooth, pale skin, and tries not to cry when Sasuke pulls away, breathing hard and eyes gone dark and somber.

“Always, koi,” he murmurs, ghosting one more quick kiss across Naruto's lips, and Naruto feels his heart clench, because Sasuke never uses that endearment. Hell, the closest they ever usually come to endearments is teme and dobe. Three times that Naruto can remember the word koi has passed Sasuke's lips, and every time it’s been the nearest to death they’ve ever come.

Here, now, death isn’t so much a chance as a certainty, and Naruto closes his eyes and fights not to give in to grief.

“Always,” he answers, whisper-soft and more heartfelt than any word he can remember speaking previously. “I’ll never—”

“No,” Sasuke cuts in, and the desolation is entirely gone, banished by the raging, furious fire that’s sprung up in his eyes. “No, Naruto, don’t you dare promise me that. You deserve to find someone else, to feel this again. It won’t be me, it won't be the same, but swear you'll let yourself. Swear, Naruto.”

Naruto meets his sharp gaze, sees the determination there, and knows that in this at least he will never win. So he gives in with a crooked smile, dipping his head and murmuring, “I swear, Sasuke, if there's ever anyone else, I’ll try. But you’re…”

Sasuke's eyes soften, and he tips forward to knock their foreheads together again. “I know,” he whispers in response. “I know, but…try.”

They both understand, because it’s something they’d both ask of the other and fail at doing for themselves, no matter how situations played out. Love is a fierce and formidable thing, at least in parting, and the grief of lost romantic love is something neither of them has had to endure before. Sasuke's will be over shortly—he can feel his life seeping away, the clock running down on his time.
here—but Naruto will have to endure and survive, alone in a land that’s become strange to him.

“I will,” Naruto repeats, shutting away the thought of another lifetime without Sasuke—a very long life, after Kurama’s sacrifice. Also pushed back is the knowledge that Sasuke will be left here to die alone, kamikaze mission or no. He’ll drop the genjutsu hiding them as soon as he’s ready, and then wait for Madara’s forces to find him. There are suicide seals everywhere in the clearing, just waiting for the trigger word to activate, and then it will be done. “Always,” he repeats, stealing another butterfly-brief kiss before getting his feet under him and rising.

Sasuke rises with him, even though he wavers on his feet as a harsh, hacking cough tears through him, and together they drag out a huge, heavy scroll and unroll it across the middle of the small open area. The lines of the seal seem to glimmer even in the darkness, sucking in the light and holding it. It’s by far the most complex seal Naruto has ever made, almost a year of constant work in one length of heavy canvas. Each line is perfect, checked over countless times and tweaked until the whole thing resonates with contained power, even before activation.

They lay it out beneath the darkened sky, and then step back into the silence, because this is the moment. This is the last, the end, the step beyond the edge and out into a new beginning.

Only one of them will be making the trip.

Naruto huffs out a heavy breath and then looks up, meeting Sasuke's dark eyes with something terribly close to despair. He doesn’t say anything, but he doesn’t need to. Sasuke's eyes reflect the same, because beginnings or no, this is also most certainly an end. In less than a quarter of an hour, the stars will be in position, ready to amplify the power called, and Naruto's seal will come to life with a single drop of blood, carrying him away forever.

Sasuke reaches out with a hand that doesn’t tremble, cups Naruto's cheek and traces every line of his face. The Sharingan means he doesn’t have to work to memorize his partner’s features, but he does anyway, consciously committing every detail to memory. It’s a beautiful face, strong and entirely matured from the roundness of childhood, lean from years of hard living and scarred from war. Even the Kyuubi couldn’t heal everything, at points, and it’s left a patchwork of scars on Naruto's skin. The long red hair, as deep and dark as a garnet, falls loosely around his face, having long since come free from its usual tail, and Sasuke runs a hand through it wistfully. Not blond, even though the sunshine-gold hair so perfectly suited Naruto’s personality. But still Naruto’s, and that’s enough to make it dear.

There’s a single thin braid, hanging down beside Naruto's face, and Sasuke touches it regretfully, remembering the long, slow night that they took for themselves once the seal was finally complete. One night where they threw thoughts of safety and concealment and vigilance to the wind, indulging, and only a slim plait bound with black and red silk and a lingering ache in both their bodies to remember it by.

“Keep this?” he asks before he can stop himself. “Just…just this one.”

For me, he doesn’t have to say, because Naruto knows, will understand better than anyone else ever could.

Naruto's hand comes up, covering his, and tightening their fingers around the slender twist of hair. “Always,” he says, his oath given once again, but this time with a smile, with his entire heart in his eyes. “Sasuke, everything. It’s always been yours. We’ve remade each other so many times since we first met, and like you said, it’s already happened. Nothing will ever change it. Even if I find someone else, even if I don’t, you’ll have already had all of me.”
Sasuke knows that, of course, has known it for years. But hearing it spoken like that, so simply and certainly, is a balm to a wound he hadn’t even recognized as such. He leans in again, brushes a kiss over the back of Naruto's hand where their fingers are still entwined, over Naruto's forehead half-hidden by his bright-dark hair, and then over his lips again, lingering and soft. One last kiss, and Naruto answers it with everything. Give and take, and they’ve always been equals, no matter his delusions as a child. Naruto is half of him, light to his dark, gold to his pale, quicksilver to his calm. Every sun needs a shadow, and every shadow needs a sun, and they balance each other like this. They always have, even in the times they didn’t want to admit it.

“Go,” Sasuke breathes against his lips, because if Naruto doesn’t leave now Sasuke is aware he never will. They’ll hesitate and hope for another way until the stars fall out of alignment, and then everything will be lost.

There are no choices here, no other paths they can take that end in a better future. This is their only chance, and neither of them can waste it.

“I love you,” Naruto whispers back, barely a breath. They don’t say it often—twice, three times, maybe—but that’s all right, because it’s always been understood. He takes a step away and squares his shoulders, striding forward to stand in the very center of the seal. Starlight glints off dagger-sharp claws as he lifts his hand, blood splattering from a slit wrist. Sasuke winces at the deep wound, life-threatening on anyone else, but Naruto's face is calm and set, not quite at peace but not entirely far off from it, either.

The seal starts to glow, rippling with blue and violet chakra, shining like a beacon in the darkness. The seals on Naruto's arms echo it, glittering and sparking, and for a moment he’s a creature of light, suspended in the shadows. Sasuke catches his breath—one last chance, one last time, just once more—and takes a step forward, right to the edge of the scroll. Naruto opens eyes that glow deep violet, and smiles at him, sharp white teeth flashing and expression fierce. Sasuke meets the grin with one of his own.

“Always, koi,” he says again, knowing Naruto will hear it even over the snap and crackle of building power as the stars creep into alignment. “I love you.”

Naruto's eyes meet his and hold, steady and strong, and there's a world of words there that neither of them has ever needed to speak. They don’t need to speak them now, because one look is enough.

It holds for a single, endless moment, and then Naruto's hands flicker through three hand seals and the light is gone.

The seal is gone.

Naruto is gone.

Sasuke takes a step back, the sudden lack like ashes on his tongue, and then breathes out.

They're lucky, really. So few in this time have ever gotten such a chance to say goodbye. Farewells are another luxury lost to war, abandoned along with mercy and justice and anything beyond kill-protect-avenge-defeat-survive. But not for long, if this plan succeeds.

Never again, if Naruto keeps his word, and Sasuke knows he will, the same way he knows the sun will rise and the tide will pull and he will die. There is simply no other option.

Their farewell will linger, will remain, and Sasuke takes comfort in it, even as he settles back against a boulder and folds his hands into a ram seal. “Kai,” he murmurs, and feels the genjutsu that’s been
concealing them, reflected and amplified by Naruto’s seals until not even Madara himself can sense it, shatter and fall to pieces. He makes himself comfortable, readying the trigger word in his mind to be spoken on a moment’s notice, and prepares himself for a wait.

*Not long now,* he thinks, and with Naruto gone, forever lost to him, he cannot bring himself to truly mind. He will face his death here when Madara comes for him, comes for his eyes, or he will meet it before the sun rises three times, and use his own passing to trigger the suicide seals and keep Madara from ever gaining his Sharingan.

Either way, they’ve won.
From this point on, in order to reduce confusion—both my own and everyone else’s—Young!Naruto will be referred to by the name he introduces himself with here. Young!Naruto will remain Naruto.

The Jounin Standby Station is sparsely populated, a handful of shinobi lounging on the couches or huddled in groups, speaking in low voices. Kakashi is perched on one arm of the sofa, hiding from Gai in the last place Konoha's Green Beast will ever look, knowing as he does Kakashi's antisocial tendencies. But Gai always underestimates Kakashi's drive to avoid his stupid challenges, and now is no different. He’s got his book, his temporary peace, and all is right with the world.

Genma is watching him from the other end of the couch, senbon rolling between his teeth and expression entertained. Kakashi reading porn in public has never failed to amuse the other man, and now seems to be no different.

“I heard you got tapped as a sensei again,” the tokubetsu jounin says lazily. “Gonna keep reading that in front of them?”

Kakashi manages to pull his eye away from the book long enough to fix Genma with a cool stare. “Why would I stop?” he asks disinterestedly, and turns a page.

Genma rolls his eyes at him, but he’s still grinning. “I don’t know, last time they asked me to take a team there was this whole long lecture about me not corrupting their innocent minds with my man-whore ways—”

“Yeah, but you're not Kakashi,” Raidou puts in from the other couch, where he’s got a pile of paperwork spread out. He doesn’t look up, even as he tacks on, “And they only asked you because they were desperate and knew you’d fail the brats. How long did they last in your test again? Twelve minutes?”

“Eight,” Genma corrects with a smirk. “Not my fault they couldn’t make the cut.”

Both Kakashi and Raidou level a look at the tokujo, who despite his lazy air is one of T&I's best interrogators, and one of the village’s best assassins. His particular skillset would be enough to give a hardy chuunin nightmares, let alone a handful of green genin. There's a reason not even Kakashi has asked what test exactly he gave the kids. Some things even shinobi are better off not knowing.

Just then, the door blows open with a sharp bang and rebounds off the wall, though it doesn’t quite dare to hit the man making his way through. Kakashi turns his head to watch Ibiki scatter jounin left and right as he makes his way to the couches. He’s scowling fiercely, even more so than normal, and Kakashi arches a brow.


“That’s not an Anko-frown,” Genma points out, and then raises his voice. “Everything all right, Ibiki?”
The big man changes course without so much as a hesitation, dropping down across Kakashi with a sharp huff. He scatters a handful of forms across the low table and growls, “Someone just claimed the bounty on Sasori of the Red Sand.”

The senbon drops from Genma’s mouth, and he only just catches it before it hits the floor. “What?” he manages after a stunned second. “But yesterday, didn’t—?”

Ibiki nods, rubbing a hand over his bandana. “Yeah,” he agrees grimly.

Kakashi looks between the two of them for a moment, and then asks airily, “Anyone want to fill in those of us who don’t live in the T&I basement?”

Genma flicks a hand at the papers Ibiki dropped. “There's been a wave of bounties being claimed in all of the Elemental Countries these past few months. Not small ones, either—Deidara of Iwa, Hoshigaki Kisame of Kiri, and Kakuzu of Taki. All S-rank missing-nin, and all rumored to be part of the same organization. I’d say someone’s got a grudge.”

“Bodies found, too,” Ibiki puts in. “Hidan, formerly of Yugakure, was chopped into pieces and buried. His head was dropped off to claim the bounty, still talking. The chuunin at the desk were told not to worry, that he’d starve to death eventually.”

Raidou blanches at that, just slightly. “Damn,” he murmurs.

Kakashi agrees. Shinobi have a lot of insane talents, but near-immortality seems like a mixed blessing in that case.

Then he pauses as something occurs to him. “Claimed. A wave,” he repeats slowly, looking up at the head of T&I. “By the same person? All of them?”

There's a quick glance from Genma, but Ibiki ignores it as he slumps back in his seat and nods grudgingly. “Yes,” he affirms, mouth twisting. It could be a grin or a grimace with him, Kakashi can't quite tell. “A man with red hair, wearing an Uzushio hitai-ate.”

Kakashi stills, because even now Uzushiogakure only means one thing to him—and coupled with red hair, it means even more. “You're sure?” he asks roughly, not even bothering to try for disinterest. “Uzushio? Definitely?”

“I wouldn’t trust the reports from Iwa or Kiri,” Ibiki answers, “but Suna’s an ally, however tentative, and this comes from a solid source. If he says it’s an Uzushio hitai-ate, it is.”

Heart in his throat, Kakashi hops off the arm of the couch and waves distractedly, already making for the door at a just-barely-polite speed. Then he’s on the rooftops and hightailing it for the Hokage’s office with hardly a thought.

Kushina, he thinks desperately, and while he knows it can’t be her, knows she died that night and that her name is engraved on the Memorial Stone beside his sensei’s, there's a flicker of something in his chest that he can't quite quell, a flare of hope that even if Kushina is gone, her clan still exists. The Uzumaki were long-lived, after all, strong in spirit and body, and there's always a chance—

He leaps through the window and only just manages to find his footing in time to keep from stumbling or falling on his nose, then spins to face the Hokage.

The Sandaime is watching him with one brow raised, expression politely attentive despite the suspicious twitch to one side of his mouth. “Ah, Kakashi,” he says, and then glances at the clock. “Dare I say you're even early? I just sent out a message two minutes ago.”
Were this even slightly less important, Kakashi would pause to mourn the death of his previously-unbroken tardy streak, but this is about an Uzumaki, so he stuffs that bit of woe down deep in his psyche and blurts, “Hokage-sama, the bounties that—”

“Yes, exactly why I wished to speak with you,” the Hokage interrupts smoothly. “There are still a few weeks until the Academy graduation and you being called upon as an instructor. In that time, I would like you to track down this Uzushio nin and offer him Konoha’s hand of friendship. There has long been an alliance between our villages, and even if Uzushio is no more, I would like to honor the tradition.”

There’s also the fact that if this shinobi managed to take out five S-rank missing-nin in the space of a few months, he’ll be an incredibly valuable addition to Konoha’s forces, but that’s left unspoken. Kakashi straightens and nods. “Yes, Hokage-sama.”

Sarutobi smiles at him and hands over a slim scroll. “Last know location,” he explains. “If he appears unfriendly, do not risk yourself, and simply return. However, do your best to be persuasive. And polite, Kakashi, please.”

Kakashi beams at the old man, relief and gratitude filling him all the way down to his toes. “Maa, Hokage-sama,” he says brightly. “When am I not?”

Perhaps wisely, the Hokage doesn’t answer, but waves him out of the office with a long-suffering shake of his head. Kakashi whistles as he leaves, sauntering through the heavy doors and out.

However, once they’re closed behind him, the cheer drops from his expression, and he unrolls the scroll. There’s little to go on as far as appearance is concerned, but Suna border guards made note of the man heading into the Land of Fire, close to a small town Kakashi is passingly familiar with. There aren’t many inns between Suna and the border, and counting the number of bounties the man’s claimed, he’s likely rolling in ryos and sick of sleeping in the desert. An inn is a safe bet, at least for the next few days.

It’s what Kakashi would do, at least, coming off the capture of an S-rank criminal.

He turns on his heel, hops out the nearest window, and heads for home. With just a little packing, he can be on his way, and the sooner he leaves the sooner he’ll reach the border town.

The sooner he’ll be able to see if this man from Uzushio really is an Uzumaki.

Alone and moving fast, Kakashi reaches to small town in just under two days. It’s a waypoint more than a village, a place to restock supplies before entering the Land of Wind, but there’s a decent inn towards the center, manned by a retired Konoha shinobi and his family. Kakashi knows the man in passing from the Third Shinobi War, and nods as he meanders up to the desk.

“Copy-Nin Kakashi,” the man says with a crooked smile that pulls at the deep scars which have all but destroyed the left side of his face. “Fancy meeting you here.”

Kakashi gives him a little wave, smiling in return. “Hisoka-san. It’s been a while.” He glances around the room, then back at the former nin and says, “I’m looking for a man with red hair, shinobi, hitai-ate from—”

But Hisoka laughs and cuts him off before he can get any further. “No need, Hatake, that hair’s enough of a marker to find him anywhere. Second floor, room sixteen. Hasn’t left yet that I’ve seen.”
Relieved at the lack of questioning, Kakashi nods his thanks and heads for the stairs, trying to control his heartbeat. He was expecting this to be harder, truthfully—if the Uzushio nin really did take out five members of an organization that recruits S-rank missing-nin, surely he’d be more wary, move on before he could be found. Granted, his deeds are impressive, even heard third-hand, but to stay in one place screams of arrogance.

Or, possibly, that he’s so powerful he can back up that move, but Kakashi doesn’t quite know what to think of that.

Room sixteen is at the end of the hall, a corner room—that, at least, shows proper shinobi paranoia, to want to watch as many angles as possible at one time. Kakashi pauses outside the door, for once wishing that he had a Byakugan that allowed him to see through solid objects. There’s a lot of chakra in the room, and he can definitely sense someone in there, but in this case at least he’d like a bit of advance warning about what to expect.

Still, he’s a Konoha shinobi, one of the greatest in his village, and dithering like a teenager in front of his crush’s door definitely isn’t going to help anything. Steeling his nerves, Kakashi raises a hand and knocks.

(It’s futile to wish he could have done some reconnaissance before meeting the man, but he’s trying to be polite as per his orders, and spying on a possible ally isn’t. He’s going in to this blind.)

“One moment,” a quiet voice calls, and there’s a rustle of paper for a moment before it goes silent. No footsteps, because no self-respecting shinobi would give themselves away like that, but there’s a longer pause than absolutely necessary to get to the door, judging by the relative size of the room. Kakashi suspects that traps are either being disarmed or readied, and he approves either way. The man has some sense, at least.

Another pause, and then the door creaks open and one eye looks out, the figure it belongs to backlit by the window and rendered all but invisible. Several seconds of silence stretch out between them, and then the man asks courteously, “May I help you?”

Figuring this is as good a cue as any, Kakashi tosses off a lazy salute. “Yo,” he says cheerfully. “I’m from Konoha.”

There’s a soft snort, and the door swings open a bit more, an unspoken invitation. “Yes,” the man says dryly. “The hitai-ate is rather blatant, after all. And I assume you know that your reputation precedes you just about everywhere, Hatake-san.”

Well, at least he’s fairly polite. Kakashi wanders into the room, taking in the lack of clutter that says the nin is ready to evacuate at a moment’s notice. There are papers on the bed, about the only mess in the room, and all it takes is a quick glance to recognize them as a variety of seals.

Satisfied there are no obvious traps, Kakashi finally turns to look at his host, and has to clamp down on his emotions. That hair is several shades darker than Kushina’s was, but it’s still unmistakably Uzumaki red, and worn long. The man is young, a little on the short side, leanly slim but still muscular, and there’s a thinness to his face that speaks of hunger more than any kind of vanity or genetics. But his eyes are brilliantly blue, like the ocean under the summer sun, and large, full of quiet curiosity as he looks Kakashi over. The Uzushio hitai-ate is worn like a headband, holding his hair out of his face, and his clothes are sensible and well-worn, a mesh shirt with three-quarter sleeves, a sleeveless black top, and basic shinobi pants. Tattoos—seals—cover his arms, another Uzushio standby, and he’s scarred as though he’s seen warfare.

If they had met on the street, or on a mission, Kakashi would instantly mark this man as dangerous,
despite his stature. The way he carries himself alone speaks of complete assurance in his own power, an easy sort of well-accustomed grace.

“You have me at a disadvantage, shinobi-san,” he says, putting on another smile as he fishes.

The Uzushio nin snorts, even as he slips over to the bed and gathers up his seals. “I'm flattered you think I'm capable of such a thing,” he says dryly. Then he turns, papers in hand, and offers Kakashi a faint smile. There's an edge to it, weary and worn. “However, I'm Uzumaki Kurama. It’s an honor to meet the great Copy-Nin in person.”

**Uzumaki.** Kakashi's mind latches on to the clan name and doesn’t let go. “Any relation to Uzumaki —?” he begins.

Kurama cuts him off before he can finish. “One would assume,” he says, smiling a little again. This time, though, it's sad. “Kushina, you were going to say.” He doesn’t wait for Kakashi’s acknowledgement, but nods. “She was…a cousin, more or less. I don’t remember our exact relationship. The clan was widespread, when it existed.”

That’s a bit of a disappointment, though possibly to be expected. Kakashi nods agreeably, and says, “The Hokage sent me to offer you a place in Konoha, if you want it.”

Because he’s looking for it, he catches the sharp but brief widening of the man’s eyes, true surprise flickering across his features before it’s swiftly buried again. Kakashi wonders at it, because surely he’s gotten other such offers before, capturing missing-nin as he has been. But then Kurama hesitates, wavers, and dips his head.

“I think I would…like that,” he says carefully, oddly deliberate. As though it’s a fulcrum, and he just chose the way the world will turn. Then he flashes another quicksilver smile, there and gone in a moment, and says jokingly, “As long as the Hokage doesn’t mind a bit of a mercenary joining. I haven’t actually belonged to a village since mine fell.”

Kakashi hears the bite of sorrow in his voice, however hidden, and mentally revises his estimation of Kurama’s age. That sounded like the grief of someone who witnessed the destruction firsthand. He’d hardly be the first shinobi to conceal his age—Tsunade is perhaps the best example, but only one of many. And the Uzumaki were renowned for their vitality. It’s not inconceivable that Kurama is actually closer to Minato's age than Kakashi’s, regardless of appearance.

“All shinobi are mercenaries in one way or another,” he offers, keeping his voice light. “And I think catching missing-nin makes for a good declaration of intent. Especially those missing-nin.”

Kurama's eyes darken and narrow ever so slightly, and for a moment Kakashi is reminded of Genma's assumption of a grudge being involved. But before he can ask the redhead nods once, tight and sharp, before his smile returns. He turns, looking around the room, and then sighs and scoops up his pack and a sheathed katana. The seal papers are stuffed in a pocket before he turns to the Copy-Nin again. “I assume we should leave now?”

Kakashi calculates time and distance before nodding. They can make it a ways before nightfall if they leave now, and the sooner they’re in Konoha the better he’ll feel. This entire mission has been easy, and if Kakashi knows anything, it’s that his luck never holds out for long.

Kurama moves like a shadow, swift and utterly silent, even to Kakashi's trained ears. He keeps in step with Kakashi easily enough, no matter how fast Kakashi sets their pace, and doesn’t fumble
even when Kakashi leads them on sudden detours or shortcuts. The Copy-Nin watches him out of the corner of one eye, curious and a little wary, but the Uzushio nin makes no threatening moves at all. His katana, a lovely thing with a silver hilt and deep blue wrappings, stays in its sheath, and Kakashi never sees him channel an ounce more chakra than is needed for running the branches. He does that as well as a Konoha shinobi, which is curious, and Kakashi files it away for later consideration.

He’s doing a lot of that, it seems, but Uzumaki Kurama is *interesting*, when life has been fairly boring for years now. It’s not just his appearance—red hair aside, he doesn’t resemble Kushina much at all. But he’s strong and by his own accounting has been alone for years, since Uzushio fell. Kakashi finds it hard to imagine such a thing, such a tragedy. He doesn’t want to, either.

By unspoken agreement they stop when it gets too dark to pick out the individual trees, and set up a rough camp. Kakashi doesn’t bother lighting a fire, simply watches as Kurama walks the perimeter they’ve set up, drawing symbols at each of the cardinal points and then connecting them in a circle. It comes to life with three speed-blurred hand signs, flaring up in a crackle of purple chakra and then settling back again, humming gently.

Kakashi considers the color, which he’s never encountered before, and then files that away as well. It’s an impressive seal for such quick work, though, and when Kakashi discreetly tests it with a handful of pebbles, they end up as dots of smoldering slag scorching the ground. Kakashi stares at them for a long moment, suddenly overwhelmingly thankful that he chose to use rocks rather than going with his first impulse and poking the barrier.

“Forgot to warn you, Hatake-san,” Kurama says, inordinately cheerful all of a sudden. “It might be best not to touch.”

Kakashi shoots him the dark look that deserves and settles back. They haven’t spoken much today, running in silence for the most part, and Kakashi is surprised that the man’s been able to hold his tongue this long. Even some of the more sensible shinobi, such as Genma and Raidou, get twitchy after too much time without speaking. Kurama looks just fine, though, munching on a ration bar as he frowns down at yet another seal. Kakashi sneaks a peak, but can’t make heads or tails of the thing—he’s hardly a Seal Master—though Minato or Jiraiya would doubtless have loved to pick the young man’s brain.

He makes it another ten minutes, choking down his own ration bar, before the hush gets to him and he gives in with a sigh. “You’re good with seals, then.”

“Mm.” Kurama pulls the bar from his mouth, swallows with a faint grimace, and nods. “It was taught to pretty much everyone in Uzushio. Different people had talent in different areas, of course, but sealing was common.” He glances down at his current project. “I’m good at creating, coming up with ideas. Adapting. Other people could counter seals, or dismantle them, or copy them flawlessly. It’s just another kind of art. Uzushio simply taught it more thoroughly than anyone does today.”

And Uzushio was destroyed because of that, Kakashi thinks, hiding a grimace of his own. In the Second Shinobi War, Iwa feared—rightly, perhaps—that Uzushio would come to Konoha’s aid, devastating their ranks with fuinjutsu, so they had destroyed it. Uzushio was never a large village, and the Land of Whirlpools was small as well, so both had fallen quickly, before Konoha could reach them to lend support.

Kushina’s grief whenever someone mentioned her country had been terrible, and she hadn’t had to watch it be destroyed. It must have been far worse for Kurama, if he truly was present.

Seeming to feel Kakashi’s eyes on him, Kurama looks up and offers a faint, sardonic smile. “Stop it.
That happened a long time ago, Hatake-san. I've recovered as much as I ever will. Don’t pity me.”

“Why not go to Konoha?” Kakashi asks. “They were allies. You would have been welcomed.”

“And trade one village for another?” Kurama shakes his head. “My home fell. At that point, I wasn’t about to go looking for a new one. It would have felt like a betrayal.” He turns to look up at the stars, eyes catching on the moon for a long moment as it peers through the branches, and then glances back at his companion. “Since I want to finish this, I’ll take first watch,” he offers.

Clearly the subject is closed now.

Kakashi tells himself to be content with what he’s discovered so far, and nods his agreement. He settles into his bedroll and closes his eyes, but the faint scratch of pen over paper keeps catching his attention.

Sleep is a long time in coming.
Homecoming

Chapter Notes

Hah. So, the monthly updates? Yeah, I might have lied. However, please don’t expect another 11k-words-in-24-hours binge any time soon. I’m not actually insane.

(Well, mostly.)

Once, Naruto would have hesitated to call himself Kurama—might never have even dreamed that he would. But now, knowing what the fox gave up for him to live, understanding the Kyuubi just a little bit more from their too-brief friendship and Kurama's sacrifice, Naruto wears the name with pride. It’s more or less his by right now, so he doesn’t truly even think of it as lying.

He’s never been good at lying—even his undercover missions tended to involve more half-truths than anything—so he and Sasuke worked out a story with enough semi-truths to let him pass. Uzushio is gone, all of its records destroyed and its remaining shinobi scattered to the winds. One more Uzumaki is nothing in the scheme of things, and with this unexpected invitation into Konoha, if he plays his cards right...

The first stage of the task is done. Akatsuki has been removed from power, Tobi’s cat’s-paws made powerless. Zetsu is dead, as are the others beside Konan and Nagato, now in hiding, and there are few, if any, other missing-nin at their level. After being told of the future, Nagato was even willing to give up the Rinnegan eyes Madara had implanted, and which are now finally destroyed. It’s taken almost a whole year and a great many failed plans, but it’s done.

It had been a vague thought, somewhere in the middle of all that, to return to Konoha at some point, maybe petition to be allowed to see his young “relative”, but the Hokage’s invitation simplifies everything.

He’ll be a Konoha shinobi again, though he’d never thought it could happen after his Konoha was razed by Madara. It will even be a whole Konoha, and something in his chest both aches and eases at the thought.

Sasuke will be there—a child, perhaps, but there. So will his counterpart in this timeline, and Sakura, and the rest of the Konoha Twelve. They’ll be alive.

Incredible. Astounding. Unbelievable, even. But Kurama does believe it, can’t do anything else, because his former teacher is waiting for him in front of the gates, hands in his pockets and slouching indolently. One dark grey eye is fixed on him, careful but more at ease than the days previously, and Kurama summons up a smile for the man.

“Big,” is what he says, leaping from the trees and walking up to join him.

“The biggest hidden village,” Kakashi returns, pride clear in his voice. “The Land of Fire might not be the largest, but Konoha’s won every war for a reason.” He turns and heads through the great gates, sparing a wave for the chuunin manning it—Kotetsu and Izumo, as ever, and Kurama gives them both a genuine smile, relieved beyond measure to see them both whole.
(Izumo had died at that gate, the last time Madara invaded. They’d managed to evacuate, to get out in time, but Kotetsu had never been the same afterwards. When he too died, making a final stand to give several families time to escape a compromised refugee camp, Kurama had been almost relieved. One shouldn’t have had to live without the other.)

Kotetsu looks at him curiously for a moment, even as Izumo calls unhappily, “Kakashi-san, you—”

“Maa, I'm taking him directly to the Hokage,” Kakashi promises. “Uzumaki-san is here on his invitation.”

“Just Kurama,” Kurama puts in, dipping his head to the two chuunin. “I'm younger than you, Hatake-san.”

“Just Kakashi, then” Kakashi retorts. In half a moment he’s on the nearest roof, looking down at Kurama expectantly. “This way’s faster, Kurama-kun. Follow like a good boy.”

Kurama rolls his eyes, returns Izumo's longsuffering smile, and follows his former teacher up onto the rooftops. The Copy-Nin barely waits for him to find his footing before he heads for the Hokage Tower. It’s deliberate for Kurama to slow his pace slightly, looking around the village he’s thought of as gone for years now.

It’s peaceful.

It’s beautiful.

It exists, and that alone is more than enough for Kurama.

Too soon, far too soon they're at the Academy, and Kurama bemusedly watches Kakashi bounce straight up to the Hokage's window without a thought. Tsunade would have drop-kicked him right back out for using it with a visitor in tow, but apparently the Sandaime is far more lenient with the Copy-Nin. Still, Kurama is slightly more hesitant as he mimics him, and balances cautiously on the sill to make sure of his welcome.

It is...fortunate that so long has passed since he landed in this time, because even a few months ago he would have likely burst into tears at the sight of that wrinkled face under the fancy hat, those sharp dark eyes taking him in as he hovers there. But he’s had a little less than a year to accustom himself to seeing familiar and long-dead faces, places destroyed years past and now untouched.

As it is, Kurama slips down to the floor and bows deeply to this man he failed to save once before, genin or not. The Sandaime was like a grandfather to him, was the only one who cared for years, and even if Kurama manages to change nothing else in this timeline, he will plant Orochimaru's traitorous head on a stake in the middle of the village for all the world to see.

“Hokage-sama,” he says politely. “I am Uzumaki Kurama. Thank you very much for your generous invitation. It is an honor, and I will do my best to make it worthwhile for you.”

A firm hand tugs him upright, and Kurama follows it, blinking at Sarutobi in surprise. The old man smiles at him, lined face creasing, and Kurama feels something in his chest all but give way. His eyes burn, to his horror, and he prays that he isn't about to start crying in front of this man, his very first hero.

But Sarutobi simply smiles, kind and gentle, and puts a hand on his shoulder. “You must have had a very hard time of it, my boy,” he murmurs. “I am sorry for your loss.”

No one has said that to him, ever. There was never really anyone close enough to lose, before, and
After, there were too many to mourn, regardless.

Kurama ducks his head, lifting his hands to cover his face. He won't let them see him weep. He won't, he can't—even if he's never managed to grieve properly, even if Sasuke's loss is still a seeping, bleeding wound in his heart, he doesn't—

A strong arm curves around his back, and the Sandaime, his first precious person, tugs him a step closer, lets him rest his head on his shoulder and weep silently.

Weak. So stupidly, disgustingly weak, Kurama berates himself, but it's not enough to make him stop.

“Sorry,” he murmurs, fighting the tears. “I'm sorry, Hokage-sama.”

“No,” Sarutobi tells him kindly. “Do not be. It is all right to cry when coming home after a long journey.”

Home is a word that Kurama has not heard in years, since long before Konoha fell for the last time. He laughs a little, pulling back and looking into the Hokage's face with all the gratitude that he feels. It's enough to swamp him, to overwhelm, but it's so sweet at the same time. What he told Kakashi about not finding another village was true—at that point, with Konoha broken, he could have gone to Suna, or Kumo, or Kiri. They all would have taken him, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to seek out a new home, to settle when the only village he'd ever loved was a haunted and ransacked ruin.

But here and now, Konoha is well, and if Kurama has his way, it will never, ever fall.

It can be a home again, his home again.

“I would—I would like to stay here,” he manages after a long moment of aching wonder at the thought. “If you are willing to make a mercenary drifter a Konoha shinobi, I would devote my life to the wellbeing of this village in a heartbeat.”

For the sake of home, he thinks but does not say.

From the smile on Sarutobi’s face, he understands regardless.

“Very well,” he says, taking a step back. “Normally, you would be tested so I knew what rank to give you, but after capturing five S-rank missing-nin, I believe that doing so would be redundant.” Sarutobi turns away, giving Kurama a moment to compose himself, and digs through one of his desk draws. After a few muttered curses, he emerges with a Konoha hitai-ate and a stack of forms. “Here we are. Once the paperwork is done you’ll be instated as a jounin of Konohagakure, and lodging will be found for you.”

The red tape and bureaucracy, at least, are still familiar, and Kurama nods, taking both. The hitai-ate feels heavy in his hand, weighty in a comforting, nostalgic sort of way. He reaches up to remove the Uzushio one he's currently wearing, commissioned here in this time because he had never replaced his battered old Konoha one after the village's fall. Uzushio was a safe place to claim allegiance with, unconnected to most anything of note, being fallen, and he and Sasuke had chosen it for just that reason.

But Kurama thinks Sasuke would understand this change in their plan, this deviation in the name of something they had both longed for. So he lets the Uzushio hitai-ate drop to hang limply around his arm, slides the Konoha plate into its place in his thick hair. That feels more like coming home than
anything.

“A good fit,” Sarutobi murmurs, pleased and thoughtful. “Welcome, Uzumaki Kurama. Konoha is
honored.”

Kurama bows again, not as a stranger this time, but as another Konoha shinobi, showing respect to
his Hokage. “As am I, Hokage-sama. Thank you.”

(He means for far more than the hitai-ate, or the place, but he doesn’t say it, and if Sarutobi
understands, he gives no sign beyond a small smile.)

Hiruzen watches the boy leave, those blue eyes half-dazed and rather shaken. He is unmistakably an
Uzumaki, what with those chakra reserves and that hair, and Hiruzen wonders if it’s weakness not to
view him with suspicion. But those tears were real, as was that overwhelming relief at being offered
a home. His face is tight with stress that has long since become a way of life, and though he is not of
Konoha, the Will of Fire burns in his tired eyes nonetheless.

The Hokage sighs and shifts his pipe to the other side of his mouth, staring out the window at the
village as it settles for the night. Kurama was polite enough to leave via the door, and from here,
Hiruzen can see his deep crimson hair as he slips through the streets. There’s an ANBU following
him, of course—Hiruzen is no fool, regardless of what Danzo thinks—but Hiruzen does not believe
he will make any trouble.

He has seen many lost souls in his years as Hokage, and this boy is one of them. There is grief in
him, a great and terrible grief, the kind that can only come with losing everything. It supports his
story, shows the truth of his words when others might call him a spy or a fake.

Hiruzen blows out a long breath of smoke, and asks softly, “Your impression, Kakashi?”

The Copy-Nin is perched in a chair off to the side, waiting patiently. When the Hokage addresses
him, he straightens up and puts away his book.

“He’s not lying,” he offers. “And he never made a move against me, even when he didn’t know
what I wanted with him. I’d say watch him for a month or two, but I don’t think there will be a
problem.”

With a small smirk, Hiruzen turns and beams approvingly at his successor’s student. “Ah, thank you
for volunteering, Kakashi. I was hoping you would. Very well, then, off you go. Make sure he gets
home safely, hmm? Konoha can be quite the confusing place after dark.”

Kakashi splutters.

Hiruzen sweeps out of his office with a smirk, glad he’s still able to pull one over on his shinobi,
regardless of his own age—or theirs. Victory is sweet indeed.

He dreams of pale hands reaching out, of eyes growing dark, of blood spilled across forest floors and
splattered garishly over stately tree trunks. Go, a voice says and he does, falls away spinning and
reeling out of one time and into another. You can change it all, the voice tells him, hot-sharp with
hope and something that they will never let themselves call desperation, but which reeks of it
nevertheless.
Black-red eyes and soft black hair and a kiss that steals his breath steals his heart takes away all will to leave and go back to the fight that they cannot must not will not lose even though there is no way to ever really win.

*Koi*, it says, but that’s not right. *Dobe*, and that’s better, that’s what they have—*had*, that’s what they had, all sharp words and gentle touches, a bond of brothers and you’re-the-last-we’re-the-last and tangled souls and so much more.

*Go*, Sasuke says again, and when has he ever done anything but obey that particular tone, low with certainty and sorrow?

Kurama opens his eyes to stare at the ceiling, breathless with that whispered *go*, and breathes out, careful and steady. The sun is rising, the moon setting, and fox-Kurama's sacrifice has left him entirely in tune with such shifts. It’s still odd, too, for there to be a moon, though he is grateful. It is a difference to help keep him straight, even when just waking, and he can never forget with it in the sky.

It is morning, and outside the window of his new apartment the village is stirring, coming to life with a sleepy murmur and a hum of energy. There's no way Kurama will be able to keep himself asleep, not in Konoha, so he slides out of bed and dresses quickly. A quick inventory of his weapons pouch reveals that he’s running short on both senbon and the paralytic poison he used to take out Kisame. Luckily the ingredients are native to Konoha—it’s one of the concoctions that Genma taught him, back when the man was still alive. Kurama is a fair hand at poisons now, though it always leaves an unpleasant taste in his mouth to use them.

But shinobi are killers, and while Kurama will be forever hopeful, forever certain that they can also be more, it is their calling first and foremost, and he’s long since adjusted to the difference between a hope held heart-deep and a naïve conviction.

He slips out of the apartment on silent feet, pausing at the threshold to slap a paper seal on the door and activate his wards. They go up with a crackle of chakra, not yet fine-tuned but good enough to last until he takes the time to tweak them. Then he’s down the hall and out the window, not bothering with the stairs as he hops out and lands lightly in the dusty street. A passing foreign merchant startles, but the Konoha civilians are entirely used to such things, and simply smile their greetings. Kurama smiles back, reveling in it, in the sheer life here as he picks a path and starts to wander.

Four streets later, his silent steps gain an echo, and a familiar figure—looking rather more rumpled than the last time Kurama saw him—drops down to walk beside him. Kakashi gives him a sour look, even as he pulls his book out.

“Not a night owl, then,” he says with weary resignation. “Damn.”

Apparently this is the man the Hokage assigned to be his babysitter. Kurama remembers hours spent languishing in boredom as a genin, waiting for their instructor to arrive, and grins without an ounce of pity. “Nope,” he says cheerfully, sidestepping a cart. “Up with the sun, always.” Of course, he’s generally up with the moon, too, since he needs far less sleep than a regular human, but he won't tell Kakashi that just yet. Let the man dream, and all that.

The streets are a familiar maze, and Kurama makes a show of wandering blindly. It’s not all for Kakashi’s sake, of course, or for the ANBU in the shadows—he’s been away from Konoha for years, and even before that he was rarely in the village, always coordinating attacks or defenses, spearheading hit-and-run infiltrations deep in enemy territory. That Konoha had been strange, as well, more refugee camp than bustling village, and to see it like this, lively and yet peaceful, is a
comfort and a balm on long-unhealed wounds.

“Here,” Kakashi says suddenly, and Kurama barely has time to catch the flak jacket that’s tossed at him before it hits him in the head. He arches a brow at the Copy-Nin, even as he pulls it on and zips it up. A quick roll of his shoulders tests the range of movement it gives him, which seems to be unencumbered.

“Thanks.” He smiles at the other man, even as his fingers linger over the Uzushio spiral stitched into the fabric. He’s never worn one of these, actually—never made it past genin, back home, because by the time he’d done enough to earn a field promotion everyone already knew him, knew he was the jinchuriki of the Kyuubi no Kitsune, and that alone was enough to put him in the Bingo Book.

Jounin, he thinks, testing out the rank, and smiles. Jounin Uzumaki Kurama. That’s…acceptable.

“Breakfast,” he offers on a sudden whim. “My treat. I dragged you out at dawn, so the least I can do is provide food. Pick a place, Kakashi-san.”

The Copy-Nin looks at him sidelong, careful and considering, and then flips his orange book open and buries his nose in it. “Maa,” he says disinterestedly. “Free food is free food. Why don’t you pick?”

Kurama rolls his eyes, feeling a sudden surge of nostalgic fondness for this weird and eccentric shinobi. Konoha was never truly Konoha to him after the man’s death, and right now, in this timeline, Kurama makes another vow to himself. Orochimaru’s head on a pike and Hatake Kakashi alive, no matter what it takes to do it.

Otherwise, he might as well not save the future, because his Konoha will still be dead. Along with the Sandaime, Kakashi is family, Kurama's first besides Iruka. Family, precious people, and his. Regardless of whether he was able to keep them in the other timeline, here he still has the chance, and he won't waste it.

As they meander, Kurama casts a look up at the Hokage Mountain, at the four faces carved into the stone. It’s a bittersweet sight, and not just for the lack of battle-scarring and cracks that he remembers in it. His father is up there, and while he loves the man, he knows the story of that night. Minato chose to seal the Kyuubi into him, rather than resealing the fox into his mother and letting it follow her into death. Kurama doesn’t hate him for it, but…he can't help wondering sometimes just how things would have played out had Minato made the other choice available to him.

It’s at the point now where he can't even begin to imagine it, and perhaps that’s for the better.

With a soft sigh, Kurama tucks his hands into his pockets, shaking his head to clear away such unnecessary thoughts. The sun is coming up, the village is waking, and it’s not the time for such things. In the future, perhaps—this is a waiting game now, after all, since Obito will doubtless be coming after him for the destruction of the Akatsuki—but not at the moment.

Kurama has just regained his life. He’ll take a handful of days to truly live it before he starts breaking it apart again.

Kakashi is a faithful shadow, omnipresent porn or no. He follows Kurama to breakfast, and then through the streets as the Uzumaki wanders—always there, always watching, but unobtrusive enough in doing so that Kurama can pretend he’s a friend rather than a guard. Kurama is thankful, because he needs a friend more than he’s willing to admit. Almost a year in this time, almost a year.
since Sasuke's death at his own hand, or at Madara’s, and Kurama is still grieving. He wonders, sometimes, if he’ll always be grieving, no matter how much time passes, but then he inevitably shies away from that thought, because it’s too painful.

Kurama has always tried to keep his hopes up, to reserve a smile for even the worst of times, but the grief of loss and loneliness is something he knows far too intimately for comfort.

However tempted he is, Kurama doesn’t immediately head for Ichiraku Ramen to get his second breakfast—that will have to wait for a slightly more socially acceptable hour, given that he’s trying to keep a low profile and not arouse suspicion. Instead, he steps past it, ignoring the almost desperate urge to duck inside and see old man Teuchi working behind the counter, Ayame smiling sweetly at their customers.

Too many lost, too many returned, and Kurama’s heart doesn’t entirely know what to do with this rush of feeling. Happiness and heartache are warring sides of his soul, with neither one gaining the upper hand.

People in the streets are smiling, laughing, going about their day with no comprehension of what is looming, what was looming before Kurama took it upon himself to wipe it out. There is still Obito to worry about, but Naruto knows him, knows his heart and that he can be overcome. His Will of Fire is still present, still strong, if misguided. Even if there is no redemption to be found outside of death, Kurama still has hope for him.

Up ahead, at the intersection of two streets, a scuffle breaks out. Kurama lifts his head curiously, and even Kakashi flicks his eyes up, just in time to see a streak of brilliant orange come shooting towards them. The Copy-Nin sidesteps almost idly, clearly used to such happenings, but Kurama stands his ground. Half a heartbeat before he’s mowed down, he lashes out, snags the collar of that eye-searing jumpsuit, and lifts his younger counterpart right off his feet.

Naruto's feet flail comically in the air for a heartbeat before he realizes what’s happened and jerks his head up with an outraged, “HEY!”

Kurama winces slightly at the volume so close to his sensitive ears, but raises a brow at the boy with a faint smile. “Careful,” he admonishes. “You might hurt someone like that.”

Naruto crosses his arms over his chest and scowls, clearly attempting to look menacing and very much failing. “Well, if you can't get out of my way in time then you're not a very good shinobi,” he scoffs.

“Oh, but I'm not the only one on the street,” Kurama reminds him, finally lowering his arm and setting the boy on the ground. “There are civilians as well, and even if you're a child, you've already started training as a shinobi yourself. That gives you an unfair advantage.”

That mulish expression doesn’t fade. Kurama, knowing very well how stubborn he himself can be, simply rolls his eyes and pats the boy on the head, then steps away. “Just a thought,” he says cheerfully, rejoining Kakashi and picking another street at random. “See you around, kid.”
Several people have asked how far back in the timeline Kurama is, and I’d thought I had made it fairly blatant. But just in case I'm not as good at dropping hints as I thought, he’s a few weeks before team assignments at the start of canon. So he knows he’s going to be a sensei, but not who his team will be.

That hair is a taunt, Kakashi thinks, staring across the training grounds to where Kurama is gliding through a series of entirely unfamiliar katas. There's a storm-wind picking up, carrying the rains towards them, and it tugs and teases at Kurama's deep crimson locks. They flutter around his face, a tattered banner of red. As long as that hair is, it’s practically an engraved invitation for an enemy shinobi to grab it, use it as a handhold to bring the Uzumaki to his knees.

But Kurama moves like a predator, and his katas are quicksilver and as smooth as flowing water. It’s a style Kakashi doesn’t know, but even watching he can tell it’s tricky, constantly changing direction and utilizing a good many aerial leaps and twists. With that katana of his augmenting it, he’s likely nigh on unstoppable.

Kakashi is more than willing to put money on the fact that no one ever gets a single step closer to Uzumaki Kurama than he consciously allows.

Five days he’s been in Konoha, and five days he’s spent wandering the streets at all hours. Kakashi’s stuck with him as much as possible, but at some point even he has had to admit defeat and head to bed, while Kurama continues on without him. From the ANBU guard, Kakashi's learned that the redhead spends maybe three hours a night in his apartment, and the rest in the village or the woods around it. It’s like he doesn’t need sleep at all, like he isn't accustomed to it, and Kakashi has to wonder what kind of life he’s been leading to be so constantly on edge.

And then, of course, there’s the grief in his eyes, the lines of weariness in his face as he slips down crowded streets and smiles at passersby, always a little distant, a little detached, but always fond, an outsider looking in on an unfamiliar but touching scene.

The cessation of movement in the field draws his attention back, and the first thing he sees is that banner of red whipping and dancing in the rising wind. Kurama stands with both feet planted and his hands loose at his side, head tipped back and face turned up as the first few drops of rain begin to fall. The green-grey dimness of a Fire Country rainstorm slides, liquid and languid, over the planes and angles of his too-thin face, highlighting the gold of his skin and the impossibly vivid red-darkness of his hair.

Like a painting, Kakashi thinks, or some quietly dramatic scene out of a movie. He closes his Icha Icha book and slips it away, suddenly feeling like he’s intruding on something, imposing his presence when it isn't welcome. Isn’t right.

With an audible rumble, a clatter of drops on tiled roofs and in dusty streets, the storm breaks. It feels like a physical shattering, the sky falling to pieces as water sheets down over them, rattling the leaves of the trees and drenching both shinobi within seconds. Out in the middle of the field, Kurama blinks like it’s a surprise, like the clouds haven’t been threatening since yesterday, and then he does
something Kakashi doesn’t expect.

He smiles.

He lifts his face to the sky again, tips his head back until the pounding rain is running down his throat, soaking his hair and turning it nearly black, and then he laughs. The smile becomes a grin, and laughter grows brighter, bolder, and Kakashi just stares at the madman out in the rain, so content even though Kakashi can’t quite see anything to be so happy about.

But that, too, is something Kakashi’s noticed about Konoha’s newest jounin. He can be sad, despondent at times, but there’s something ultimately happy in him, something that lets him look around the village and greet people with a smile, enjoy small things like fresh dango or sunrises or a waxing moon. Kurama is cheerful and prone to laughter, and no matter the grief in him that part is still very much at the forefront.

Five days in Konoha, and Kakashi suspects that this newest defender will be one of the village’s most steadfast.

With a faint smile of his own, Kakashi hops down from the tree branch and makes his way through the sheeting rain, ignoring the immediate drenching. He tucks his hands in his pockets and meanders up to stand beside Kurama, who’s still grinning.

“Like the rain?” he asks, and his voice is about the only part of him that’s dry.

Shaking his sodden hair out of his face, Kurama turns his smile on Kakashi. His blue eyes are vivid in the dim half-light, full of something that’s unnervingly close to wonder. “Yes,” he says unreservedly. “It’s…seeing rain over a village again—it’s beautiful.”

Kakashi blinks, looking down at his companion, and then turns back towards the village, trying to see what he does. A moment of disassociation, of straining his eyes, and Kakashi is just about to give up when something suddenly clicks into place. His gaze shifts, refocusses, and suddenly he can see the way the water bounces and the light reflects, creating halos around everything. He can see the way the leaves shine, impossibly green, and feel the freshness in the air, smell the dusty earth as it soaks up the moisture and turns to a rich, dark brown.

“Ah,” he says in surprise, and Kurama laughs at him.

“Yes,” he agrees, and it’s softer this time, sweeter. “Beautiful.”

Another moment of nearly reverent silence passes, and then Kurama shakes his hair out of his eyes and steps away. He scoops up his katana and slides it into its strap, then pulls a length of leather out of his pocket and ties his hair back. “Would you be willing to show me to the library?” he asks without glancing back at Kakashi, eyes still fixed on the roofs of the peaceful village. “I think…it’s about time I started doing something productive.”

Five days, Kakashi wants to protest, though he doesn’t quite know why. Five days of rest after how many months hunting missing-nin? But Kakashi's hardly in the position to lecture anyone about overworking themselves, so he dips his head in acknowledgement and nudges Kurama to the right. “Maa,” he says lazily. “Hokage-sama will probably want to start you off with milk runs.”

Start us off, Kakashi corrects mentally, grimacing faintly underneath his mask. It’s very, very unlikely that the Hokage will assign anyone else as babysitter, since there’s still a week until team selections at the Academy. Kakashi suspects he’ll get stuck with the last Uchiha, but beyond that, there’s just a sort of blanket dread about the whole thing.
Kurama hums noncommittally as they start back towards the village. Kakashi lets the redhead lead, because he’s fairly certain that—with Kurama’s very good sense of direction and the fact that he knows they’ve passed the library at least four times on their walks—the new jounin can find it for himself. There’s certainly no hesitation in his steps, so Kakashi suspects that the request was simply a well-hidden invitation to join him.

Odd, really, that Kakashi doesn’t feel like turning it down.

Then again, Uzumaki Kurama is a mystery, just as much as he is a connection to Kushina and, through her, to Minato. Kakashi’s always been one to cling to his memories, to the remnants of the past no matter how distant or unhealthy.

And he’s always enjoyed a good mystery.

It’s been a very long time since Kurama was last able to enjoy a rainstorm without worrying about Sasuke’s illness getting worse in the damp, or finding shelter, or keeping vital supplies dry. He smiles as the drops fall, glorying in the simplicity of peace and the ease of a lazy day as he and Kakashi make their way through the village. People smile and wave, accustomed to his face after so many hours spent wandering, and Kurama waves back, almost gleeful that he can.

Sasuke's loss is still an ache, a needle-thin blade lodged deep in his heart, and Kurama is familiar enough with grief to know that it will always be there. He might not remember, from time to time, but he will never forget. Nevertheless, there is tranquility to be had in Konoha, balm for wounds that have been gaping for too long already. That first day, Kurama had thought he would be bombarded with old memories, the reminders of his failures in another life, but…

But instead, he’s found peace.

They all fought, back in Kurama's timeline. Everyone who could, right down to the civilians who had the courage to pick up swords and defend their homes even if they’d never wielded anything more dangerous than a hoe before. For the first few years, every death had been a personal failure, something Kurama should have been able to prevent but hadn’t. In time, though, while each death still tore at him, ripped at his soul and his mind in equal measure, he’d begun to understand that they had all made their choices. They were all doing what had to be done, taking the only remaining option, and only a fool or a madman would accept all the fault.

Kurama’s never been particularly smart when it comes to grief, or loss, but he can respect sacrifice. He can accept a friend’s dying gesture, and grow stronger from their memories.

“Kurama-san,” an aged voice calls, and Kurama blinks, jolted out of his thoughts. He turns and bows to the Hokage, who is just emerging from a teahouse with a familiar figure in tow.

Seeing Iruka-sensei is like confronting all over again the fact that he’s in the past, that he still has time and opportunity to save those he loves so dearly. It takes so very much effort not to beam at the man and pull him into a tight hug.

“How are you today?”

The old man smiles at him, warm and fond, and Kurama wonders, just briefly and with some awe, what he’s done to earn such an expression. “A bit damp, but otherwise very well,” he says cheerfully. “I apologize for interrupting your plans, but might I speak with you in my office?”

Before Kurama can answer, Iruka has taken a step forward, eyes narrowed, and the redhead almost
recoils before he realizes that the expression—a dangerous one, more than capable of cowing Kages and reining in entire hordes of rowdy children armed with sharp, pointy objects—isn't directed at him.

Kakashi beams his bullshit smile and says innocently, “Maa, Iruka-sensei, what’s the matter?”

If anything, Iruka's eyes narrow further. “You,” he growls, and Kurama takes a discreet step back as the chuunin stalks forward. It’s telling that the Sandaime does the same. “Your jounin instructor paperwork is three weeks overdue, Hatake.”

There’s a long moment of silence where Kakashi simply blinks, and then he reaches up to rub faux-sheepishly at the back of his head. “Oh?” he asks guilelessly. “Really?”

Iruka makes a sound like a cat dumped into a bubble-bath and pounces. Kakashi attempts to evade, springing for the rooftops, but the Academy instructor is hot on his heels and lunges again, knocking him off the roof as he touches down and following him over the far side of the building. The sound of wood breaking and something metal impacting something decidedly not rips through the air, and then there's silence again.

The Sandaime sighs and covers his eyes with a gnarled hand, muttering under his breath.

Kurama gives in to the mirth building in his chest and laughs, shoulders shaking as he tries to contain it, one hand pressed over his mouth but doing little to conceal the sound as it rings through the street. After a moment, the Hokage joins in, shaking his head.

“I have been informed,” he says wryly, “that there is no other place quite like Konoha, just as there are no other shinobi quite like our shinobi. For once, I think that the Kazekage was telling me the truth.”

Kurama wipes his eyes, finally managing to regain his breath, and snorts. “Wasn't that a chuunin?” he asks, because the sight of Kakashi getting his feet swept out from under him and then tossed off a roof is one he’s going to hang on to forever, and that’s as good a point of connection with Iruka as any.

The Hokage huffs out another laugh and steps away, heading for the Academy. “Yes, well,” he says wryly. “Umino Iruka has always been a very special chuunin, and Hatake Kakashi is hardly an average jounin.”

Falling into pace with him, Kurama snorts again. “So I’ve noticed,” he agrees, tilting his face up to meet the rain again. After Madara burned whole swathes of Fire Country—some sort of twisted, belated revenge against Hashirama, no doubt—the sky always seemed to be choked with ash, and the rain was never clean. This storm is, though: clear and clean and beautiful, smelling like fresh-turned earth and green leaves and growth. He inhales it with relish, unable to fight his smile, and then looks at the old man walking next to him without concern. “Thank you again, Hokage-sama,” he says, because it really can’t be repeated enough. He came to this time without any plans to return to Konoha permanently—at best, he had thought to slip through whenever his plans allowed, keeping an eye on his old team and his younger self.

But the Hokage's invitation changed all of that, and Kurama would like to think that it’s for the better.

Sarutobi flashes him a small, sincere smile. “You are very welcome, my boy,” he says, sweeping into the Administration Division and up the stairs towards his office. Kurama follows, nodding a polite greeting to the ANBU hidden in the shadows of the door as they entre the office.
“Come,” the Hokage calls cheerfully. “I've tea, Kurama-kun, if you would like, or a very nice sake that my student sent me from Rice Country.”

Kurama thinks of Tsunade and can't contain his grin. “The sake, please,” he says, even though with his constitution he’s never actually managed to get so much as tipsy, regardless of how hard Tsunade tried. And she tried very, very hard indeed. Pleasantly buzzed was about as far as he got before she finally admitted defeat.

“A good choice,” Sarutobi approves, pouring them each a small cup and gesturing Kurama to the chair across his desk. Kurama takes it, accepting the sake. It is good, sweet with a mellow burn, and he closes his eyes in pleasure. Whether the alcohol affects him or not, Tsunade at least taught him to appreciate the taste.

There's a long stretch of comfortable silence, and then Kurama lifts his head to meet the Hokage's eyes. “Was there something you needed besides a drinking partner, Hokage-sama?” he asks with humor. “I'm always willing to indulge in some good sake, of course, but…”

The Hokage chuckles softly. “No,” he admits, “a drinking partner wasn’t my goal, though the company is nice.” He pauses, and then says carefully, “The missing-nin you captured were all agents of the Akatsuki organization.”

Ah. So that’s what this is about. Kurama has been expecting this since his return, and has prepared for it. He dips his head in a faint nod, and murmurs, “Yes. My approach was…systematic. I removed as many of their agents as I could.”

Sarutobi’s fingers close just a little more tightly around his cup. “There have been…rumors,” he says carefully. “That Konoha’s most infamous missing-nin was a part of that very organization. He has a sizeable bounty, and I cannot help but notice that it was not claimed.”

Kurama sets his cup back on the desk, giving the Hokage his full attention, and nods again. “Yes, Uchiha Itachi’s bounty is very large,” he agrees, keeping his tone lazy. “However, you're forgetting one thing: I don’t hunt innocent men.”

Sarutobi’s breath catches in his throat, more of a tell than a veteran shinobi would ever normally show. He stills, eyes narrowing as they fix on Kurama's face, and there are a thousand thoughts whirling behind those wise, dark eyes.

A long moment of silence, and then Sarutobi closes his eyes and settles back into his chair with a weary sigh. “So you know,” he says with some resignation. “I had wondered, when no one claimed his bounty.”

Kurama smiles, sad and slight. “I had…a friend in the Uchiha clan,” he offers. “He knew Itachi, and could recognize the stress that he was being put under. However, he also told me that Itachi was entirely loyal to Konoha, even more than he was to his clan, and I would take his word over anyone else’s. There had to be another explanation, and with the survival of Itachi’s little brother…well, the pieces kind of fell together.”

Bits and pieces of the truth, perhaps, strung together out of order, but it’s true enough to ease the tension around the Hokage's eyes, the stiff set of his shoulders. “A friend,” he echoes with a faint, rueful smile. “He must have been a very good friend indeed, for you to put so much faith in his words.”

“The best,” Kurama agrees without hesitation. “The very best, and more.” He reaches up to touch the slender braid that still hangs beside his face, warmth and fondness filling him, because for all that
they ended in tragedy, Sasuke is still so very much a part of all his happiness. He always will be, and
in this case at least, the good memories cannot hold a candle to the bad.

Sarutobi watches him, regret in his eyes as his gaze lingers on the red and black threads wound
around the twist of hair. “Was it Shisui-kun?” he asks suddenly, and then raises a hand to cut
Kurama off before he can even open his mouth. “No, no, never mind me, Kurama-kun. It’s your
secret to keep, and I will not ask for it.”

Kurama offers him a smile, soft for all it’s sad, and says nothing. He won’t deny it, because the
assumption is a useful one, but he also won’t confirm it, because Sasuke is worth more than that.
“What will you do?” he asks instead. “I’ve been keeping tabs on Itachi, just to make sure no one else
claims the bounty.” He hesitates, wondering how much to reveal, and then adds cautiously, “There
have been…rumors of a threat rising in the Land of Sound.”

Those sharp eyes flicker up to meet his, and the Hokage arches a brow. “Yet another Konoha bounty
you have not claimed,” he says reservedly.

Kurama grimaces, hands clenching in his lap as he imagines wrapping his fingers around
Orochimaru’s slimy throat. “Mm,” he agrees, keeping his voice carefully light. “But this one, I assure
you, is simply because I lacked the opportunity before now.”

Sarutobi watches him carefully for a long moment before he inclines his head slightly. “I will think
on it,” he murmurs.

Sensing that the meeting is coming to a close, Kurama pushes to his feet. “Good,” he returns.
Another hesitation, and then he takes a breath and says, “From what I’ve been able to learn, there
were…other factors that night, as well. I have no doubts as to Uchiha Itachi’s skill, but…it is possible
there was another present that night as well.”

A step forward with the plan—early, perhaps, but one he and Sasuke agreed upon nevertheless.
Madara and Obito managed to hide in the shadows for far too long before, but this time it won’t go
the way they wanted it to. Already Kurama has managed to shred their power base, to drive them
back into hiding. At this point Madara is still dead, not yet revived, and Kurama has faith that Obito
can be called back to sanity. He has the Will of Fire, after all, and it still burns inside of him.

Kurama will appeal to that and hope for the best, but he’s prepared for the worst as well.

He’ll do anything, whatever he must, to keep this world from falling as his did.
Chances

The first attempt of the day is a bucket of water rigged precariously over his door.

Perched in the hallway window, having just returned from a pre-dawn (and unsupervised, because Kakashi apparently can no longer be bothered to drag himself out of bed and the ANBU are nowhere to be found) training session, Kurama eyes the bucket with amusement. He studies his door for a moment, and then affably slides right back out to enter through the balcony.

His stalker isn't quite bold enough to curse, but judging by the waves of frustration coming from the far end of the hall it's a very near thing.

The next attempt comes that afternoon, when Kurama arrives back at his apartment from his shift at the Missions Assignment Desk. He leaps from the rooftop across the way in an easy bound, going slow enough to spot the suspicious sheen on his balcony railing from a good distance away.

Entirely amused, with a large helping of nostalgia on the side, Kurama flips neatly in the air, careful not to let even a single garnet hair touch the glue-covered railing, and lands easily in the doorway. He eyes the doorknob for a brief moment and then shrugs, pushes it open, and casually catches the flowerpot that tumbles down. It's a pretty little indigo-violet chrysanthemum, and Kurama caresses the petals with a smile before setting it safely aside and going to eat his dinner.

The next morning, the water has been upgraded to paint. Thankfully, Kurama's stalker still can't seem to tell when he's in the apartment, so it's easy enough to avoid.

Then there's the minefield of banana peels that gives Kurama pause, if only to wonder what happened to all the bananas.

After that, the front door's knob is laced with itching powder.

A glitter bomb.

A stink bomb.

An eraser trap.

A poorly aimed mud-ball in the middle of the street.

Kurama, very well aware of how stubborn he himself can be—as well as the fact that he has actually mellowed since childhood—evades them all with ease.

When he slides through the Hokage's window, frustrated chakra seething behind him, and gives the old man a bright smile, he gets an aggrieved shake of the man's head in return.

“This will not end well,” Sarutobi warns him gravely, though there's a glimmer of reluctant amusement in his eyes. “Do you intend to hold out forever, Kurama-kun?”

Kurama simply chuckles. “Hardly, Hokage-sama,” he answers cheerfully. “Little boys tend to have short attention spans. And from Kakashi's increasingly frequent complaints, I assume the Academy graduation is soon. That will be distraction enough, I think.”

Sarutobi concedes the point with an inclination of his head, and his expression grows somber. Kurama suspects he's remembering Naruto's failing grades in the class, and his position as dead last.
“Yes,” he murmurs, trailing off distractedly, but Kurama leaves him to his thoughts for the moment.

Appearances can be deceiving.

Kurama knows that better than anyone.

The Jounin Standby Station is sparsely populated when Kurama slips through the door, having evaded his stalker for the moment. He’s carrying a mission scroll from the Hokage, his first as a Konoha jounin, and is entirely cheerful about the prospect of getting out of the village and actually doing something. Not that training isn’t productive or distracting, but Kurama’s been hunting Akatsuki members for the past year, which is rather more tense than katas.

He pauses inside the doorway, giving himself seven seconds to assess the occupants. They're familiar to him, for the most part, all jounin he knew and fought with in another time. Hayato is by one wall, along with Yugao, speaking in hushed murmurs with their heads bent together. Shikaku has staked out one of the low tables to set up his shogi board, and is searching his surroundings for anyone who looks foolish enough to agree to a game. Inuzuka Tsune is wrestling with Kuromaru, everyone else giving them a wide berth, and several lower-level jounin are playing what looks suspiciously like strip poker in the corner.

Kurama looks at them all, lets himself feel a brief pang of loss and pain for those that were his, and then carefully, firmly tucks it away and steps into the room, headed for his target.

As shinobi, they're all too discrete to turn and stare, but Kurama can feel their attention on him nevertheless. But he’s had practice ignoring stares far more hostile than this, and slips around the arm of a couch without pause.

Shiranui Genma and Namiashi Raidou lift their heads simultaneously from their lunches. Genma's brow arches in question, and Raidou blinks.

Kurama hides the grin that wants to come out and instead inclines his head politely, offering the pair his scroll. “Namiashi-san, Shiranui-san,” he murmurs. “From the Hokage.”

There’s half a heartbeat of silence before Raidou reaches out and plucks the roll from his fingers, quickly breaking the seal and unfurling it. With Genma leaning over his shoulder, he reads the short missive, and then studies the mission details.

“A courier run? Damn,” Genma mutters, even as he rises to his feet and stretches gracefully. “But if Hokage-sama wants three jounin on it, it’s probably important.” Flicking the senbon to the other side of his mouth, he offers the newest jounin a brief nod.

“I'm Uzumaki Kurama,” the redhead responds, offering the taller man a swift smile. “Hokage-sama spoke highly of your skills as a team. I look forward to working with you.”

“Call me Genma,” the tokujo offers with an answering grin. “It’s going to be a long way to the Suna border if you're that formal all the time, Kurama-kun.”

“Genma,” Raidou sighs, his tone longsuffering. Apparently out of words, he simply shakes his head and then turns to Kurama. “If you don’t mind, you can call me Raidou as well. And I apologize in advance for my partner.”

Kurama just chuckles, understanding why the Hokage assigned him to these two rather than Kakashi for his first mission outside the village. They're one of the best pairs Konoha has, and as long as
Kurama has known them they’ve always been together. It’s all but impossible to find one without the other somewhere close behind. But they’re also easygoing and cheerful, especially for assassination experts, and can put anyone at ease.

“It’s nice to meet you both,” he tells them, and it’s entirely truthful. “I’ll join you here tomorrow morning, then?”


“Don’t worry, Rai,” he drawls lazily. “I’ll drag you out of your bed in time. Easy when I'm in it, after all.”

Raidou goes crimson and splutters, hands waving wildly. Kurama laughs, leaping out of the way of the flailing tokujo, and thinks, *I missed this.*

*I missed* them.

*And now they're here again.*

His luck’s always been incredible, but this is simply astonishing.

Restlessness draws his feet away from his apartment, back out into the village. It’s midafternoon and the streets are crowded, the market bustling with mothers and off-duty shinobi. Kurama slips by them without pausing, caught up in his thoughts. This, at least, he never planned out with Sasuke, because they never ever hoped for such a situation, and now Kurama feels like he’s been set adrift in an unknown sea.

Naruto is nearby, though no longer dogging his steps, and Kurama remembers very well the empty, aching loneliness of being the Kyuubi’s jinchuuriki but not knowing it. He wants to save his younger self from such things, wants to give him the home and family that Kurama himself never had, but he also knows just how many life-shaping occurrences will happen to the boy in the next few weeks. Mizuki’s betrayal and Iruka’s defense are a turning point, and Kurama is reluctant to change anything about it.

The mission to Wave is another, but that…

Perhaps their deaths were entirely meaningless in the long run, but Kurama still *aches* to save Haku, sweet and devoted and so reluctant to kill, and Zabuza, who hid his kindness behind talk of tools and a hard exterior. Haku was the one who taught him about precious people, after all, who changed his entire outlook yet again.

Maybe this time Kurama can keep them from dying. Volunteering to go along with Kakashi and Team 7 should be easy enough—Tazuna is hardly likely to object to another trained nin with the secrets he’s keeping, after all. And, while Kurama is reluctant to think that he can change *everything,* maybe he can give them…a chance. Just one single chance.

Sometimes, that’s all it really takes in the end.

By the time he gets back from this mission, graduation will have come and gone. Naruto will have learned what he is, what lives inside him, but he’ll also have seen that it doesn’t make him into a monster. It doesn’t stop people from loving him. It’s a lesson that Kurama would be hard-pressed to teach, and utterly invaluable.
So he’ll go on this mission, and when he comes back he’ll contrive to meet the boy again. A simple exchange of names will ensure that he has a reason for taking custody of Naruto, and then…

And then?

Kurama pauses on the corner, scrubbing one hand through his long hair in frustration and nearly pulling it out of its tail. What the hell comes after that? Kurama has been a shinobi for as long as he can remember, a full soldier for almost ten years. He doesn’t know anything about being a parental figure, a brother, even a role model. Konohamaru was the closest he ever came, and that was more two like personalities connecting than anything else, titles of ‘boss’ aside.

But, of course, Naruto is Kurama, more or less. Kurama knows exactly how he’s grown up, how he’s managed to survive this long and managed to become a shinobi. He understands the determination, the drive, the sheer overwhelming stubbornness that the boy possesses, and maybe… maybe that can be enough.

Naruto doesn’t need a father or a brother—he has those already, or will soon. But Kurama can certainly be a friend, and no one can ever have too many of those.

Iruka locks up his classroom with a weary sigh, far too many papers balanced precariously on one arm. He both loves and loathes graduation; it’s bittersweet, seeing his students move on and become genin.

(And then, of course, there's the sudden and abundant influx of paperwork that’s sure to drive him mad before the week is through. That part he flat-out hates, no ambiguity there. )

He casts a quick look at the test on the very top of the stack and can't quite hide his wince. There are only a few questions answered, and the rest of the page is covered in doodles and sloppily written ramblings. Three guesses who it belongs to, and if the first two aren’t Naruto they don’t count. Iruka despairs of the boy, hates that he’ll have to fail him—and he probably will, if his track record is any indication—but can't conscience sending an underprepared child out into the shinobi forces, even as a genin. Especially as a genin. Naruto is—

A round stone turns under his foot, and Iruka promptly loses his balance with a startled yelp. Instinctively, he throws his hands out to catch himself, and watches with a surge of resigned horror as twelve solid hours of grading shoots up into the air.

Fuck, he thinks, and only long years of practice as a teacher keep him from screaming it.

And then a shadow blurs, too quick to truly see, and a flash of red distracts him from his papers’ fate. Iruka registers it even as he twists his body around to catch himself, hitting the ground in a low crouch. Half a heartbeat later there's a gentle thump as someone else lands as well, and he looks up from a pair of battered and dusty shinobi sandals to the wrapped legs of black pants and then further up. Tattooed seals and scarred hands and leanly muscled arms under mesh, a wealth of crimson hair falling loose around an equally scarred face.

The man is carrying a tall stack of papers, and it takes Iruka a moment to realize that they’re his. This shinobi somehow managed to catch them all before they hit the ground.

“Are you all right?” the redhead asks, brilliantly blue eyes sympathetically amused. He pauses and looks down at his burden, and then grimaces. “I’m sorry. They’re all out of order now. I just reacted without thinking.”
But Iruka isn’t quite listening anymore, because there aren’t many redheads in Konoha, and even fewer wearing jounin vests. The man’s identity connects with a snap, and Iruka blinks. “Ah!” he says before he can stop himself. “You’re the one Naruto’s been trying to prank!”

There’s a moment of silence, and then the redhead’s eyebrow slowly creeps upward. “Naruto,” he repeats after a second. “That’s the blond boy with a penchant for running over civilians?”

Iruka winces. He’d been wondering what the man had done to make Naruto so hell-bent on catching him. It’s likely the man said something chastising, and as the majority of Naruto’s cold treatment comes from the civilians, it must not have gone over well. Dragging a hand over his tightly bound hair, Iruka manages a nod. “Yes, he’s—he’s one of my students.”

It’s said warily, ready to defend the boy if this man has heard anything. But there’s not so much as a flicker of anger or disgust as the redhead simply nods. He tips his head to the side, long hair sliding bright and loose over his shoulder, and then an unexpected smile breaks across his features.

“They’re fairly clever pranks, for an Academy student,” he says, amusement clear in his voice. “Not quite up to catching a jounin yet, but I’m sure he’ll get there.” With a shake of his head, he glances up to meet Iruka’s eyes. “I’m Kurama. It’s nice to meet you, sensei.”

“Umino Iruka,” Iruka returns automatically, only belatedly realizing the lack of a family name. Before he can mention it or ask, though, Kurama has taken a step away and is tucking the papers under his arm.

“Let me walk you home, Iruka-sensei,” the jounin offers with a sweet, bright smile. “You’re heading in the same direction as me, I think, and I could do with the company.”

Phrased like that, there’s just about no way to politely refuse. Iruka hesitates, wavers, and then gives in with a sigh. “I’m perfectly capable of walking myself home,” he protests, but since he’s already falling into step with the redhead it’s halfhearted at best.

Kurama simply keeps smiling, letting Iruka take the lead. “Of course,” he says easily, and it is, startlingly, not patronizing in the least. “You’re a chuunin, and I’m sure you earned the rank. But I’m just wandering right now, and playing pack-mule is as worthwhile a pastime as any, I think.” He deftly dodges the stealthy grab Iruka makes for his tests and chuckles.

Iruka gives in to what is clearly inevitable with bad grace and an impolite grumble, but doesn’t protest again. He won’t admit it, but it is nice to have company on his usually lonely walk home. It’s just past twilight, and most of those with friends or family are safely tucked away, eating dinner and enjoying the warmth of companionship. In contrast, Iruka’s apartment is cold and lonely and barren.

It’s not that he has no friends—Mizuki is certainly one, and there’s always Genma, who looked after him following the Kyuubi attack, and Kotetsu and Izumo, whom Genma did the same for. Those three are very nearly family, and Iruka loves them, but he can’t bring himself to depend on them all the time. Not when he’s village-bound and all but a desk shinobi, and Genma is ANBU and the terrible twosome have regular missions.

So Kurama, no matter how strange—though he’s hardly the strangest jounin Iruka has ever met—is a comfort, and a welcome one. He’s peaceful to be around, too, with a calm and easy air, full of quiet confidence and offhand grace.

And then, out of nowhere, Kurama says, “It’s incredible, what you do.”

Iruka blinks, caught entirely flat-footed. “What?” he manages after a second, because he’s just a
teacher and if Iruka remembers the rumors correctly this man took out an entire organization of S-
class missing-nin in less than a year.

Kurama huffs a soft laugh, tipping his head back to where the first stars of the evening are beginning
to show through the indigo twilight. “Teaching,” he clarifies. “That you’re able to do it, and do it
well—that’s incredible.” Casting a sideways glance at the chuunin, he smiles again and shakes his
head faintly. “Anyone can kill, given the motivation and training. But to make someone want to
learn, to give them the foundation on which to build an entire life, that’s something so far beyond
what most people can do. I admire you for it, Iruka-sensei. All good teachers, really. As a child I was
awful at everything, and it was only my Academy sensei who had hope for me. He’s the only reason
I got where I am today.”

It’s said with too much good humor to be anything but true. Nevertheless, Iruka is entirely reluctant
to believe it, because Kurama has the same air about him that Kakashi does, the one that says I have
seen the very worst this world has to offer and it has not broken me. It’s a dare, a bet, a reckless
declaration entirely backed by fact and experience, and Iruka wonders how many have fallen to it.
Fallen for it, and then found out far too late that Kurama is everything he claims to be and more.

“He would be proud of you,” Iruka says, and perhaps it’s a wild and unfounded assumption, but
Iruka looks at this strong, brave, scarred shinobi and thinks of the hopeless child he claims to have
been. Maybe it’s self-centered, but for a moment all Iruka can see is Naruto, bold and bright and
forever laughing. Bad at everything except pranking, with dreams a size too big for him, but so
determined. So brave in his own way.

Iruka wants this future, wants to watch someone like Naruto prove just what an incredible shinobi he
can be.

Maybe, he thinks, wildly optimistic, maybe someday he’ll be like Kurama.

Kurama looks at him and smiles, and murmurs, “You think so? I’d like to believe it.”

And if his expression has a faintly wry edge to it, if there’s just a hint of sadness in his clear blue
eyes, Iruka is too distracted by his thoughts of the present to notice.

Kurama meets his new teammates at the Jounin Standby Station a few minutes before the sun clears
the horizon, katana on his back, hair in a loose plait, and heart light. Talking with Iruka has always
made him feel better regardless of the subject, and even if Kurama can never have Naruto’s
relationship with the man again, maybe he can have something else. A friendship, instead of a
brotherhood, and that’s all right, because the man who was Kurama’s big brother died when Konoha
fell for the last time, and Kurama would not replace him for all the gold or good luck in the world.

He lands in the street, not even raising to dust under his sandals, and smiles at the two tokujo in
greeting. Genma is the same as ever, lounging against the side of the building with a senbon in his
mouth and an easy grin on his lips, and Kurama has seen him look the same through blood and fire
and battle, week-long runs with only a scattered handful of hours spent sleeping or resting. For all
that he’s not a full jounin, Genma is one of the pillars of Konoha. Not overtly powerful, not flashy,
not in any position of authority, but steady. Grounded. Dependable, which is worth far more than a
few flashy jutsus could ever be.

Raidou looks far less awake than his partner, slouched over and yawning almost without pause. His
eyes are glazed and his face is slack, and Kurama and Genma exchange amused glances over his
head. Captain of an ANBU team or no, the man’s a wreck in the mornings without adrenaline in his
With a huff, Genma tosses a scroll into the air and catches it deftly. “Got the mission,” he says lightly. “Who wants to play target and carry the thing?”

“I will,” Kurama offers, already gathering chakra in his palm. He closes his eyes, focuses, and sweeps his fingers over his left arm from elbow to wrist, and the seal tattoos there flare with violet light. He takes the scroll, sets it against his skin, and feels it vanish into the dimensional pocket the seals create.

Genma whistles, low and impressed. “Sealing, huh? Handy.”

“Very,” Kurama agrees, letting the chakra fade and the seals go dormant again. “No one but me will be able to retrieve it now, unless they can somehow manage to entirely deconstruct my seals.”

There’s a thoughtful pause, and then Genma grins, pushes off the wall, and comes to drape an arm around Kurama's shoulders. “I want you on all my courier missions,” he says cheerfully. “Sealing scrolls are useful, but only to a point, and I like this method.”

“You guys are so loud. Just move out already,” Raidou grumbles, waving a hand at them to shoo them forward even as the end of his sentence dissolves in another yawn. He stumbles past them and then blurs into motion, headed for the gates.

Another exchange of amused glances is all Genma and Kurama have time for before they're crossing the rooftops as well, almost too fast for the eye to catch, and falling into formation behind the team leader.

Even at a run, Kurama spares one single glance back as they disappear into the dense trees surrounding the village. It’s peaceful and quiet, calm and at rest. By the time they get back Mizuki’s betrayal will have shaken things, but not enough. Konoha will still be unprepared for what is coming.

Kurama has planned, and taken steps, and thrown his whole heart into the idea of changing everything.

It’s about time to see if all of it pays off.
The mission, perhaps predictably, goes to hell without so much as a pause to breathe.

With a low snarl, Kurama blocks a clone’s axe-strike with his sword and whirls past too quick to catch, beheading it with a single easy stroke. Sasuke's katana, surrendered when he finally became too ill to use it, sings as it cuts through the air. It’s not Kusanagi, broken long ago, nor is it anything incredibly special, but it’s Sasuke’s, well cared for and crafted by a master, with Kurama's own seals in the metal itself.

The clone turns back to water with a splash, and Kurama hurtles forward, taking out the nin locked in combat with Raidou.

Raidou doesn’t thank him, and Kurama doesn’t wait for thanks; this is a mission, not a staged tournament, and Konoha shinobi are famous for their teamwork for reasons just like this. Any enemy shinobi going in to a fight with Konoha knows that rather than one on one matches, like they might face against another village, with Konoha it’s always going to be a melee, and rarely in their favor.

“Genma?” Raidou calls, evading a Doton jutsu and lunging forward, the black blade of his poisoned sword a shadow in the half-light beneath the trees.

Kurama ducks a kunai that passes close enough for him to feel it skim his hair, then throws one of his own, with the addition of an exploding tag. The force of it, modified and amplified by the seals Kurama uses to make them himself, shakes the forest, and gives Kurama time to dart back to his team leader’s side. “Laying traps,” he answers, even as he pulls a square of paper from the inside pocket of his jounin vest. “They’ve got reinforcements headed our direction, maybe four minutes out. Unknown numbers, approaching from the southeast.”

“Hell,” Raidou mutters, and then twists to the side, catching a descending kunai on his sword. He kicks his attacker, spins to the side, and Kurama meets the enemy nin with bared teeth and a snarl, slamming one of the papers into the woman’s chest. There’s a crackle of violet light, a scream, and then the woman drops like a stone.

“Go!” the tokujo orders. “I can hold them off until Genma's done. Meet at point D at noon.”

Kurama bites back the instinctive protest against abandoning a comrade, but he’s been a shinobi long enough to know a sound strategy when it’s presented to him. These nin are after the scroll, have clearly been hired to retrieve it, and that means they're after him. While running will doubtless tell them exactly who’s carrying the item, it’s the best choice. Kurama is fast and skilled, and dividing their forces will give Raidou and Genma the edge they need to win quickly.

Letting out a short, sharp breath, Kurama dips his head. “Right. Make sure you get there,” he growls, slides his katana back into its sheath, and leaps forward in a blur of speed. He’s not quite the Yellow...
Flash, not yet, but when he tries, there are few in any time who can catch him.

The Kyuubi no Kitsune always knew how to run, at the very least.

They're on the very border of Fire Country, practically shoulder-to-shoulder with Lightning, and it's far from comfortable. The peace is uneasy at best, bought with death and underhanded dealings, and there's no peace at all when they're shinobi villages hired to outwit each other. Kurama is very careful to keep to his side of the border as he runs, marking it in his mind and maintaining his distance.

Behind him, nowhere near as swift through the trees as he is, are the other nin. They're making enough noise to alert even the most brain-dead Academy student, and Kurama mentally scoffs. Fire Country forests are special, certainly, but they're hardly unique, and that level of noise is simply an embarrassment.

He leaves traps as he goes, seals triggered by proximity and quickly set trip wires with exploding tags, anything he can throw down on the fly. As much as he hates it, this is exactly the type of situation he’s experienced with, running and fighting and avoiding pursuers. At one time, maybe he would have rejected such an idea, stood and fought and died for it. But Madara’s forces outnumbered them by a huge amount, always, and all the remnants of Konoha quickly learned that sometimes retreat and flight truly were the best options.

Ahead of him, there's a faint spark of chakra, a small flicker of light, and Kurama narrows his eyes. He’s fairly familiar with the jutsus that Raidou and Genma use, and that wasn’t them. They're also a good seven minutes behind him, even moving fast, and they’d have had to already have taken their opponents out. There’s no doubt as to their skills, no question that they both have earned the ANBU tattoos on their shoulders many times over, but even for the pair of them that’s pushing things.

So. Enemy, then.

Kurama takes a breath and launches himself forward, out of the trees. He lands at a run, up and moving before his pursuers can even register the change, and takes advantage of their sudden rush to get to the ground to flick his hands up into what is still, even after so long, his most familiar seal. In a heartbeat there are five of him, and the four clones split off without hesitation, falling into ready stances even as he increases the distance between them. These enemy nin are chuunin, maybe a jounin—two at the most—mixed in, and four clones are enough to handle that.

Were he any good at genjutsu, this would be the perfect time for a chameleon jutsu, but even the addition of the Kyuubi no Kitsune’s chakra and skill can't make up for his own lack in that area. Kurama curses under his breath and leaps forward as the ground gives way, hands reaching up to grab him. Another four quick signs and he hisses, “Doton: Compression!”

With a groaning rumble the earth collapses in on the shinobi beneath the surface, and Kurama hooks a hand around a thick branch, kicks of the tree, and flips back to the ground. There's someone ahead of him; his sensitive ears can pick out the rasp of breath, but it sounds quick and panicked.

*Young,* Kurama thinks, heart clenching, but he grits his teeth and draws Sasuke's katana again. (Ginkaze, Sasuke had always called it, no matter how much Kurama mocked him for his lack of imagination. But thinking of Sasuke, still an ache, still a fierce-sharp regret, right now is—no. No.) He doesn’t want to kill the chuunin in the bushes, likely only recently promoted, but they’re both shinobi on a mission, both with a duty to carry out.
Kurama has learned a lot about duty, since Madara returned.

“I won’t ask you to let me pass,” he says. “But I don’t want to fight you.”

The breathing catches, just faintly, and there's the slight-soft hiss of a weapon being drawn. Kurama sets his feet and steadies himself, just in time for the boy in the bushes to come charging out. He’s clumsy with his wakazashi, though, too slow to even begin to match Kurama, who would have been a kage in another life, had things turned out better. Kurama sidesteps, half-turns, and cracks the hilt of Ginkaze into the back of the boy’s skull. Too soft to be a killing blow, if only just—mercy is something they still have time for, here, and Kurama loves with a tearing, wrenching ache that he no longer has to kill those who cross his path. Perhaps doing so would be better, smarter, but Kurama has never been like that unless forced to be.

Kurama spares half an instant to glance back over his shoulder, even as a surge of fire rises above the treetops. He smiles faintly, fondly, because for someone so levelheaded Genma has always been suspiciously fond of Katon jutsus. Then, with a short sigh, he slips Ginkaze back into its sheath and bounds up into the branches.

“Should have been a freaking A-rank, not a B,” Genma mutters, leaning back against the wide bole of a tree as he tries to control his breathing.

Next to him, Raidou nods, swiping the back of his hand over his brow. “Trade treaty from a mining town,” he says with a shrug. “Should have expected it. These missions always suck.”

Conceding the point with a snort, Genma checks the position of the sun and murmurs, “Almost noon.” The tone is noncommittal, but Raidou's been his partner for long enough to hear the thread of concern in the man’s voice, well-buried as it is.

For his part, though, Raidou can't quite bring himself to worry. Uzumaki Kurama seems levelheaded, skilled, and entirely competent, without the ego a lot of good shinobi get. Beyond that, he brought in several incredibly infamous missing-nin, and that’s impressive. He’s fast, too, and even if he took the circuitous route to throw off his pursuers, he’ll likely be arriving soon.

And, as if summoned by the thought, a shape drops through the branches to land lightly on the ground in front of them, hardly even stirring the leaves. As he rises, Raidou takes a quick inventory, and is unsurprised by the lack of wounds. Kurama looks a bit ruffled, and there are leaves and twigs in his now-loose hair, but beyond that Raidou can't see any damage.

“The scroll?” he asks, because his first priority has to be the mission, regardless of how much he wants to make sure he’s not missing anything.

Kurama smiles at him, bright and entirely cheerful, and dips his head. “Delivered, along with a warning about how much opposition we faced,” he answers. “You're both alright?”

“A little singed,” Genma acknowledges without care, “but we’ve had worse.”

Raidou barely restrains the urge to roll his eyes. “We wouldn’t be singed if you hadn’t set off your own trap—”

“It got them, didn’t it? Don’t stress so much, Rai, you're gonna go bald, and then I’ll have to get myself a better-looking sugar daddy.”

Quite certain that his skin is approximately the same shade as Kurama's hair now, Raidou clamps
down on the urge to splutter and just slaps his hands over his face. He’s a private person, and Genma is the walking, talking definition of an overshare. “Two years,” he says, not caring if it comes out muffled and all but inaudible. “Genma, I am two years older than you. Stop that!”

Quiet laughter cuts the argument off before it can progress further, and Raidou drops his hands to see that Kurama is turned away from them, shoulders shaking, head bowed so that his long hair curtains his face. The sound is unmistakable, though, sweet and warm and full, and Raidou smiles in spite of himself. It’s not that Kurama is slow to laugh, exactly, but he can seem so melancholy at times that each bout of mirth somehow feels like a victory.

Judging by the curve of Genma’s lips and the tilt of his brows, he feels the same.

“Sorry, sorry,” Kurama gasps, face still hidden. “It’s just—you sound like— Ah, and people say shinobi suck at being married.”

Raidou has the rare pleasure of watching Genma gape, momentarily speechless, and laughs himself. “If I’ve managed to survive those three chicks he raised for this long, I think I deserve a better title than ‘husband’,,” he says dryly. “Maybe ‘saint’. One of them alone could give a man grey hairs to rival Kakashi’s.”

“Who the hell says you’re the husband?” Genma demands, and there’s a flush high up on his sharp cheekbones.

“Chicks?” Kurama asks at the same moment.

Raidou, almost gleeful at finally getting one back at his partner, gives Genma an innocent smile. “Well, I was assuming you were the wife, given your skills at housework, Gen. I’m sorry, was I stereotyping?”

Genma splutters, and Raidou looks over at the redhead who’s still watching in amusement. “After the Kyuubi, there were a lot of orphans in the village,” he explains. “Genma took in Kotetsu, Izumo, and Iruka to look after whenever he wasn’t on a mission. All three of them are monsters, though Izumo hides it better than most.”

Before Kurama can answer, though, a pair of long arms wind around Raidou’s neck, and Genma all but drapes himself over his side. “Screw you,” the younger man growls. “I’ll be best damn wife you ever had, bastard. Let’s go home and I’ll show you.”

Raidou goes brilliant red, just as the last blush was finally fading, and Kurama is laughing again. Genma grins in triumph, sharp and wicked, and only protests a little when Raidou whacks him around the head in desperate, embarrassed revenge.

They return to the village to the sight of well-ordered chaos, and share a glance between them. ANBU are out and visible, patrolling the walls, and where there are normally only two chuunin manning any one gate, two chuunin and two jounin greet them as they approach.

“Raidou-san, Genma-san,” Uzuki Yugao says, rising to her feet and inclining her head. Hayate is at her back, but his eyes are on the forest still, not allowing himself to be distracted by the returning team. “You’re back a little late.”

Raidou waves a weary hand in acknowledgement. “By three days,” he agrees. “The opposing side hired Kumo nin. What’s happening here?”
Yugao’s eyes narrow faintly, but she answers, “One of the Academy instructors turned traitor the night before last. He tried to convince one of the students that failed to steal a kinjutsu scroll for him. The Hokage hasn’t released the details yet, but he was stopped, and all shinobi forces above genin have been put on alert in case he wasn’t working alone.”

Genma whistles lowly. “Wow. Hell of a thing to do. The kid okay?”

Yugao dips her head in a short, sharp nod, even as she checks their mission scroll off and waves them through the gate. “He’s fine, last I heard. A little shaken up, but that’s entirely understandable for a student.”

There’s true, if faint, concern in her voice, and Kurama spares her a quick smile as he follows his teammates into the village. For all that the civilians were always antagonistic with their glares and whispers, for the most part the shinobi of Konoha were more understanding of life as a jinchuuriki. It’s nice to see that carries over.

“I’ll turn in the report,” Raidou volunteers with a weary sigh, waving Genma and Kurama off as they come to an intersection of streets. “You guys are dismissed. Thank you.”

Genma looks at him for a moment and then rolls his eyes. “I’ll pick up lunch,” he says. “We’re all hungry and filthy, and we’ve been running since yesterday. What do you want, Rai?”

Raidou favors him with a quick smile. “Ichiraku?” he suggests.

“Done.” Genma reaches out, quick as a snake, and snags Kurama’s arm as he makes to disappear. “Oh, no. I don’t think so, Kurama-kun. You’re going to eat if I have to force-feed you. March.”

Kurama takes one look at the mother-hen expression his new friend is wearing, rolls his eyes, and marches. “Now I understand why Raidou calls them your chicks,” he mutters.

“If you start making hen noises like Aoba does I’ll string you up by your ankles in the Forest of Death,” Genma threatens, steering him towards the familiar stand. After a quick glance to make sure Kurama is walking obediently, he releases him and ducks under the awning. Kurama hears him call a cheerful greeting to Teuchi, and is just about to follow when someone bursts out of the stall and collides with him, nearly knocking him over.

“You!” a loud voice cries, and Kurama blinks down at the finger pointing at his face, then at the bright blond head almost level with his elbow.

“Me,” he says agreeably. Then he reaches out, ignoring the boy’s stiffening, and carefully ruffles his hair. “Those were some good pranks, kid,” he says warmly. “The one with the glue was especially inspired.”

There’s a long moment of silence as Naruto stares at him, jaw gaping and blue eyes stunned. Then he puffs himself up like a rooster and beams. “I almost got you!” he crows. “I know I did! ‘Cause the future Hokage is awesome at everything!”

Kurama chuckles softly. “Future Hokage?” he asks. “The old man had better watch out, then.” He reaches out and taps the worn hitai-ate Naruto is wearing. “Genin is a good start.”

Naruto grins widely at him, and Kurama feels a faint pang as he remembers being this boisterous and innocent. “I’ll make jounin in a year,” he boasts, “believe it!”

“And who are you, so that I know our future Hokage’s name?” Kurama asks. This is as good an opening as he’ll ever be handed, a random enough chance that even the Sandaime won’t see
anything suspicious in it.

“Uzumaki Naruto, genin of Konoha!” the boy declares proudly, and Kurama makes himself go very, very still.

“How interesting,” he hears himself say from a distance, because this is it, this is the beginning of the change. Yes, Akatsuki is already gone and Nagato’s eyes are no longer a threat, but this is the real change, the one that will show the most in Kurama's little double.

“How very, very interesting. Because, you see, my name is Uzumaki Kurama.”
Sarutobi sighs and rubs at the bridge of his nose, wondering if he’s simply seeing double and that’s why his desk looks like a file cabinet exploded on top of it. Team assignments are always a tedious time, and his personal investment in this particular class doesn’t change that.

The damned traitorous Academy teacher hasn’t helped matters any, either.

*I'm too old for this*, Sarutobi thinks, restraining another sigh with difficulty. He was too old when he passed his hat on to Minato, and he’s too *ancient* for it now, when Minato is dead and his son is a genin hated and feared by the civilians, hated *because* he’s feared. It’s *not fair*, and while Sarutobi is never one to indulge in such thinking, has been a shinobi far too long to assume it bears any weight at all, but sometimes even his practicality is overwhelmed in the face of the bad hand Naruto drew in this life.

Right now, as it stands, the only successor who won’t turn the village inside out within a month is Tsunade, and she’s sworn never to come back. Maybe he’ll have the hat until he dies, and that’s a grim thought indeed; Danzo will doubtless use the chance to snatch up the position with haste, pry it right from his cold, dead fingers. While Sarutobi believes that Danzo believes he has Konoha's best interests at heart, he doesn’t think the execution of those interests will result in anything less than tragedy. And Danzo will never see it, because as much of an old war hawk as he is, he still has an idealized notion of humanity, and it's never sat well with Sarutobi.

The sigh finally escapes, heavy and low, and Sarutobi turns back to his paperwork, berating himself for letting his mind wander. He really is too old, but there's no alternative to be had. At least for a few more years.

He’s smiling to himself, picturing the reactions of the general populace to learning that their new Hokage is the demon brat, when a soft thump alerts him to a presence on his windowsill. It’s common courtesy for ninja to announce their arrival in such a way; for all that he’s getting on in years, the last three assassins who managed to get this far all realized very quickly indeed why Sarutobi Hiruzen is still called the God of Shinobi.

He looks up, and blinks, startled by the sight of a wealth of unmistakable red hair and those ocean-blue eyes. Uzumaki Kurama stares back at him, mouth set into a neutral line, which is…out of character, from what Sarutobi has seen of the cheerful young man. He’s still in his dusty and battered mission clothes, bristling with weapons, and there are leaves in his hair. It’s the work of half a second to recall Namiashi Raidou's report, and Sarutobi frowns, wondering what pressing business Kurama could have so soon after returning.

And then a shock of sunshine-yellow hair peeks over Kurama's shoulder as arms tighten around his neck, and Naruto pulls himself into view. His eyes, a sky blue several shades brighter than Kurama's ocean blue, are confused and perhaps a little hurt, wide with uncertainty but also a bewildered sort of stubbornness. He doesn’t say anything, and that’s perhaps the biggest clue of all that something has happened.

Silently, Kurama slides off the sill and drops into a crouch, letting Naruto down. The boy wavers, clearly torn between staying with his newly found cousin and running up to the Hokage like he usually does. Finally, after a long moment, he settles on giving Sarutobi a fairly weak smile and twisting his fingers into the hem of Kurama's shirt.

Clearly, this is not going to be an easy conversation.
“Why don’t you sit, Naruto, Kurama-kun?” Sarutobi suggests at length, indicating the chairs in front of his desk. There's another pause where he wonders if he’ll be obeyed, and then Kurama tips his head in acknowledgement and steps forward, wary and graceful. Sarutobi has thought quite a bit about his options in regards to the two of them, and while he can safely say he’s considered nearly every angle, his heart still gives a pang at the sight of shuttered eyes and a blank face. From everything he has been told, has observed himself, Kurama is given to smiling, to cheer. But he’s deprived this lost young man of knowing his little cousin, did it willingly and with full realization of his actions, and even though Sarutobi can’t quite bring himself to regret it he does hate to put Kurama through any more pain.

And Naruto…

With a weary sigh, Sarutobi steeplets his fingers in front of him and regards the two, wondering how to start.

Perhaps predictably, Naruto steals the chance before he can come to a decision. He sits bolt-upright in his chair, blue eyes sparking with sudden, pigheaded determination, and cries, “You didn’t tell me I had a cousin, jiji!”

Sarutobi studies the blond for a moment before he inclines his head. “No,” he agrees. “I did not. Kurama-kun has been in the village less than a month, and before that I was entirely unaware he existed.”

At that, Kurama's blank look softens slightly, flickers into something that might be understanding or simply relief, and he reaches out to drop a hand on Naruto's head. “The Hokage wanted to make sure he could trust me,” he explains softly. “If I was an enemy trying to get into the village or something, that would be a good way in, and it would hurt you if I really was an enemy. Hokage-sama was just trying to protect you.”

The mulish set of Naruto's face doesn't change. “But—!”

“But I believe Kurama-kun has proved to be all he says he is,” Sarutobi cut in, though that’s not entirely true. But it’s enough for now, and the sudden, burgeoning hope in Naruto's expression is more than sufficient to convince him that this is the right thing to do. He smiles with all the warmth he feels towards this unpredictable, unnervingly bright boy, so very much a mix of his charismatic father and vivacious mother. “Uzumaki Naruto, meet Uzumaki Kurama, your cousin.”

Naruto hovers in one corner of the room, almost afraid to take even a step. The redheaded man—Kurama, his cousin, and that’s still equally amazing and terrifying and impossible to believe—is on the other side, next to the tall and overflowing bookshelf, tucking scrolls back into their places. He wonders what he should do—walk in and make himself at home? Kick back on the comfy-looking sofa and see if it lives up to its appearance? Sneak back out the window and hope Kurama, clearly a skilled jounin, can't track him down?

Vaguely, still half-dazed, Naruto wonders if there's a shinobi rule for dealing with this kind of situation. Sakura-chan would know, but Naruto's clueless.

He’s felt that way so often these last few days, and it’s really starting to get on his nerves.

In lieu of anything else, he occupies himself with looking around. He’s seen Kurama's apartment before, if only briefly while he was laying traps, but it’s still rather startling how…bare it is, especially compared to Naruto's own cluttered rooms. About the only thing present in the apartment
is paper, reams of it, pieces in all shapes and sizes covered with strange, complicated symbols. Some of them are finished, tacked up on walls and glittering strangely here and there where the light hits them. Others are stacked in teetering piles in the corners, precarious and listing. They’re vaguely familiar, something Naruto is probably supposed to know about, but he’s spent half his time at the Academy skipping class and the other half goofing off during it, so his knowledge of the basics is rather lacking.

Still, they look neat, and from the tattoos covering Kurama’s arms they’re apparently important to him. Naruto has heard people talking about what a good shinobi the new jounin is, and he wonders if those drawings have something to do with it.

“Would you like something to drink, Naruto-kun?”

The soft voice jolts Naruto out of his preoccupation, and he twists around to see that the redhead has finished putting away his gear and is hovering at the doorway of the kitchen, one finger nervously twisting around the thin braid in his hair. He meets the man’s eyes, and it’s weird how off-balance he feels, like some giant rug just got wrenched out from under his feet, and he’s still spinning in the air, waiting to come crashing down. But one glance at Kurama is enough to see that he feels just as uncertain about all of this.

That alone gives Naruto the courage to offer up a wide grin. “Milk?” he suggests hopefully. Kurama hesitates, then pulls a face. “Only if you like the sour type,” he says wryly. “I just returned from a week-long mission, and I’m afraid I didn’t quite manage to clean everything out of my fridge before I left. I have tea, though, if you don’t mind it.”

While he’s never been overly fond of the bitter stuff Hokage-jiji drinks, Naruto agrees, just for something to say, and Kurama flashes him a quick smile—almost like he knows what he’s thinking—before he retreats into the kitchen. Naruto follows him, steps stupidly hesitant even though he can’t bring himself to walk more confidently. In the space of two hours, he’s gone from being an orphan outcast to having a cousin who smiles at him and offers to make tea. It’s…

“You know,” Kurama says, voice muffled as he rummages through the cupboards, “Technically, as long as you’re a genin you’re also a legal adult. I’m your cousin, Naruto-kun, but that doesn’t have to mean anything more or less than you’d like it to.”

Naruto pulls a face of his own. Adults always have to say things in the most complicated ways possible. It’s like they’re trying to be misunderstood. “You mean—”

There’s a soft huff of bright laughter, and Kurama casts him an amused look over one shoulder. “I mean that, even though I’d like to have you live with me, Naruto-kun, you’re under no obligation to. We’re family, but we’re also strangers, and as much as I’d like to be a family to you, it’s entirely your decision.” His smile turns sad, and he looks away, back to the cupboard, with a faint sigh that Naruto likely wasn’t supposed to hear. “I’m also not sure how well I’d do being any sort of mentor,” he adds bluntly. “My village was destroyed a long time ago, and I’ve been mostly on my own since then.”

That’s the answer to another question Naruto has been trying not to contemplate. He swallows, suddenly feeling very small, and asks, “You mean you’re not from Konoha?”

In half a heartbeat, Kurama is right in front of him, crouched down so that they’re at eye-level. His blue eyes are sharp and fierce, and seem to pick up the meaning behind the question without Naruto having to clarify any further. “No,” the jounin says, an edge of fire and tempered steel to his words. “No, Naruto, or I would never have left you to grow up alone. I didn’t know that Kushina had had a
son, or believe me, I would have been here the day after I found out, demanding to raise you myself.”

Naruto looks at him and he believes. No one’s ever looked at him the way this man is, except for maybe Iruka-sensei the other night, when that shuriken was lodged in his back and he still managed to smile at Naruto, the reason for it.

He believes, and before he can stop himself, he blurs, “Can I?” Kurama blinks, and Naruto quickly clarifies, “Can I live with you?”

He’s never had a family beyond Iruka and the Sandaime, but he’s always wanted one. And with Kurama here in front of him, his cousin offering a new life entirely different from his old one—

Well, Naruto’s never been the type to hesitate over anything, and when it’s something he wants this much, he’ll do everything in his power to grab it.

Kurama smiles, bright and soft and clearly, honestly happy, and dips his head. “Of course,” he murmurs, and rises gracefully to his feet, dropping a firm, steadying hand on Naruto’s shoulder. “Come on, Naruto-kun, you can have the second bedroom. I’ll help you move your stuff in tomorrow, hm?”

Naruto thinks of his cluttered, messy, lonely apartment, only a few scattered mementoes to give it any kind of life, and reaches out to wrap his fingers around Kurama’s larger hand. This apartment is even emptier than Naruto’s in regards to stuff, but regardless, it feels warm and cozy as Kurama grips his hand in return and beams down at him.

“Thanks, Kurama-nii!” Naruto cries, and he’s never meant anything more.

Kurama lies on his bed, flat on his back as he stares up at the ceiling above him. Naruto’s breathing is soft and deep across the hall, comforting and unsettling all at once. He’s still wavering, still wondering if this is truly the right path to take, but then he remembers the look on Naruto’s face outside the ramen stand, and then again in the kitchen, as though day had just broken for the first time, confusion washing into stunned comprehension as he stared at Kurama as though the jounin had just handed him the Hokage’s hat without any strings attached.

With a soft sigh, Kurama drapes his arm over his eyes, trying to imagine what this change will bring. He and Sasuke had long ago discarded the notion of keeping events as close to those of their timeline as possible; it didn’t work the first time, and the small edge that knowing how things would turn out gave them wasn’t worth the chance of failing again. But this, this is a change just as massive as wiping Akatsuki off the map. With a mentor, an immediate family to guide and care for him, how will Naruto change?

Kurama never wanted this Naruto to become him—it’s one of the many reasons he went back in time in the first place—but the thought that they might not even be similar is entirely disquieting.

Something stirs beneath his skin, shifts and surges and then recedes again as soon as it’s gotten his attention. Kurama blinks his eyes open, sitting up and dropping his arm. One of the seals on his right arm, directly over the pulse point, is glowing black, somehow managing to be brilliant even in the moonlit darkness. Cautiously, Kurama lays a hand over it, judging the feel of the chakra, and then snorts at what he finds.

“Finally decided to wake up, bastard?” he asks. Even though it’s rhetorical, the force in the seal shifts
Rolling his eyes, Kurama settles cross-legged on the bed and drops his hands onto his knees. “All right, all right, I heard you the first time. I’m coming.” Releasing a long, slow breath, he lets his eyes fall shut, concentrates on everything and nothing at all until white light blossoms behind closed lids. There’s the scent of green on the air, something warm and growing, with an undertone of damp earth and old, dry leaves.

“You’ve been redecorating,” Kurama drawls, opening his eyes again and arching a brow at the dark-haired man seated across from him on a fallen tree.

“Sorry to break it to you, brat, but your mindscape is hardly the most interesting place to languish, even when it doesn’t look like the inside of a sewer,” Uchiha Obito informs him sardonically.

Kurama grins, surveying the lush Fire Country forest surrounding them, a pool of perfectly still, clear water to one side and a full moon hanging above them. “No, no, I like it. Very…peaceful. Very green.”

Obito rolls his one remaining eye. “Shut up. If I’m going to be stuck in a fucking seal I’d at least like it to have pretty scenery.”

“It’s not like anything would change if I did let you out,” Kurama points out, managing to strangle his amusement with difficulty. “You’re pretty much a chakra impression right now, idiot.”

“Oh, like you’ve got even half a leg to stand on calling somebody else that, brat. As soon as I’m out of here, I’m going to—”

“Kick my ass, subject me to the cruelest of tortures imaginable, raze the village to the ground, make my life a living, breathing hell—should I stop now, or did I miss one?”

Obito blows out a long, heavy sigh and pinches the bridge of his nose, as though Kurama is the hard one to deal with here. “Shut up. Just—I don’t even know what I did in my life to deserve this.”

Kurama snorts. “The near-destruction of our entire world ring a bell?”

“Oh, go to hell. Even that’s not enough to be forced to deal with you.” But there’s humor in the Uchiha-dark gaze, reluctant as it is, and Kurama smiles back at him. Obito rolls his eye again, then hesitates. After several seconds of silence, he says, “You know, I’ll never be able to go back to being the idiotic, loudmouthed brat from Team 7. But no matter how far I go, whether it’s rise or fall, that brat is still me.”

Kurama blinks at the other man. “You heard my thoughts—”

“I felt your angst,” Obito corrects with another eye-roll. In the four years that Obito's been (willingly) trapped in the seal, Kurama’s gotten that expression from him more times than he’s gotten it from Jiraiya, Tsunade, Sakura, and Iruka. Combined. “There's so much of it, brat, it wasn’t hard. And it’s not that hard to guess why you're twisted up in knots. The kid’s still you. He’ll always be you. He’s just…a different possibility.”

There’s another long moment of silence, and then Kurama huffs out a reluctant laugh. “You know, for someone who’s a megalomaniacal mass-murdering psychopath, you're unnervingly good at reading people.”

“WAS. Was a megalomaniacal mass-murdering psychopath, thank you. I'm reformed.”
“Last time I came for a visit you threatened to string me up from the ceiling by my own intestines.”

“It’s a work in progress. Surely you of all people don’t expect everyone to get things right on the very first try.” Regardless of the caustic tone, Obito is smiling again, the deep scars on his right side pulling the expression into something that’s dangerously close to endearing.

“Ugh,” Kurama mutters, pressing his hands over his eyes. “Could you not do that, please? It gives me hives to see the scourge of the Elemental Nations looking cute.”

A derisive snort is his only answer, and there's another pause. It’s comfortable, though, both of them enjoying the gentle night breeze as it carries the scent of lilies past them. Naruto basks in the peace of this place, even as he appreciates the irony that Uchiha Obito, one of the least peaceful souls he’s ever met—in all possible meanings of the phrase “least peaceful”—was the one to create it.

“I have a sealing question for you,” Obito says finally, humor fully absent from his voice now.

Kurama cracks an eye open to study him, but the Uchiha is far too good at holding his poker face to let anything slip. “My favorite kind,” the redhead responds cheerfully. “Maybe I’ll even answer it if you're polite.”

That earns him another huff, this one indignant, but Obito says without pause, “Minato-sensei was able to transfer his Hiraishin seal to other people or places with a touch, and then use it as though it was the original. Could you do that? With any seal?”

“Hm.” Kurama tilts his head, studying the other man curiously. “I’m…not entirely sure, actually. In theory, it’s as simple as fine-tuning your chakra control in regards to a seal that’s present on your body and then visualizing its replication with enough clarity and focus that it recreates itself with as little as a touch. I’ve never tried it, but it’s likely I could do it with enough practice.”

“Then start practicing,” Obito tells him bluntly. “As soon as you're competent, let me know.” Eye going dark with distance and preoccupation, he subsides back into his seat on the log, lacing his fingers in his lap. Kurama knows that expression, especially after four years of witnessing it close-up. Obito is scheming, mind whirling through plots and plans and possible outcomes, considering and discarding options more quickly than anyone but a Nara could manage. It’s futile to interrupt him when he gets like this, as Kurama has long since learned. Instead of trying, he flops back to the ground, stretching out on his back and twisting into a long, spine-popping arch.

Silence falls, and the moon inches across the sky.

Finally, after what is likely hours, Obito sighs and unfolds himself, rising to his feet. “You were drooling over that Katon jutsu I showed you last week,” he says. “Still want to learn it?”

Kurama bolts to his feet without hesitation, languidness forgotten and his smile bordering on a grin. “The Fire Dragon Flame Bullet? Yes, please.”

Obito rolls his eye again, sighing grumpily like he’s about to undergo a terrible ordeal, but there’s a reluctant smile pulling at the corners of his mouth, too. Kurama’s willing to count that as a win.
Adjustment

“Naruto-kun. Naruto-kun, it’s time to wake up. You have training today.”

Naruto groans and attempts to drag his blankets over his head, hoping to shut out the weak light already starting to fill the room and the soft but insistent voice above him. For half a second he can almost imagine it worked, but then a weight dips the mattress beside him and a hand gently but firmly shakes his shoulder.

“Up, Naruto-kun,” the voice urges, sounding amused, and Naruto groans again as he forces his eyes open. The blurry blob of red and tan above him wavers for an instant before resolving into his cousin’s face, smiling down at him.

“Kurama-nii?” he manages after a dazed second.

“Up,” Kurama repeats, reaching out to tweak his nose with a soft huff of laughter. “You have to meet your team in an hour. Go shower and get dressed, and then come eat. I’ll have breakfast ready by the time you’re done.” He stands with a grace that should be entirely illegal for this hour of the morning, prudently dragging the blanket with him and easily evading Naruto’s groggy attempt to reclaim it. Before Naruto can make so much as a sound of protest—or point out that, judging by the pattern of the past two days, Kakashi-sensei is going to be at least two hours late, so he should be allowed to sleep in—Kurama is out the door, blanket still trailing from under his arm like a somewhat limp victory banner.

Naruto flops back onto his pillows with a whining groan, cursing the fact that his cousin seems to be the epitome of a morning person.

Twenty minutes later, feeling slightly more awake and a tiny bit more alert, Naruto hauls himself up onto one of the kitchen chairs and blinks at the dishes that are deposited in front of him.

“What?” he demands in shock.

Kurama raises an amused brow in his direction. “Grilled salmon, miso soup with onion and tofu, pickles, freshly made rice, and a glass of non-sour milk. Something wrong with that, Naruto-kun?”

It’s a perfectly lovely breakfast, made even nicer by the fact that Naruto didn’t have to cook it himself, but… “Uh, Kurama-nii, I usually just have a cup of ramen. Really, that’s—”

“Delicious and very satisfying, I’m sure,” the redhead cuts in, taking a seat across from Naruto with his own breakfast, “but regardless of taste, that’s not a complete breakfast, Naruto-kun. Ramen is fine for lunch, since it has lots of calories to replace those lost in training, and salt to make up for some of what you sweat out, but it isn’t breakfast food. While you’re living here, you’ll eat full, balanced meals.”

“But—ramen!” Naruto protests, because ramen is god and there’s no way he’s going to be deprived of the chance—

“Naruto.” Kurama looks up at him and smiles, and the expression somehow manages to imply shut your mouth and eat or the next meal served in this house will include your perfectly grilled flesh while simultaneously remaining utterly kind and innocent. “Eat your breakfast.”

Naruto closes his mouth with a snap, ignores the shudder of horror that races down his spine (it fights for a place in his stomach beside the curl of warmth at the thought that somebody cares about his
nutrition), and eats his breakfast.

It’s delicious, if still mildly terrifying.

As they eat, Naruto takes the time to watch his cousin. Kurama looks bright and cheerful, and for the first time that Naruto's seen he’s wearing the standard Konoha jounin uniform, though his shirt is sleeveless and leaves his tattooed arms bare. In the early morning sun his hair is unnervingly close to the color of blood, but his face is peaceful, even with the pale scars that cut across the tanned skin. Naruto traces them with his eyes, trying to be discreet about it. One runs from the right side of his jaw all the way up to his hairline, and another slants down from the middle of his left cheek, across the skin of his throat, and disappears beneath his hair.

A faint shimmer of violet light catches his eye as Kurama reaches for the tamari, and Naruto blinks, dropping his gaze to one of the tattoos around the man’s wrist. It’s glowing, if only faintly, and he can’t help but stare.

“Ah,” Kurama says, apparently noticing the direction of his gaze. He pulls his hand back and turns his arm over, studying the mark, and then looks up at Naruto with a startlingly bright smile. “Have you ever seen seals before, Naruto-kun?”

Almost automatically, Naruto's hand goes to his stomach, pressing over the seal there, and then he freezes. “W-what?” he squeaks.

Kurama just keeps smiling, as though he didn’t notice the hesitation. “Seals,” he repeats, and lays both palms flat on the table so that Naruto can see the intricate, twisting designs that are inked into his skin. There are no two the same, though some are faintly similar, and Naruto leans forward to study them, eyes narrowed in confusion.

“Like…for keeping stuff in?” Naruto asks, wracking his brain to remember if Iruka-sensei said anything about this stuff. “Uh…kinda like sealing scrolls?”

Kurama nods, and his expression shifts into something fond as he runs his fingers up his arm, tracing the outlines of one of the marks. “Sealing scrolls are the absolute most basic form,” he acknowledges. “Most shinobi can make them, since it’s an incredibly simple design. Sealing mostly deals with containing and either trapping or redirecting a force, and from there people are only limited by their imagination and the size they want their seal to be.”

Wrinkling his nose, Naruto blurts out, “But that’s not cool at all! You can’t do anything just keeping stuff in!” Half a heartbeat too late he realizes that might have sounded insulting and winces, hoping it won’t get him tossed out on his ear.

But rather than taking offense, Kurama just laughs. “You’d think that, at first glance,” he agrees, “and that’s why there aren’t many seal masters left outside of those who escaped the fall of Uzushiogakure.” He leans forward, twisting his arm to show Naruto a set of curling, curving designs that run from the bend of his elbow to his wrist. “As an example…do you know what elemental affinities are?”

“Uh…” Iruka-sensei definitely talked about that—there was even a test on it—but the main thing Naruto remembers about that day is how the majority of the girls screamed when they found his rubber spiders in their desks. He quickly shakes his head.

Thankfully, Kurama still simply looks amused. “Elemental affinities show what kind of jutsus a shinobi will be best at using. Here in Fire Country, most shinobi have a fire affinity, but it’s not uncommon for other kinds to pop up as well. The Uchiha had a handful of lightning affinities, the
Hyuuga often have water affinities, and a few of the lesser shinobi clans like the Kamizuki are earth affinities. A shinobi can learn to be good with an element that isn't their affinity, but it's far more difficult, and they'll always be better at their natural element.”

Naruto opens his mouth to ask the obvious question, but before he can Kurama cuts him off with a faintly raised brow, indicating the marks on his arm again. “I have a wind affinity, but using seals, I can take my chakra, contain it, and run it through enough a series of elemental conversion matrixes—ah.” He breaks off with a chuckle, seeing the utterly blank look on Naruto's face. “The seals contain the chakra that I feed them,” he clarifies, not sounding put out about having to the way a lot of the Academy teachers did, before Naruto just stopped bothering to ask. “They change my chakra’s elemental affinity, and when I release the chakra I can use it as though I have a completely different affinity. That's the kind of thing seals can do. Like I said, it's all up to your imagination. If you can figure out a way to add the correct seals, simply containing chakra can become your greatest weapon.”

Naruto stares at the pretty lines that suddenly seem infinitely more significant, openmouthed and uncaring, because… “Kurama-nii,” he breathes. “You…you can do any jutsu?”

A soft snort, and then a calloused hand ruffles his hair. “Of course that’s what you’d take away from that, brat,” Kurama says, though there's no annoyance in his tone, only warm humor. “Yes, Naruto-kun, with enough advance warning and a moment to prepare the chakra, I can do all five main types of jutsus. Not indefinitely, though, and not too many times in a row, or it will burn the seals out. They're fairly delicate.”

Even so, that’s absolutely awesome. Naruto stares up at his cousin, visions of knocking Sasuke-teme on his ass with a burst of fire and then drenching him with a tsunami dancing through his head. “Teach me!” he cries, bouncing in his chair. “I wanna learn that, too, Kurama-nii!”

Kurama regards him for a moment, one brow still lifted, and then shakes his head with a chuckle. “We’ll see,” he answers, standing up and gathering both sets of empty dishes. “If you want a set of seals like mine, though, you're going to have to learn all of the theory behind them and do well in the Chuunin Exams before I even think about letting you get them put on you in ink.”

He pauses, placing the dishes in the sink, and casts a considering eye over Naruto's all but vibrating form. Then he smiles again, kind and sweet, and it somehow manages to make Naruto feel warm all the way to the tips of his toes. “But I'll talk to your jounin sensei and see if I can start teaching you the basics of sealing, at least. I think you’ve got enough imagination and unpredictability to be good at it.”

No one has ever, ever said that they thought Naruto would be good at something. Naruto goes still in his seat, frozen by those unexpected words and the weird, happy, twisting feeling in his chest, like the kind he gets when Sakura smiles at him and Sasuke isn't a complete teme and Iruka-sensei treats him to ramen all in the same day. He swallows hard, uncertain in the face of this unfamiliar feeling, and starts a little when that warm hand drops to rest in his hair again.

“Hey,” Kurama says gently, meeting his eyes with yet another smile, and no one has ever smiled this much at Naruto, not even Hokage-jiji, who is all too often busy or exasperated or both. “Hey,” the redhead repeats, ruffling his hair. “Come on, let’s get going. You don’t want to be late meeting your team.”

Thought of his new squad-mates jerks Naruto out of his daze, and he pulls a face. “But Kakashi-sensei isn't going to be there for hours!”

Kurama laughs, turning away to pull a tall bento box out of the fridge. “Ah, but Kakashi has been an
elite jounin long enough that he can get away with that kind of thing,” he counters. “Plebeians like you and I have to show up on time until we’re important enough that our value outweighs our quirkiness.”

“Plebeians?” Naruto echoes, confused again, and geez, why can’t adults just talk normally?

“Common folk,” Kurama clarifies, picking up a sheathed sword from where it was resting in the corner. He slings it across his back and heads for the door. “Come on, Naruto-kun, I’ll walk you there. Might as well ask if Kakashi will let me teach you sealing right away, rather than waiting until you’re bogged down with D-ranks.”

The promise of that is enough to get Naruto up and moving, hopping to pull his sandals on as Kurama heads out the door. He rushes after his cousin, almost colliding with the man when Kurama stops in front of the hallway’s largest window.

“Kurama-nii?” Naruto asks curiously.

Kurama looks at him, and there’s a spark of very familiar mischief in his eyes—Naruto’s seen it in the mirror. “You haven’t learned tree-walking or how to use the rooftop yet,” Kurama says, then drops into a crouch in front of Naruto. “Hop on, this way’s faster.”

Remembering yesterday’s jaunt over the roofs and the nearly-weightless leap up to the Hokage’s window, Naruto doesn’t hesitate. With a grin, he leaps onto his cousin’s back, wraps his arms and legs around him like a monkey, and clings as Kurama takes a chakra-assisted bound out the window, across the gap between buildings, and then breaks into a run. Way too much red hair hits Naruto square in the face (and someday he’ll ask why his cousin has more hair than even Ino) but it’s worth it just for the sheer speed Kurama can move at.

If this is what being a jounin is like, Naruto can’t wait until he becomes one.

“Which training ground?” Kurama asks as he bounds across the main street, not even vaguely winded.

Naruto shakes his head. “Kakashi-sensei said to meet on the bridge like we did for our test!”

“I remember that bridge, I think,” Kurama hums, and Naruto belatedly remembers that the man is new to Konoha. Before he can offer directions, though, Kurama changes his heading and hops from a rooftop onto the thick branch of a tree, then drops down to the quiet side-street. He crouches down again. “Come on, it’s not too far from here, and walking will help loosen up your muscles for stretching.”

With a pout, because that’s got to be one of the most awesome ways to travel, Naruto detaches himself and slides off, only to startle a little when Kurama wraps an arm around his shoulders and tugs him into a quick half-hug as he stands. The jounin doesn’t say anything, acts like it’s perfectly natural as he steps away, but Naruto is floored.

Maybe other kids get regular hugs, but apart from a few courtesy of Iruka, and the occasional fond pat from Hokage-jiji—and, of course, Sakura’s love-taps—nobody touches him. It’s not even so much that people avoid it as he just doesn’t have anyone to give him frequent hugs.

But—but now he does.

“Come on, Naruto-kun,” Kurama calls, casting a smile back over his shoulder, and Naruto’s twelve years old and a genin, he should have outgrown this kind of urge by now, but nevertheless he runs to catch up and carefully, cautiously slips his hand into Kurama's free one.
Kurama glances down and chuckles, curls his fingers around Naruto's in turn, and acts like *that's* completely natural as well.

It’s…weird in a way that’s so overwhelmingly *good* Naruto can hardly breathe because of it.

He’s *allowed* to do this.

“I hope you like onigiri and vegetable buns,” Kurama says casually, lifting the bento box he’s carrying. “I thought it might be nice for you to have some food for when Kakashi gives you a break. There’s enough to share, too.” He offers Naruto a secretive, conspiratorial smile. “I’ve always found that there’s no better way to build teamwork than sharing a meal with your starving teammates.”

Naruto beams back, thinking of how Sakura will react to being offered the miracle of his cousin’s really, really good cooking. Then he remembers her excuse the last few times he asked her out for ramen and wilts. “But…Sakura-chan is on a diet. She won't eat any.”

“Mm. I think you're underestimating the effects of the hell-training Kakashi is going to put you through,” Kurama says thoughtfully, and that devious glint in his eyes is definitely not comforting at all. Naruto is more than able to recognize a kindred pranking spirit, and the mere fact that Kurama managed to dodge all of his traps before—many of which *other* jounin have fallen to—is a clue that despite his bright and innocent smile, Kurama is just as much of a trickster as Naruto himself.

It’s probably genetic, and the idea of having *genetics in common with someone else* is a thrill in and of itself.

“Even if she doesn’t eat any, offer some to your other teammate,” Kurama suggests. “Sakura isn't the only one on your squad, after all.”

“But Sasuke is a bastard!” Naruto protests, offended by the very *thought*. “He’s a complete and total —!”

A warm laugh cuts him off. “Maybe,” Kurama allows, “but I think you’re more than capable of holding your own, Naruto, so you don’t need to prove anything.” He tilts his head, considering, and then offers Naruto a tricky grin. “Hm. How would you like to freak him out completely?”

Always up for anything prank-related, *especially* when Sasuke-teme is on the receiving end, Naruto cries, “Definitely, believe it!”

“Try this, then: whenever he insults you, compliment him. Offer to share your food and smile at him. Don’t let him beat you, but show him just what you can do and then don’t boast about it. I think that will blow his mind if you can keep it up for a few days.”

Naruto chews that over for a minute. As much as he'd like to immediately shoot down any idea that calls for acting *nice* towards the bastard, the concept has promise. Sasuke-teme’s become so used to Naruto—rightfully!—proclaiming his awesomeness and how he’s going to beat the bastard that switching it up will throw him off track completely.

“I’ll do it,” he declares firmly. “Just wait and see, Sasuke-teme’s not gonna know what hit him!”

“I bet he won't,” Kurama demurs, an echo of that fox-grin still hovering around the corners of his mouth.

Naruto debates asking who it’s directed at, but quickly decides that he’d really rather not know.
Sakura perches on the railing of the bridge, the first to arrive. She’s nervous, can’t stop twisting her fingers in the hem of her dress even as the thrill of passing Kakashi-sensei’s test and actually becoming a genin makes her feel bubbly and about twenty pounds too light. She’s always been smart, has stayed the top kunoichi in her year since almost the very beginning, even coming from a civilian family and being year-mates with the heirs to the biggest clans, but it’s only just now really sinking in. She’s a genin, an actual shinobi instead of an Academy hopeful, and the next few years are going to change everything.

As far as teams go, maybe she didn’t land on the best one—judging by past generations that’s probably the Ino-Shika-Cho team for sheer solid dependability and all-around effectiveness—but it could be a lot worse. Sasuke’s a genius, and Naruto at least has those insane amounts of shadow clones going for him. And Hatake Kakashi is supposed to be one of the best jounin in the village, even if he’s never passed a team before.

Then, of course, is the fact that Hatake Kakashi has never passed a team before, but they passed. They managed it, as weird and mismatched a trio as they are. That’s got to count for something, certainly.

The sound of voices draws her out of her thoughts, and she looks up, hoping—but not expecting—that it will be Sasuke. Half a moment later she realizes the problem with that, because Sasuke doesn’t exactly talk to people, and deflates just as the speakers round the bend of the road. Then she takes a second look at them and blinks in surprise.

The very first thing to catch her attention is red. Deep, brilliant red hair, like the garnets her mother likes to wear on special occasions, darker than rubies but no less vivid. At first she thinks the approaching adult is a woman, but that frame is too broad to be feminine, built on different lines. It’s a man with long hair, wearing a shinobi uniform, a jounin vest, and a Konoha hitai-ate in the same style as hers.

And next to him, clinging to his hand and chattering away, is a familiar blonde.

The jounin doesn’t seem to mind, though, because he’s smiling gently, and as they approach she can see that his blue eyes are warm. He’s not even ignoring Naruto—he’s responding and paying attention. Not even Iruka-sensei, who treats Naruto like a little brother, catches every single word the boy says.

“Sakura-chan!” Naruto cries, finally noticing her, and he detaches himself from the man to bound over to her. “Sakura-chan, come meet Kurama-nii! He’s a jounin and he used to be a bounty hunter and he’s really strong!”

Of course strength would be the first thing Naruto focused on. Still, Sakura knows enough to identify the marks on the jounin’s arms as seals, and he’s carrying a katana slung across his back with an ease that says it’s a familiar weight. A little nervously, she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and smiles up at the stranger. “Hello, I’m Haruno Sakura. I hope Naruto wasn’t bothering you.”

The man’s eyes crinkle as he turns that warm smile on her. “Not at all, Sakura-chan. I’m Uzumaki Kurama. It’s nice to finally meet you; Naruto told me quite a bit about you.”

The man’s eyes crinkle as he turns that warm smile on her. “Not at all, Sakura-chan. I’m Uzumaki Kurama. It’s nice to finally meet you; Naruto told me quite a bit about you.”

Sakura blinks, trying to remember if she’s ever heard of or met anyone else with the name Uzumaki, but she hasn’t. In fact, up until now, she was dead certain that Naruto was an orphan. But between the way Naruto is clinging to the man, the honorific Naruto used, and the name—

“Kurama-nii is my cousin,” Naruto adds, his grin wide enough to split his face. “But he didn’t know about me and I didn’t know about him, so he never came to get me before. But we’re living together
now! He’s got an apartment in the shinobi area with a balcony and there are seals everywhere and Kurama-nii says he’s going to teach me how to make them too!”

“Breathe, Naruto-kun,” Kurama says with a tolerant, amused smile. He ruffles Naruto’s hair and then drops down to sit cross-legged on the ground, setting the bento he’s carrying off to one side and resting his hands on his knees. A quick check of the sun’s position has his stretching languidly and leaning back against the rail, then peering up at Sakura with humor in his eyes. “I assume your sensei won’t be here for a while. Do you mind if I wait with you two?”

Even as Naruto voices his enthusiastic support of the idea, Sakura shakes her head, trying not to stare at the jounin. He’s handsome, though definitely not as handsome as Sasuke, and he’s scarred. She remembers Naruto blurtling something about bounty hunting, and has to fight a shiver. The thought of missing-nin scares her, and she hopes that if—when—she has to face her first rogue ninja, it’s a long while into her future.

“I’ve heard Naruto-kun’s story already,” Kurama says, making her look at him squarely. His eyes are very blue, darker than Naruto’s but just as sincere and friendly. He favors her with a slightly crooked smile and asks, “Why did you choose to be a ninja, Sakura-chan?”

“Because Sasuke-kun—” she starts automatically, and then stops, blinking.

That’s…not right.

That’s not right at all.

Maybe Sasuke is a factor now, but she didn’t actually meet him until after she started the Academy. She just…hasn’t thought back to the real reason in a very long time. So long, but she can still remember it. She remembers it with perfect clarity the second she pauses to think about it, and that’s a little surprising. For so long her head’s been filled with nothing but Sasuke, and while as his future wife and soul mate there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that, she’s somehow deeply glad that she still hasn’t forgotten her original reason.

“Because…there was a kunoichi who lived next to us when I was little,” she says slowly, and it takes no effort at all to remember the woman, tall and strong and always standing very straight. “She used to babysit me, sometimes, when both of my parents were busy and she didn’t have missions. But she…she died protecting a family traveling across the border. The man who told me said that she stepped in front of a sword meant for a girl my age, and that it was only because of Kasumi-san fighting until she bled out that the whole family managed to get away safely.”

Sakura hasn’t thought about Kasumi-san in years, because really, it’s a little terrifying to imagine such a situation. But at the same time, the thought of the brave, strong woman Sakura knew giving absolutely everything she had to save the lives of those depending on her—it makes Sakura’s heart feel hot and heavy at the same time, makes her breath catch in her chest and something fierce burn in her throat, because she wants to be the kind of person who can do that. She wants to be that brave and strong and selfless, and up until this moment she’d forgotten that.

Sasuke is still amazing and cool and so, so handsome and brilliant, but…

But he’s not why Sakura wants to be a ninja, a kunoichi. Kasumi-san is. The ability to be so completely devoted and fearless is.

When she raises her head, feeling oddly shaky and unbalanced, Kurama is still watching her, blue eyes somewhere between proud and warm and sad, all at once. “That’s a good reason,” he says.
Sakura smiles at him, helpless to do anything else, and nods firmly. “I think so too,” she answers, and somehow, it’s no surprise at all that her voice is entirely steady.
Last night my wife and I went out to dinner, pretending that we have lives outside of work, and I ended up scribbling the majority of this chapter on a couple of napkins. Thankfully, Bet was simply amused. She’s awesome like that. *heart*

Kurama never sleeps much anymore, can’t break the long-ingrained habit of constant vigilance and frequent movement. Three hours is all he needs, after Kyuubi-Kurama's sacrifice, and in a tight spot he can make do with even less. It’s perfect for a war, especially one fought with guerilla tactics behind enemy lines, and was one of the few advantages Kurama could claim over Madara.

But here, in peacetime, in a village that understands nothing of the dangers yet to come, the nights seem to stretch on into eternity. Too many hours spent still and restless, aching at the confinement regardless of his gratitude for it during the day, and for the first time Kurama wishes he could sleep the way Naruto is doing across the hall. Talking with Obito only takes so long, after all, and the Uchiha tends to get cranky if Kurama continually interrupts his thinking time.

So Kurama leaves Obito to his scheming, lies awake in his bed with oppressive silence all around him, and lets his thoughts drift. As they always, inevitably do, they turn towards his past, this world’s future, and Kurama closes his eyes on the sight of his bedroom’s ceiling. Not quite a dream, not exactly a memory, but there are images behind his eyes, that night when everything changed so very much, when hope and despair came hand in hand.

He smells fire, feels cold stone beneath his bare back, the bite of heavy manacles around wrists and ankles. There are seals carved into the metal, familiar and hated, and not a single speck of chakra can escape beyond his skin. He fights, tearing flesh, but can’t bring himself to care, because Madara is in the next room and the Kyuubi is terrifyingly quiet in his head, and Naruto has never been one to lose hope until the very last possible moment, if even then, but his friends are either dead or fighting on distant fronts, and there's no way anyone can save him. Not in time. Not even close.

Kurama stirs inside of him, crimson fur like fresh blood as he raises his head to regard the blond boy panting for breath before his cage. Ruby eyes are slitted, dangerous, but Naruto stopped fearing Kurama years ago.

“Brat,” the demon fox says softly. “Madara’s going to rip the chakra out of us, and this time he’ll take it from both of us and even you won’t be able to survive.”

Naruto bares his teeth, even as he blinks blood out of his eyes and tries to keep from swaying. “No! I won’t let him—!”

“You can't stop him.” Kurama rises to his feet, vast and beautiful in a treacherous, dangerous way. “This is one battle you're not going to be able to win, no matter how strong your willpower or your faith.”

“Well, I'm not about to give up,” Naruto snarls in return. “Madara’s been trying to get your chakra since the very first, and if we surrender and give it to him then he’ll use it to—”
“Not you, brat, and not we. Me. I’m going to have to be the one to stop him this time.” Kurama looks down at him for a long moment, and then huffs out a fire-hot sigh. “You’re a troublesome little mortal, you know that? Hating all of my containers was so much easier.”

A shiver of foreboding slips down Naruto's spine like a drop of ice water, and he pulls himself up straight, eyes narrowing sharply. “Kurama, whatever you're thinking of doing, don’t. This isn’t the time for stupid sacrifices.”

“If not now, when?” Kurama asks frankly. “Of those who took a stand, how many are left? What remains of Konoha beyond a handful of desperate shinobi and a few crumbling ruins? Who is there to come to our rescue and actually succeed? Only your Uchiha would have even a slim chance of pulling it off, and he’s clear across Fire Country and a good portion of Wind Country as well. Face it, we’re on our own, and you’ve got no chance of doing anything.”

“But—!”

Nine tails lash angrily, and Kurama crouches down, one huge eye fixed warningly on his jinchuuriki. “No,” he growls. “There’s only one chance for you. My time’s up either way, and I’d rather it be in the name of saving you than becoming Madara’s pawn once again.”

Naruto growls, mimicking his tenant with startling accuracy. “No!” he cries again. “No, you bastard, I've already lost too many friends to this asshole. I won't lose another!”

There’s a long moment of silence, and when Kurama speaks again, his voice has softened, gentled with something perilously close to sympathy. “You’re the first to ever treat me like a friend, Naruto, and that’s the reason I’m willing to do this. Please, just once more, let me help you. Let me give you a gift, in return for everything you’ve given me these past few years.”

“You stupid fox! That’s not how friendship works!”

The Kyuubi’s growl is a thousand times more impressive than anything that could ever come from a human’s throat. “You think I don’t know that, brat? Just—for once in your life, stop arguing. Accept this. I don’t offer it lightly, but it’s a burden that you of all people will be more than able to bear. And hurry up. We haven’t got much time before Madara’s done preparing for his damned ritual.”

With a wordless cry of grief and rage, Naruto rakes his fingers through his blond hair, fisting his hands in the shoulder-length strands and wrenching at them with impotent fury. Glowing red eyes keep watching him, fixed and unwavering but not unsympathetic.

“If not for me,” Kurama says softly, with all the ruthless precision of the very best assassin, “then accept it for him. Your Uchiha. Isn’t it cruel to leave him like this?”

Naruto closes his eyes, helpless and loathing the weakness in his heart, the one that’s driving him to say yes just for Sasuke's sake, and damn the consequences. But beyond that, he knows Kurama is right. Knows this is the only way, when there’s no hope of freeing himself and no chance of rescue when no one even knows he’s gone. Madara has him, has Kurama, and that’s the final step towards his victory.

If Madara wins this, wins the Kyuubi, everything will have been for nothing. All of the death, all of the destruction, it will become meaningless.

Naruto can’t let that happen, no matter the cost.

“Fine,” he whispers, and hates himself for it. “Fine. Do it.”
Atom by atom, bit by tiny bit, the world starts to fade away into white brilliance. Kurama keeps his eyes on Naruto, even as his own form starts to vanish like shattered stars, like fireflies in the moonlight. “You’ll do fine, brat,” Kurama say gruffly, and he’s more than half gone now, but regardless of what he’s enduring he doesn’t so much as twitch. “Even if you died this moment and could let my body disperse…I still think I like this option.”

“You're giving me everything,” Naruto breathes, and he wants to look away from it, this beautiful, gradual death, but he won't let himself. He keeps looking, and because of that, he can see the last, faint fox-grin Kurama wears as the fade reaches his head.

“Isn't that what friends do?” Kurama asks, warm and fond and laughing, and then even the echo is gone. There's nothing left but light and white, a brilliant expanse of absolutely nothing.

Naruto drags his hands through his hair, trying not to shake, and red clings to his fingers like stray threads of crimson silk, the same garnet as Kurama's fur. He closes his eyes, gritting his teeth even as a rush of searing warmth burns through him, and then opens them. The roof of the cavern Madara’s been using looms above him, and Kurama calls up his roiling, raging chakra, no longer fully human, and braces himself.

The manacles shatter and he runs, red hair whipping behind him, his steps too fast for any human, even the son of the Yellow Flash.

He runs and runs and runs, fast and faster and faster still, but he can't outrun the change or the hollow, aching emptiness inside of him.

Kurama is gone, and only Naruto is left.

Sakura is amazing, Kurama thinks wryly, watching the girl who will grow up to be the strongest medic-nin in the Elemental Countries, his surrogate sister and unflinching, unyielding rock in hard times. She’s still just a little girl, but Kurama can already see a shadow of the woman she’ll become in her sharp eyes, the firm set of her mouth.

She had told him once, back in his time, about the neighbor who made her want to be a shinobi. At the time she had laughed, brushing it off as something long forgotten, but even then, so many years distant from the incident, it had clearly affected her. Kurama had decided, spur of the moment and entirely on a whim, to see if he could remind her.

It’s working. It has worked, because the two genin have been bombarding him with ninjutsu questions for the past thirty minutes and Sakura has only mentioned Sasuke twice. And really, she’s incredible, so very clever that it’s almost terrifying, and ridiculously in control of herself. Already she’s shifting her mindset, consciously choosing to focus on shinobi matters instead of daydreaming about her crush, and there’s a fire in her eyes that was entirely absent when they arrived.

Kurama knows that small changes can make the greatest difference in the end, has used such tactics to his own advantage here in a time not his own, but this is perhaps the greatest example of all. Nine words, one of the most basic questions, and she’s already rearranging her priorities. Oh, it won’t be quite so simple—doubtless Sasuke’s reappearance will bring about a relapse—but…Kurama suspects that it won’t be all that difficult, either. And she’s changing herself, which is perhaps the most important part of all. It’s not the influence of an outside force, simply a recalled memory.

Sasuke will doubtless be a fair bit harder, though Kurama has hope for him as well.
Almost as he thinks it, achingly familiar chakra appears within the range of his senses, and he falters, stumbling over a word. Naruto doesn’t seem to notice, though Sakura gives him a faintly odd glance, and Kurama can’t quite bring himself to pay attention to either of them as he lifts his head.

The small, ridiculous childlike figure is approaching at a steady pace, hands in his pockets and a calculated indifference in his eyes. He doesn’t look at either of his teammates, even as Sakura calls out a cheery and near-worshipful greeting, but immediately fixes his attention on Kurama, the most powerful of the three. Dark eyes narrow sharply, suspicious and already trying to calculate what the reason for the jounin’s presence is.

It is…startlingly easy for Kurama to look at him, to breathe with Sasuke within his sight. This isn’t the Sasuke he left behind, beautiful in the way of the full moon in a cloudless sky, as graceful and deadly as the lightning he wielded so casually. This Sasuke is a waxing moon in the midst of a storm, lightning on a mountaintop seen from the far end of a valley. They're the same person, but only in the way that a rough sketch is the same as a finished masterpiece.

This Sasuke has a very many roads to travel before he can become anything like the man Kurama left behind.

Sasuke comes to a halt before Kurama, looking down on him with dark eyes and a derisive slant to his mouth. “Kakashi pawned us off on you already?” he huffs as he crosses his arms over his chest.

“Hey!” Naruto protests as he bolts to his feet, and then freezes. A beat and then he spins to face Kurama, eyes bright with enthusiasm and mouth open in preparation for a shout.

“No, Naruto-kun,” Kurama says swiftly, cutting him off before he can even start. “Kakashi-san is your jounin sensei.”

The blond wilts a little, looking disappointed. “But Kurama-nii!”

Rolling his eyes, Kurama reaches out to ruffle the spiky hair. “Oh, enough, I've already said I’ll teach you sealing, and we’ll see what we can't drill into your skull regarding Uzumaki clan kenjutsu. Be content with that, brat.”

Sasuke makes a faint sound, not quite surprise but something that wishes it could be. “Clan?” he repeats sharply.

Kurama gives him a smile, even as he pushes to his feet and dusts off his black pants. “Yes,” he affirms. “The Uzumaki were one of the founding families of Uzushiogakure, and a main part of its politics and military right up until its destruction in the Second Shinobi War.” He inclines his head, dropping a carelessly affectionate hand on Naruto's head. “I'm Uzumaki Kurama. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Uchiha Sasuke,” the brunet grunts, already turning away.

But Kurama knows this boy, knew him as a brat and a hero and everything in between. He knows how to get his attention. “Uchiha? Ah, I've met your brother before.”

Sasuke goes entirely stiff, every muscle strung taut. He turns, fury in his eyes and rage twisting his features, and Kurama reaches out and easily catches the kunai that comes flying at his throat. A second later he catches Sasuke, too, grabbing the boy’s arm and whirling him around to half-pin him against the railing of the bridge.

“That,” he says dryly, “was not polite.”
The Uchiha snarls, struggling against the grip like an eel. “You saw that murderous bastard?!”

Kurama flicks his eyes up to see that Naruto and Sakura are both watching them, but they’re several steps away. He leans down, close to Sasuke’s ear, and murmurs, “Aren’t you a ninja, Uchiha? Hasn’t anyone ever told you to look underneath the underneath? Or do you really think that the same brother who gave you piggyback rides when you were too tired to walk suddenly snapped and killed everyone for no reason?”

Sasuke goes very, very still against him, not even breathing, and Kurama waits one more moment to be sure it’s safe before he releases the boy and steps back. Still frozen, Sasuke stays where he is, but grits out, “That’s not something to joke about.”

“No,” Kurama agrees soberly, “it’s not. But it’s certainly something to think about.”

The boy says nothing, but all things considered, maybe that’s the best course for now. Anything else Kurama has to say can wait for somewhere less public.

Kakashi arrives, as per his cunning plan, two hours and seventeen minutes late for the team meeting, and lurks in one of the surrounding trees to get a feel for the lay of the land. Also to check that none of his cute little genin are clutching deadly weapons, but that’s beside the point.

What he sees is…surprising.

Naruto is bouncing, as should probably be expected, but it’s not with irritation. He’s laughing, bright and cheerful and very much like Minato, and he’s halfway draped over Konoha’s newest jounin. Uzumaki Kurama smiles at his little cousin from his seat on the ground, clearly amused, and then tilts his head back to look up at Sakura, who’s perched on the railing of the bridge with feet resting on Kurama’s shoulder. She’s talking enthusiastically, green eyes bright and hands darting as she tries to make a point.

She doesn’t once turn and look at the dark boy brooding on the other side of the bridge, which is absolutely staggering. Kakashi had thought her a fangirl worse than Rin ever managed to be, one half-step back from hopeless, and this…this is almost enough to give him hope.

Sasuke, too, is ever so slightly different than he has been the last few days. He’s still a stick-straight figure, dark and surly, but the lines around his eyes and the creases in his forehead speak of shock and thoughtfulness, respectively. Even when Naruto bounces too close, the Uchiha says nothing, trapped in thoughts that don’t seem to be dark, merely deep.

And in the midst of it all, Kurama is laughing and smiling and talking to both Sakura and Naruto, not quite a lecture and certainly not preaching, but discussing. It’s a hard thing for many jounin instructors to do, remembering that their genin aren’t just little mindless students but actual people—shinobi people, at that—but the redhead seems to have found the necessary balance.

“Argh!” Sakura cries suddenly, almost making Kakashi fall out of the tree in surprise. “Kurama-san, how can you pick just one thing to specialize in? They’re all so interesting.”

That’s definitely not the boy-crazy fangirl of yesterday talking, and Kakashi vaguely wonders who’s impersonating his kunoichi-in-training, and why they didn’t bother doing their homework on her beforehand.

Kurama simply chuckles. “You don’t just have to settle on one thing,” he reminds her, even as Naruto chimes in with, “Yeah! I’m gonna master everything just like Hokage-jiji did!”
Scuffing a hand through his cousin’s hair, Kurama rolls his eyes fondly and adds, “One of the best examples to read up on might be Tsunade-hime of the Sannin, Sakura-chan. She’s the most accomplished medic-nin in the world, but she’s also a devastating front-line fighter because she’s ridiculously strong—she can knock down trees with a flick of her finger. I think she’d make a good role-model for you.”

Kakashi might be mistaken, but he’s fairly certain there are stars in Sakura’s eyes. “A front-line medic? That’s amazing! Medic-nin are usually the weakest in a squad because they have so little chakra and everyone ends up protecting them, but Tsunade-hime must be so powerful!”

“That she is,” Kurama agrees cheerfully, and grunts as Naruto throws himself over his shoulders. He laughs again, grabbing the blond before he can wiggle free. “And you, Naruto-kun, are going to be a chakra tank, I have no doubt. We Uzumaki have ridiculous stamina, too, so if you can master a bunch of ninjutsu you’ll be able to keep using them long after someone else would have dropped into a coma from chakra depletion.”

“Yes!” Naruto cheers. “I’m gonna learn all of your seals and then master every single jutsu ever, Kurama-nii!”

“Off, brat, you’re heavy,” Kurama chides with mock gruffness, flailing a little comically with his elbow in what is a clearly halfhearted attempt to push him off. (It fails completely.) Then he raises his head to regard the brunet across the bridge, and smiles. “And I’m sure Sasuke-kun is a taijutsu genius already, graduating top of your class. If you add kenjutsu to that, you’ll be devastating, I’m sure.”

Almost despite himself, Sasuke looks up, a faint spark of interest in his gaze. “Kenjutsu?” he asks, eyes narrowing.

With a wiggle that should be entirely unbecoming of a jounin but just manages to look bendy, Kurama detaches himself from Naruto and reaches over his shoulder, grasping the blue-wrapped hilt of his katana and drawing it smoothly. He holds it for a moment, looking down at the shimmering silver of the blade with something like regretful fondness in his eyes, and then flips it around and offers it hilt-first to the genin. “Here. See how it feels in your hand.”

Sasuke hesitates, but clearly the idea of kenjutsu is appealing, because after only a second he nods and takes a step forward, grasping the hilt and drawing it back carefully. The blade is too heavy for him as he is right now, dipping his arm and making his shoulders tense, but his eyes are wide with something that Kakashi is almost willing to call wonder as he raises the blade in front of him.

“It’s a chakra-conducting blade,” Kurama says, watching Sasuke with something unreadable in his eyes. “For lightning and wind, specifically, though I’ve also used it for water and fire in a pinch. There are seals in the metal itself to neutralize enemy attacks, or at least decrease their potency. I added them myself during the forging.”

Forget almost. That’s definitely wonder in the last Uchiha’s eyes as he shifts into an experimental taijutsu stance, attempting a simple slash. It’s awkward, but Kurama doesn’t laugh, simply rises to his feet and approaches him, carefully touching his shoulder and then, when he’s not rejected, repositioning Sasuke’s stance. A moment later, he steps away with a nod. “There. Try it again.”

Astonishingly, Sasuke does as he’s told, and it’s much, much better this time. Kakashi can see the boy’s eyes light up, and that too is astonishing, when Kakashi had thought this boy was an avenger and nothing else.

“Hm.” Kurama sounds thoughtful. “I know that the Uchiha had their own kenjutsu styles, Sasuke-kun, but with your age and current reach, I think the Uzumaki style would benefit you too. Since I’m
going to be teaching Naruto-kun, would you like to learn as well?"

Sasuke goes stiff, visibly torn between the pride that wants nothing to do with anything related to his dead-last teammate and the desire to learn something new and deadly. He says nothing, but the indecision is clear on his face.

Kurama simply chuckles, reaching out and resting a hand on top of his head. From anyone else it would be a condescending, patronizing gesture, but the redhead somehow manages to turn it into something fond and gentle and kind. “Take your time deciding,” he says simply. “I'm not planning on going anywhere, and if you want to find another instructor, or ask Kakashi-san, that’s fine too. I just think you’d be good at it, and a shinobi should always take advantage of a skill that can protect their precious people.”

Kakashi wonders, hearing the deeply buried regret and grief in the man’s voice, just how many of those people Kurama has lost. Too many, probably—likely all of them, given his previous lifestyle. But still, Kurama is smiling cheerfully, and Naruto is demanding jutsus, and Sakura is trying to get Kurama to tell her more about Tsunade, and Sasuke is trying another careful swing.

Somehow, in some way, Uzumaki Kurama has recovered from the same blow that all but destroyed Kakashi, and seeing that, something small and warm settles in Kakashi’s chest and takes root.

If Kurama can still smile like that after losing absolutely everything, there's hope for Kakashi as well.

Allowing himself a faint, true smile, Kakashi drops down from his perch, tucks his hands into his pockets, and saunters over to join his team.

(He doesn’t bother noticing that he includes Kurama in that number as well; at least for the moment, it’s entirely unimportant.)
Conflict

Chapter Notes

This opinion might be a bit controversial, but I think Itachi is a good person who made really stupid, destructive choices. He was thirteen at the time, so it's perhaps more understandable than the stupid choices other characters made, but still. I don't consider him this tragic, ever-noble hero; he was backed into a corner, made bad choices, and got fucked over. He also completely destroyed his little brother's psyche, and I definitely think he's to blame for a lot of the shit Sasuke pulls later. Just—one should be aware of my view before one starts reading, as I know most of fandom adores the dude.

It's a bit of a surprise to wander into the Jounin Standby Station and see the now-familiar wealth of crimson hair. Genma pauses three steps into the room and blinks, but Kurama remains on the comfortable couch, papers scattered around him like the victims of a localized hurricane. Huffing out a soft laugh—because if asked Genma would have said that Kurama was the politely amiable but distant type, never one to socialize, and clearly would have been wrong—the tokujo changes direction and settles onto the couch across from the redhead.

"Having fun?" he asks dryly, watching Kurama mutter and chew on the end of his pen.

Kurama flinches, so slightly that most people would miss it, and then raises his head. He blinks at Genma for a moment, blue eyes almost dazed, before focus rushes back into them like a wave and they narrow sharply.

"Genma-san!" he says sharply, bolting to his feet. "Come with me!"

"Wha—?" Genma starts, but before he can even get to the second syllable Kurama has grabbed his wrist, dragged him to his feet, and triggered a shunshin. The world blurs with smoke and color, and half a second later they're touching down in a deserted training ground, Genma's head spinning slightly from the speed of the transportation.

It's only his long-honed instincts that let him dodge the lightning-swift hand-strike that would have caved in his nose if it connected, and with a huff Genma leaps back, putting distance between himself and the redhead. "Kurama-kun, what the hell?"

Settled into an unfamiliar taijutsu stance, Kurama blinks at him innocently. "I need your help with my training," he says, as though it should be obvious why he's grabbing random tokujo and then trying to rearrange their faces. "We both have a shift at the Mission Assignment Desk this afternoon, so you don't have missions and can spar with me, right?" He smiles, bright and deceptively sweet. "You're one of the fastest and most agile shinobi in Konoha. Please?"

That's blatant flattery—apparently Kurama is very enthusiastic about this training. Genma hesitates, eyeing the jounin suspiciously, and then sighs and shoves his hair back from his face. "Right," he says resignedly. "What are we doing exactly?"

The grin he gets in return is blinding. "Don't worry, you don't need to do anything specific. It'll all be on my end. Taijutsu, ninjutsu, kenjutsu, senbon—use whatever you like. Just try not to let me hit you anywhere."
Kurama takes a half-step back before shifting stances, his expression turning distant and a little vague, as though he’s focusing on something complicated. Genma considers him for half a second, then mentally shrugs and takes his own stance. He’s always up for a good, vigorous spar—one of the hazards of spending his formative years in close proximity to Gai—and he’s seen Kurama in action. The man’s good, so this will at least be interesting. There are far worse ways to pass a morning.

He doesn’t wait for a signal—they're clearly both ready—but launches himself across the gap between them. Putting his speed to use, he whirs and drops, sweeping out a long leg to knock Kurama off his feet. Without so much as a heartbeat of hesitation, Kurama leaps into the air, twisting nimbly to land on his feet behind the tokujo and striking out with a sword-hand. Genma easily knocks it to the side, dipping away from the follow-up and then trying a high kick. Kurama sways out of the way, letting Genma’s sandal just miss his chin, and then darts away from a sternum blow.

“You really are fast,” he says, apparently pleased as he drops into another stance Genma has never seen before. “That’s perfect.”

“Same to you,” Genma offers with a grin, because it’s rare that anyone but Kakashi can match him in a spar, speed-wise. This is looking to be even better than he’d thought.

Kurama leaps forward, and launches into a blindingly quick series of punches and kicks. Genma matches him, blocking them easily enough. The redhead’s attention still seems divided, like he’s concentrating on more than just their match, and Genma lands two hard hits on his ribs and one on his thigh before Kurama breaks away.

Pushing his advantage, Genma follows, using one of the combinations that always manages to knock Raidou on his ass. But Kurama is faster than Raidou, more used to relying on leaps and twists in his normal style, and he whirs away, vaulting right over Genma’s head. Genma turns just in time to catch his arm and stop a blow to the throat, but a quick kick makes him disengage and leap back.

Kurama shadows him, right up in his face and too fast to stop, and it’s been so long since Genma could go all out against another Konoha nin—ANBU, maybe, was the last time. He’s grinning, heart bounding as they whirl apart and crash together, a blur of strikes and blocks and counterattacks, nimble footwork and agile leaps. Kurama's smiling, too, hair a brilliant dancing banner in the sun, eyes bright with enthusiasm as he ducks and weaves and strikes like a snake.

Genma matches him, because he can and it’s wonderful, slips like a stray bit of breeze around hits that have the potential to break bones and then slides into a vicious series of blows as smoothly as water. Their pace is too fast to even think about using ninjutsu, let alone going for a sword or his senbon, but that’s just fine with Genma.

And then violet light flickers and flares around Kurama's left hand, a startling break in their rhythm, and before Genma can recover and block that chakra-covered palm slaps against the bare skin of his forearm.

Instantly, the world blurs and then explodes into brilliant, blinding focus. The surge of sudden awareness forces Genma right to his knees as his brain tries to process the fact that his hearing, sight, sense of touch, and chakra awareness have all abruptly tripled. The rush of blood through his own veins is deafening, and the cool, gentle breeze feels like a hurricane whipping across his skin. There’s so much chakra, so many sounds, and closing his eyes isn't blocking out nearly enough to be of use.

“Argh,” he manages, and even that is deafening.

“Easy,” someone murmurs, just above a whisper but nevertheless sounding like a damned bellow. “Just breathe through it. Sorry, I forgot what it feels like if you’re not used to it.”
Genma's mind is already adjusting, used to combat and the need to recover from anything as quickly as possible, and he follows Kurama's suggestion, focusing on his breathing until he can manage to open his eyes without crying out from sheer sensory overload. He’s still in the middle of the training ground, on his knees with his arms up as though to defend from a blow, and Kurama is crouched next to him, blue eyes full of worry. On Genma’s arm, glittering violet against his skin, is a complicated seal made entirely of purple light.

“That,” he huffs after another endless moment, “was cheating, Kurama-kun.”

Kurama has the decency to look abashed. “I’m sorry,” he repeats. “I was going for a seal with a low impact, but I forgot how that one feels if you haven’t experienced it before.” He reaches out and lays a hand over the seal, then closes his eyes. A moment later, Genma feels it shatter like glass, chakra fading away as his senses drop back to glorious normal. Kurama rocks back to sit on his heels, expression repentant. “Sorry,” he says a third time.

With a sigh, Genma settles himself in the grass, crossing his legs as the last bits of discomfort dwindle to nothingness. “Don’t worry about it,” he counters lightly. “I take it that was the point of the spar?”

Kurama nods. “Yes. I'm teaching myself how to transfer seals during combat, like the Yondaime could do with his Flying Thunder God seal. But when I'm focused on fighting, it takes a while to build up the correct amount of chakra and be able to visualize the transfer. Hopefully, with enough practice, I’ll be able to cut down on the time significantly.”

“Use a different seal and I’m happy to help,” Genma offers with wry amusement. “What was that, anyway?”

The redhead gives him a sheepish smile. “Ah. That was a sensory enhancement seal I designed myself, for fighting in the complete dark. It amplifies everything threefold, so it’s useful when you're otherwise outmatched, but using it takes some getting used to.”

“I’ll say. If my brain leaks out my ears, you're going to be the one to cover my shifts at the Missions Desk. And explain what happened to Raidou.”

Kurama laughs, which is what Genma had been aiming for. “All right,” he agrees easily, rising to his feet and offering Genma a hand. He smiles and adds, “It’s been a while since I sparred like that. It was wonderful, thank you.”

Genma lets the younger man pull him to his feet, then takes a step back and stretches. His muscles feel pleasantly sore and well-worked, but it doesn’t seem like he overtaxed himself. “My pleasure,” he answers, and then gives the redhead a crooked grin. “You should come spar with me and Gai some time. We’re at Training Ground Thirteen every morning, as long as neither of us has a mission. Gai’d get a kick out of your style, since it’s different from anything around here.”

“It’s one of Uzushio’s,” Kurama explains with a faintly sad smile and a slight shrug. “There are still some scrolls on it floating around; I’ll see if I can't dig one up for him.”

“He’d like that, taijutsu nutball that he is,” Genma says fondly, because while being thrust onto a team with both Gai and Ebisu was in some ways a mostly-well-adjusted kid’s worst nightmare, it turned out pretty well. He and Gai made chuunin together, even landed on the same squad most of the time, and Genma’s become entirely immune to the man’s weirdness after so many years. At this point, Konoha just wouldn’t be Konoha without its Beautiful Green Beast.

Kurama smiles at him, reading the expression and the sentiment behind it with ease. “Thank you,
Genma-san,” he murmurs, and the lines of his face are soft, strangely beautiful even with the wide, stark scars. But then, Genma's always thought Raidou one of the most handsome shinobi in Konoha, so it’s possible his taste is a bit skewed. “I appreciate you humoring me.”

“Nah,” Genma says easily, slinging an arm around the man’s shoulders and turning them back towards the village. His stomach is telling him that it’s well past time for lunch, and Genma's never been one to deny himself. “I'm always up for a spar, and I'm more than happy to help with your training. Just let me know for the next time, yeah?”

“Sure,” Kurama agrees, letting himself be steered. “Our shift at the Desk starts in an hour and a half, right? Let’s get lunch, my treat.”

“Ramen all right with you?”

“Of course.”

Genma laughs, and Kurama laughs with him, and even if civilians give them weird looks, dusty and sweaty and giggling in the middle of the street, that’s fine. He stopped caring about that kind of thing years ago, and from the expression of easy joy on Kurama's face, he doesn’t give a damn either.

Deadly shinobi still coming off a physical exertion high are allowed to giggle if they want to. And if that’s not a rule, it should be, because right now the entire world looks ridiculously bright.

Sasuke watches Naruto's red-haired cousin dance through his katas, katana flashing like a straight, silver bolt of lightning as he twists and weaves. His feet are unwaveringly steady, his body entirely controlled, and his eyes are closed. Sasuke isn't arrogant enough to think that he hasn’t been noticed, but he’s being ignored.

That’s…not usual, and Sasuke is torn between being grateful that this man isn't a pandering, sympathetic fool like the rest of the village and a surge of impatient irritation. Three days he’s been turning the man’s words over and over in his mind, trying to pick out the meaning, trying to see underneath the underneath even when for the past five years he’s tried never to think too hard about his brother’s actions that night.

But now, now he can’t help but think of them, can't do anything else at all, and it’s because of this red-haired man with his cunning words.

Or do you really think that the same brother who gave you piggyback rides when you were too tired to walk suddenly snapped and killed everyone for no reason?

There is no possible way that what happened that night could be anything else. What other reason would there be for Itachi’s words? What other reason for hurling Sasuke headlong into that tortuous vision? For telling him he was too weak? But—

But at the same time, Sasuke cannot help but wonder, cannot help but obsess over the thought that there might have been something else behind it. Itachi loved the village, loved it even more than his family, so why do something that would have him declared a missing-nin? Why leave?

Sasuke isn't sure that Naruto's cousin will have the answers, doubts it strongly, but he has to at least ask, because what if he does?

The katana hisses, steel over silk as it slides away, and Sasuke glances up to see the man walking towards him, silent and graceful. He’s shed his shirt and jounin vest, and Sasuke can see that the
tattooed seals on his arms continue over his shoulders and down the line of his spine, dark and stark against skin tanned to a deep gold. His expression, when he looks at Sasuke, is open and warm but not expectant, kind without being cloying.

“You're either here for a kenjutsu lesson or some answers,” the redhead says almost casually, leaning his katana up against a tree and picking up a bottle of water. He swallows a few mouthfuls, then dumps the remainder over his head with a sigh of relief. His hair, pulled up into a high tail, whips back and forth as he shakes water from his eyes and adds, “Somehow, I think you want the answers, no matter how much fun kenjutsu is.”

Sasuke hasn’t done any training for fun since the night Itachi murdered his clan. Silently, he crosses his arms over his chest and fixes the man with his most expectant glare.

Naruto's cousin simply smiles at him, light and free, and drops to the ground, starting his cool-down stretches. “I’ve met several Uchiha,” he says willingly enough. “Your brother was one of them, and I’ll admit he played the villain very well. But the heart is a funny thing, and if you’ve got enough experience looking, it’s easy to see when someone’s heart isn’t in their actions. Itachi seemed that way, to me, so I did a little digging.”

“Why?” Sasuke demands, the word bursting out of his throat before he can stop it. He grits his teeth in frustration, but the confused fury beating in his blood pushes past the block with ease. “Why would you bother?”

The red-haired man looks up at him for a long moment, his blue gaze steady. Then he sighs and leans back on his hands, turning his eyes on the gathering clouds above them. “Because of what he did to you,” he says at length. “Because I know how it feels to be betrayed by the person you love most, but to keep loving them anyway.”

Sasuke wants to deny that he loves his brother even now, wants to shout and scream and tear into the man for even thinking such a thing, but his voice is trapped somewhere down in his chest and he can't even begin to speak.

Kur—the red-haired man seems to hear the objection anyway, because he casts a faint, sad smile at Sasuke. “There are always many sides to everything,” he says almost gently. “You know one, Sasuke-kun, but what will you do if there are others?”

He’s shaking, Sasuke realizes numbly. There's a fine tremor running through him, shaking him from head to toe, and it’s ridiculous, because Sasuke hasn’t shaken from mere words since that blood-drenched night half a decade ago. He’s stronger now, maybe not enough so to kill his brother but still strong, and this shouldn’t—

But it does, and Sasuke sinks slowly to the ground, fisting his hands in the fabric of his pants as he tries to keep himself under control.

“He still killed them,” he rasps, almost unconsciously. “Even if he had a reason, he still killed them all. I don’t—I can’t—”

Slim, strong fingers curl gently around the back of his neck, gripping carefully, and Kurama pulls him forward, letting Sasuke's forehead rest against his shoulder. The bare skin is warm, and the lines of the seals are almost dizzying this close up. “I know,” Kurama whispers, and the ache in his voice makes Sasuke think that he really does. “He’s your brother, but he still did something horrible and unforgivable. He took everything away from you, and regardless of his reasoning that wasn’t right. I'm sorry, Sasuke.”
Those three words are something that Sasuke has heard countless times since that night, repeated again and again by stupid, toadying bastards who just want their chance at having influence with the last Uchiha and his fortune and power. But coming from this man, with his scars and his lost village and his perpetual smile, it almost sounds honest. It almost sounds real.

Sasuke doesn’t pull away, even when Kurama carefully loops an arm around his shoulder and cards cautious fingers through his hair. The jounin smells of sweat and metal and the faintest hint of mountain winds, different from anyone who’s ever held Sasuke before, but that’s…comforting. Kurama isn’t an Uchiha, and somehow, for some reason, Sasuke wouldn’t ever want him to be. Just—being Uzumaki Kurama is enough.

For a moment, just one brief moment in a clearing empty of all but the two of them, Sasuke feels like he can breathe fully, without the weight of hate to drag him down. He draws in a breath, another, like fire down his throat, and closes his eyes. Kurama's hand settles in his hair, gentle and kind, and Sasuke keeps his eyes shut, trying to hang on to this feeling. He’s been an avenger since that bloody night, has lived solely to kill the person he once loved best, and he’s tired. The mere thought that there might be a reason he doesn’t know, an explanation for the obliteration of his entire world, makes him feel empty and aching inside.

He loves Itachi, but he loathes him.

He doesn’t want a reason, but he does.

(He wants it more than anything.)

(He’s never wanted anything less.)

Sasuke doesn’t cry, doesn’t snuffle, never even moves, but Kurama knows grief—knows Sasuke’s grief—when he sees it. The boy doesn’t move away from Kurama's embrace, though, stays within the circle of his arms with an unspoken and unacknowledged sort of gratitude. Kurama says nothing, either, just holds him the way no one has since that night five years ago.

He’s thrown Sasuke's world into turmoil and knows it, knows the effect such things will have on a boy who has never looked at the massacre as anything but a tragedy enacted by one person. Sasuke has never not blamed Itachi, and Kurama knows that even if Itachi is declared innocent, Sasuke will have a very, very long way to go before he can even begin to forgive his brother.

But that’s all right. A slow march towards forgiveness is far better than having any chance for it ripped away without warning. At least here, there’s a slim chance for Itachi’s return and a greater one for his survival; as long as that remains constant, Kurama will be satisfied.

(He’s always been aware of how much Sasuke—both his Sasuke and this version—worshiped the man, but nevertheless he can’t bring himself to respect Itachi. Perhaps he was given an array of bad choices with no good ones to be found, maybe he was backed into a corner with no way out, but still. To kill his entire clan, regardless of Obito's then-less-than-sane assistance, to willingly kill so many—Kurama can't like him for that. Surely, surely there was another choice. Surely one could have been made that did not shatter Sasuke into so very many broken pieces.)

Sasuke takes a breath that shudders ever so faintly, and Kurama tightens his arm, pulling him just that much closer. The body pressed against him is so slim and frail, a child’s yet-developing form, and Kurama finds it hard to connect this grieving boy with the strong and steadfast man he left behind. The vast majority of his heart belongs to his Sasuke, dead and forever gone, but…
But there are other pieces left, smaller though they might be. Naruto has already claimed several, and Genma and Raidou, the Sandaime, and Yugao, and certainly Sakura and Kakashi. It’s only right that this Sasuke, different as he is, receives his own piece.

“Sleep at my apartment tonight,” Kurama offers on a whim. He feels Sasuke stiffen in his grasp and chuckles, because his Sasuke or not, the thoughts behind those sharp-dark eyes are easy enough to guess. “It’s not pity, Sasuke-kun. My best friend in the entire world was an Uchiha, and I know he wouldn’t have approved of you living in the compound alone. Just for tonight, humor me and let me respect his wishes. I promise I won’t even make ramen for dinner.”

Sasuke huffs, but he still doesn’t pull away, and his forehead stays resting firmly against Kurama's shoulder. There's no sound for a long moment, and then he mumbles something. Very likely it’s something Kurama was never meant to hear, but enhanced ears pick it up regardless.

“Ramen…isn't that bad.”

Kurama grins to himself, relieved and pleased, and a little triumphant. Not so bad indeed.

Omake (beware of silliness):

“You're going to have Kurama spar with Gai? Genma!”

Genma simply grins at his partner, glancing away from the pot of miso he’s stirring. “Come on, Rai, I've got a feeling about this. Just trust me.”

Raidou gives him a black look. “Genma. The last time you said that, we were arguing about which bundle of senbon you had poisoned. You stuck one in your mouth and spent the next twelve hours debating the state of Fire Country politics with your nightstand, in between attempts to fly. Izumo and Kotetsu still twitch whenever you start talking about colors.”

Genma doesn’t even have the decency to look abashed. He just snorts. “So that’s why they bolted from the room when I was trying to pick out a new couch. Cowards.”

Iruka, who’s wandering around Genma’s apartment for no real discernable reason beyond throwing dirty looks at Raidou, pauses in the doorway long enough to add, “At least you didn’t mention butterflies.”

That makes Genma blink once at him, long and slow, before he shrugs in clear dismissal, clicks his current senbon against his teeth, and smoothly changes the subject. “I just think that someone like Gai would be a good influence on Kurama. Gai is—”

“No,” Raidou interrupts. “You are not allowed to have any sort of opinion regarding Gai, ever. You left three small children alone with him once. For three days.”

“Genma had a mission,” Iruka says, narrowing his eyes at the tokujo as he slides into the kitchen and takes up a defensive position in front of his surrogate mother. Genma just rolls his eyes, mutters something under his breath that might be and they call me the mother hen, and otherwise ignores the younger man.

Raidou isn't about to let the point drop so easily.
“You were twelve,” he reiterates, just in case Genma missed the whole point of his objection. “I am absolutely astonished that the village was still standing.”

“Gai is easily manipulated, if you know the right trigger words,” Kotetsu chimes in cheerfully, ducking through the doorway with Izumo on his heels. He stares grimly at Raidou in brief but heartfelt warning, then whips around and goes to give the blond tokujo a hug. “Genma! Is that tuna I smell?”

“I swear you're part Inuzuka, brat,” Genma says with fond tolerance, looping an arm around what parts he can reach and hugging back, even as Izumo throws himself into the group hug and the two younger men attempt to squeeze the life out of him.

Raidou sympathizes. Genma is very nice to hug. It’s still aggravating, though, especially when Izumo—who he used to think was the levelheaded and sensible one of the trio—gives him a dark glare over Genma's shoulder. He rolls his eyes and points out, not petulant at all, “I still think that spar is a bad idea.”

Genma waves him off, clearly unconcerned. Which usually means it’s just the type of thing Raidou should be concerned about. “You didn’t see him today. That kid could beat me at speed if he paid attention, and his taijutsu’s impressive and unpredictable, Gai's favorite combination. Besides, everyone in Konoha should know Gai.”

So they know when to run, Raidou very carefully doesn’t say. Genma's weirdly protective of Gai, even though the jounin is probably one of the least likely to need such a thing.

Then again, Genma needs to get a plaque reading RESIDENT SHINOBI DEN MOTHER and just hang it outside his apartment. Or around his neck. Really, either would work.

But, granted, Gai was his genin teammate, and that kind of thing forges undeniable bonds. Genma is also one of the few who never even bats an eye at the man’s antics—whether from his sheer iron unflappability or immunity through longtime exposure Raidou has never determined—and can easily translate from Gai-speak to something a little more universally understandable.

“Fine,” Raidou sighs at length, because even he knows when to back down sometimes. “But if this whole thing blows up in your face—”

“You'll be there to say I told you so,” Genma finishes for him, entirely unruffled as he sets the plates on the table. “I know.”

The three chicks are all giving him nasty looks now as they slink into their positions around the table, overprotective—as ever—in the face of anyone even attempting to argue with the man who took them in. Raidou sighs to himself as he picks up his chopsticks, resigning himself to a meal of dirty looks and conversation where he can't get a word in edgewise. In this kind of situation, aren’t the step-kids supposed to live in fear of bringing their new parent’s wrath down upon them? And why is this even his life? Aren’t they all adults here?

Then a gentle hand touches his shoulder, and he glances up just in time for Genma to brush a soft, glancing kiss over his lips and set his dinner down in front of him. “Eat up,” he orders with a smile, and Raidou knows he looks besotted and stupid right now—Aoba has told him many times, at length and in great detail—but he doesn’t care.

This is family, and this is peace, and maybe just a little, he can understand how Uzumaki Kurama is still able to laugh and smile here, even after the complete destruction of Uzushio.
Konoha is far from perfect, but it’s still home.
I am... a little bemused by the number of comments I've gotten complaining about the amount of Sasuke in the last few chapters, or how they don’t like all the focus on SasuNaru, or how they’d really rather I not make this Kakashi/Kurama and just keep them friends. I'm sorry if you're unhappy, but I posted pairings in the first chapter. Sasuke is also one of the tagged main characters, geez. If you're not fond of him, read something else. I was very clear about characters and pairings and if you chose to read it anyway, please don’t nag at me.

Naruto narrows his eyes in concentration, focusing on the piece of paper in front of him. The apartment is quiet but for the intermittent patter of rain starting up outside. Kurama had mentioned training for a few hours before dinner and left with his katana, but even without him the apartment still manages to feel warmer and cozier than Naruto's ever has.

Part of it could be that Naruto's stuff has migrated onto the bookcase and is filling several new shelves around the main room, or that the door to his new bedroom is propped open and he can see Gama-chan perched proudly on the desk from where he’s sitting. Or maybe it’s that Kurama made him cocoa and brought home dango for him, without Naruto even vaguely hinting that he wanted either.

This, Naruto supposes, is what it feels like to have a dad. Except that Kurama is more easygoing than any of the dads his friends have complained about, more apt to let Naruto decide everything on his own, and then be there with congratulations after a success or sympathy in the face of a failure. He has his own life and his own duties, but he still takes a moment whenever he can to be kind, to do simple things that no one’s ever done for Naruto before, and it’s simultaneously amazing and completely bewildering.

So, for Kurama—and for himself, because this stuff is actually pretty cool—Naruto is reading. Has read three entire scrolls on basic sealing that even genin can do, and Kurama has finally given him leave to test it.

(He probably didn’t mean for Naruto to test it while he wasn’t present, but he never specified, and Naruto's done with the scroll and fairly confident in his abilities, so why not?)

The outline of an exploding tag is growing under his brush, smooth and slow. Everything he’s read has been incredibly explicit about not hurrying, and as much as Naruto would like to, he also doesn’t want to blow up the whole apartment, so he’s careful as he sketches out the seal and then inks it.

Exploding tags are one of the things that every shinobi uses, and even Naruto has used them before, learned at the Academy, but most ones bought pre-made are actually really boring. Like this, Naruto can tweak the seal to change how much smoke there is, or how much fire, or how much noise. Basic exploding tags all have about the same strength, since that’s just how the seal is, but that’s fine, because it’s really the extras that get people instead of the force. Smoke and bangs and all that—that’s what really confuses an enemy.

And now Naruto can make his own.
There are really no words for how awesome seals are.

Just as he’s about to put the finishing flourish on the upper-west quadrant, though, the door opens, and his cousin calls, “I'm home! Naruto-kun, did you burn the house down yet?”

Offended at the implication, Naruto jerks his head up and cries, “Kurama-nii!” in a wounded voice.

But the jerk of his head is echoed by the jerk of the brush in his hand, and a jagged streak of black cuts through three quadrants at once. Naruto blinks down at it for a moment before the implication registers, and then his eyes go wide.

“Naruto-kun, I—oh, whoops.”

Before Naruto can so much as open his mouth to cry a warning, a calloused hand closes on the back of his shirt, plucks him neatly out of the way, and drops him onto the sofa. Kurama drops to one knee, slams a palm down on the ruined seal, and speaks a word that makes Naruto's ears ring. There's a flash of light, a sound like metal tearing, and then dead silence.

Naruto rubs his eyes to clear away the spots, and the world slowly resolves into the still-intact apartment, with his cousin kneeling in front of him with one red brow arched. He looks more amused than angry, thankfully.

“Good job, dobe,” a familiar voice huffs from the doorway.

“Shut up, teme!” Naruto snaps back automatically, glaring at the brunet leaning against the wall. “It was working until you distracted me!” Then he actually registers the other boy’s presence and tacks on, “And what are you doing here anyway?”

It’s only after the words are out that he remembers he’s being nice to Sasuke right now, and he winces.

Something odd—almost relief, except Sasuke doesn’t have emotions beyond rude and condescending—flickers over the Uchiha's features before they settle again, and he turns away disinterestedly, dropping his gaze to the smoking paper Kurama is holding between his fingers. “What is that?” he asks—though, since this is Sasuke, it sounds somewhere between flat monotone and a demand.

“A customized smoke bomb tag,” Naruto says proudly, because it would have worked, if he’d been able to draw that last line. “Like an exploding tag, but instead of an explosion you get smoke.”

“And a loud bang,” Kurama says dryly, surveying the seal. He tilts his head and chuckles, then looks back at Naruto. “It looks like it would work. Good job, Naruto-kun. To be able to personalize even a basic seal already—you’re picking it up quickly.” Smoothly he rises to his feet, then heads towards the kitchen, ruffling Naruto's hair as he passes. “That Uzumaki blood is really showing.”

Naruto all but preens. He’s never had a family to live up to before, but if this is how it feels, he can understand why people try so hard to do it. “Thanks, Kurama-nii!” he cheers, and the redhead favors him with a soft, fond smile before he turns to the other genin.

“So?” he asks mildly, resting a hand on Sasuke's hair with an equally warm smile for him. “Would you like me to talk to Kakashi-san and see if I can teach you kenjutsu? And I'm sure he knows it, albeit a slightly different style, if you’d prefer to learn from your actual sensei.”

“Hn.” Sasuke whips his head around and looks away, but not before Naruto catches sight of the flush rising in his cheeks. And that expression on his face…it’s weirdly...familiar…
His jaw drops in sudden understanding and he splutters, even as his cousin disappears into the kitchen. Hearing him, Sasuke jerks back around and levels him with a death glare that’s all but negated by the fact that he’s still blushing.

“You—you pervert!” Naruto manages to hiss after a strangled second. He’s seen that look on Sakura’s face before—specifically, when she’s looking at Sasuke. “You—you—you’ve got a crush on my cousin!”

“Shut up!” Sasuke hisses back, cheeks flaming even brighter. “I do not, dobe! That’s ridiculous!”

“Then why are you blushing when he just touched your hair? Do too!”

“I do not!”

“Do too!”

“Do not!”

“Do too!”

“Do no—argh, get the hell off me, dobe!”

“Stop blushing ‘cause of Kurama-nii, teme! I’m the one he’s teaching sealing!”

“And he’s going to teach me kenjutsu—dead last, stop it!”

“Jerkface, let go!”

“Ow!”

“Hey!”

Kurama leans in the doorway of the kitchen, brow raised, and watches them wrestle on the floor. Then, with a faint roll of his eyes and a mutter of, “It never changes, does it?” he turns around and goes back in. He’d been planning to ask what the boys wanted for dinner, but at this point they can just eat what he gives them and be happy.

He had visited the ruins of Uzushiogakure once, three months after Konoha fell. It had been a strange and solemn thing, stepping into a foreign graveyard only to find it populated with familiar ghosts.

Not much had remained standing, and there was more rubble than there were buildings at that point, but those who destroyed it had been Kiri and Iwa nin and unskilled when it came to seals. Kurama had been able to dig down through the debris of countless lost lives and ruined dreams until he found, safely stored away from foes and the ravages of time alike, the last few remnants of his clan’s legacy.

(Because, as much as he is the son of Konoha's Yondaime, its Yellow Flash, he is far more the son of a fiery, red-haired woman with a spine of steel and the courage to face down a demon. He is the son of a woman who left her home to become a willing human sacrifice in the name of containing the Kyuuubi, and had made the best of her situation until it truly turned around for her. He is the Red Hot-Blooded Habanero’s son, a part of the clan whose name he bears more than he will ever be a Namikaze, whether he is recognized as such or not.)
The treasures, when gathered, were few and scattered and often close to unsalvageable, but Kurama had done his best for the sole reason that there was no one else to do it. What other Uzumaki remained, if there were any, had been spread thin across the Elemental Nations, and between Orochimaru, Tobi, and Madara it was very likely they had all been wiped out. He had managed to find amidst the ruins a handful of scrolls on Uzushio’s martial arts, taijutsu and kenjutsu alike, and many more on sealing. A few trinkets here and there with the spiral crest, a battered hitai-ate and a nearly-complete set of kunai that had somehow kept their edge.

And bodies—so very many bodies. Uzushio had not been a large village, for all its strength, but it had still housed an entire force of shinobi and civilians, a once-grand marketplace and families and people. And now all of them were gone, dead and forgotten in this lonesome stretch of coastline. The Land of Eddies was a slim slip of shore lost between everything else, because Uzushio had never sought power beyond what could be found in their seals and swords and hearts. They had stayed within their land and built their beautiful city and grown far too powerful for the other countries to stomach, so they had been destroyed.

Even now, years and timelines and worlds different from the angry boy who dug graves for an entire city, it still makes something in Kurama ache, makes him grit his teeth and clench his fists and wish fire down upon Iwa and Kiri. Because it was a tragedy and it has been forgotten, and that is an even greater tragedy than it ever simply happening in the first place.

He’s the last to actively carry Uzushio’s legacy, just about the last to bear the name. He would never have brought a child into being in a warzone, even if he and Sasuke had ever discussed surrogates and such. And, unless his past self takes such a step—is able to take such a step—this generation will see the end of the Uzumaki clan.

But, Kurama thinks, glancing across the room from his seat in the open window. His eyes settle on the two small forms curled together on the couch, peaceful in sleep the way they never are awake. It’s Sasuke's second night here, and all Kurama had to do to lure him in was offer food.

But, he thinks again, and smiles. If I teach them, and if they pass it on, and their students pass it on—that’s already three more generations that would have otherwise been lost to us. That’s three more generations protected, if only secondhand. Three more generations preserved, and even if it ends there, I think I can be content with that.

He’ll teach Naruto his taijutsu and sealing, Sasuke his kenjutsu. He’ll give them the tools and the foundation and the will to save themselves, rather than doing it for them, and once this world has been righted he’ll return to Uzushiogakure, hidden between sea and tides and sky. He’ll return, and bury his mother’s people, his people, and tell them that he’s done what he can.

He thinks they would be proud of what their legacy has wrought, if they could see it.

Another morning, another meeting, and somehow it’s not a surprise at all that Uzumaki Kurama is at Team 7’s bridge once again. Kakashi pauses underneath the overhang of the forest, content—at least for the moment—to simply watch. Naruto is sprawled out in his back, reading a scroll with a frown of furious concentration on his face, while Sakura sits a few feet away, sharpening her kunai as she studies a basic medic-nin anatomy doll. On the railing of the bridge, Sasuke and Kurama have their heads bent together, and astonishing as it is, Sasuke seems to be the one providing most of the conversation.

A week ago, Kakashi wouldn’t have thought it possible. A week ago his team was a wreck just waiting to break under its own strain, likely at the very worst moment possible. Naruto raged at
Sasuke, and Sasuke was coldly indifferent and bitingly condescending to him. Sakura fawned over Sasuke and belittled Naruto, who fawned over her in turn, even as Sasuke entirely ignored the kunoichi. Certainly a destructive cycle, and Kakashi had looked at them and wondered how in the nine hells they’d ever managed to pass his test.

But this morning, Sasuke and Naruto both arrived with Kurama, and Kakashi has a sneaking suspicion that he knows why there were no lights on in the Uchiha compound again last night. Naruto had been carrying a stack of scrolls, his face a mask of almost comical determination, but he’d sat down and promptly cracked open the first one—a beginner’s guide to seal theory, if Kakashi’s not mistaken. And though he’s been complaining to his cousin intermittently for the last two hours (Kakashi’s making them wait three today, just for a change of pace), he’s kept with it. Likely Kurama's gentle yet insistent prodding has something to do with that, but for the Academy’s dead-last, it’s still impressive.

Sakura, too, is a large change. Oh, she performed her requisite fangirling over the Uchiha, but her attention waned quickly, and before long she was laying out the doll and memorizing parts. Even if she doesn’t become a medic, such knowledge can only help—but from the fierce intent in her eyes, Kakashi suspects that she’s set her heart on her goal and won't easily waver.

And then there’s Sasuke. Kakashi wants to call him troubled but brilliant, wants to file him away as another genius with a tragic story the way Kakashi himself was as a child, but looking at the boy now, he simply can't. Sasuke is talking with Kurama, slowly running through hand seals as he concentrates on his fingers, then saying something that Kakashi can’t quite pick out. Kurama nods thoughtfully, though, and carefully reaches up to reposition Sasuke's left elbow a little. An encouraging gesture from him, and then Sasuke tries it again.

Belatedly, Kakashi recognizes the sequence for the Water Prison technique, and blinks. From what he knows of the Uchiha, the odds of Sasuke having a water affinity are infinitesimal, to put it generously. To teach the kid that, when he doesn’t even know his real affinity yet—

Entirely intrigued, Kakashi stretches his senses out just a little more, shamelessly attempting to eavesdrop.

“—any jutsu?” Sasuke is saying, a faint note of skepticism in his voice.

Kurama nods. “Yes. You'll never be as good with the other elements as you are with your own, but I don’t think that’s any excuse not to at least try. It’s good for a surprise attack, or to make your opponent think you’re weaker than you are. That kind of thing will keep you alive. Water Prison is only a C-rank anyway; it takes about as much control as your Great Fireball jutsu.”

“Hn.” Sasuke is frowning, but it’s thoughtful rather than grim. Then he says, “Naruto said the seals on your arms let you use all the elements equally well.”

That’s news to Kakashi, and he raises one hidden brow, surveying the redhead a little more closely. If that’s true, and if they’re seals that Kurama invented himself—and they must be, or every shinobi anywhere would happily be paying an arm and a leg to get those seals—then the elder Uzumaki must be a genius at sealing. Kakashi can’t even begin to imagine how complex something like that must have to be to work, especially in combat.

Kurama nods easily, as though it’s a little thing and not something that could potentially turn the tide of a war. “Yes, but they’re exceedingly delicate. Burning them out is incredibly easy, and an incredibly bad idea, as they’re linked directly with my chakra coils. My clan traditionally has large enough reserves to handle it if they go bad, but I wouldn’t want to slap these seals onto the average shinobi. They’d become a vegetable in under five uses.”
Alright, Kakashi thinks with a wince. Maybe that’s why they’re not widespread, then. But he still suspects that they’re Kurama’s personal work—there’s a note of pride in his voice that wouldn’t be present otherwise.

Sasuke looks faintly disappointed, even as Naruto drops his scroll with a dramatic flourish and cries, “Kurama-nii, how come you’re teaching him? I thought I was the one you were teaching seals!”

“You are, brat,” Kurama says with a surreptitious roll of his eyes. “Sealing is a specialty of the Uzumaki clan, and Uzushiogakure’s shinobi in general. You’re being taught your clan’s heritage right now, and I won’t skimp on that. But I’m also a jounin with some time on my hands between missions and a lot of experience using a sword, and Sasuke has the speed needed to make the Uzumaki techniques work. Our clan’s small as it is, Naruto-kun; I’m not about to turn away anyone who wants to learn, provided they use the knowledge correctly.”

Figuring that’s his cue, Kakashi shunshins to the middle of the bridge, appearing in a storm of leaves. “Maa, Kurama-kun, you’ve just been letting them sit around?” He tries to inject as much disappointment into his tone as possible, and continues over Naruto and Sakura's rabid snarls of “LATE!” “They’ll never learn anything if you're nice like that.”

Sasuke eyes him like he’s a particularly nasty bug, crossing his arms. “You say that like we actually learn,” he mutters, and wow, the kid can do sarcasm. Kakashi had honestly had no hope for him. He turns a beaming smile (not that they can see it) on the boy and claps his hands together. “You’re right, my cute little genin. So for today, let’s switch it up a bit! Endurance training, so off you go! Three laps around the village. From the outside. Don’t get eaten.”

There’s dismay from three quarters, and Kakashi glories in it, even as he herds the adorable little monsters towards the gate. They grumble, but take off running, and Kakashi waves fondly as they disappear into the distance.

“You,” Kurama says drolly, “are such an asshole.”

Because he’s feeling remarkably cheery this morning—afternoon—Kakashi beams at him, too. “People who lie about their ages don’t get to call me that, Kurama-kun. Try again.”

There’s a beat of silence, and then one red brow slowly arches. “Come again?” the jounin asks politely.

Kakashi hops up onto the railing to sit next to him. “Uzushio was destroyed during the Second Shinobi War,” he points out. “Minato-sensei was…ten, I think, and I was maybe a year old. But you talk about the destruction like you took part in the fighting, and still claim to be younger than me.”

Kurama looks down at his hands, eyes distant but shadowed. “Ah,” he says softly, at length. “Most people don’t realize. I…don’t exactly age normally.”

Studying the man, Kakashi nods in easy acceptance. Kurama's eyes are far too old for his face, and Kakashi has thought so since they met. “A bloodline?” he asks. “Or just good genetics?”

A huff of laughter escapes the other jounin, and he raises a hand to rake fingers through his long hair. “A bit of both,” he admits after a moment. “The Uzumaki are known for their longevity, but…my father wasn’t an Uzumaki, and he passed something on to me.”

Kakashi doesn’t push, because for the most part bloodline limits are incredibly private except when they’re being used against an enemy. Also, with a genin team, he doesn’t have the excuse of saying he wants to know in case they ever get caught in a combat situation together. Which is faintly
disappointing, but Kakashi's always been just as much a circumspect bastard as he is a nosey one; he'll go digging and see what rumors he can turn up.

Raising a hand to shield his eye, he turns to peer in the direction of the gate. “So,” he says, cheerfully changing the subject. “Want to put bets on which of my cute little genin kills one of his or her teammates first?”

Kurama laughs at that, bright and sweet, and shakes his head. “Asshole,” he says, but it’s entirely fond, and Kakashi feels something ease within his chest, if only slightly, at the smile that’s turned on him.

There's a pause, a beat, and then Kurama digs out his wallet. “I’ll put twenty ryo on Sakura snapping and trying to kill them both,” he offers.

“Deal,” Kakashi agrees instantly, and they shake on it.
Obito wanders around the small clearing he’s created, touching the seals carved deeply into the trunks of the trees. “You’ve been dreaming about Uzushio, I see,” he murmurs, and though it sounds idle, Kurama’s known the other man for long enough to recognize the lead-in to a much longer conversation.

“When I do dream, yes,” he demurs, watching Obito drift between trees. He’s never really asked what mokuton feels like, but it has always made Kurama curious. Hashirama himself said that it was power over life more than power over plants, natural energy in its purest form, and Kurama knows that Obito—at least when sane—tends to gravitate towards trees and plants and natural features.

Even on the brink of death, when Obito transported himself and Kurama away from their last head-on battle with Madara, he’d dumped them in a stream in the middle of a forest. At the time Kurama had thought it a mistake, Kamui gone somehow awry, but now he’s not so sure. Maybe Obito had dropped them in the first place that felt alive and clean to his fading mind.

“The one tragedy in the last fifty years that I had no hand in. I’m glad that’s the one you’re dwelling on, given the numerous alternatives,” Obito says lightly, and were it anyone else making the remark Kurama would have already slit their throat, or at least attempted to do so. But there’s a grief that’s beyond comprehension in his eyes, something vast and earth-shattering, and Kurama has known him since the very moment his madness died on that grassy battlefield; he can identify grief and guilt in equal measure when they’re presented so clearly.

He remembers too how Obito raged, that night when they found Kakashi’s corpse at the bottom of a ravine, Sharingan gone and body so battered Kurama could barely look at him regardless of his resolve. He remembers Obito’s furious grief at the final destruction of Konoha, when Madara’s forces razed the empty village to the ground and left it burning, even as they turned their attention to Kumo. Remembers the way Obito picked up a battered and scored and bloodstained book from that gorge, held it in his hand for a long moment, and then tucked it away in his kunai pouch. He never read it, but sometimes at night Kurama would catch him holding it, running his fingers over the tattered orange cover with something terribly like desolation in his eyes.

Kurama’s never asked how Obito feels, has never had to—as with grief, he knows love when he sees it. It could be a familial love, as brothers, or romantic love, as two strong and entirely broken men. Kurama has never had the courage to ask about that part, but whatever the feeling behind it, he respects Obito's suffering. Regardless of what hand the man had in Konoha's destruction, he feels just as much grief at its loss as Kurama, if not more.

But such a thing is all but impossible to say, and Kurama hold his peace, watching the Uchiha lean against a massive oak in the moonlight. It’s a full moon again, as it always seems to be in this space, and almost as bright as day beyond the forest’s shadow.
At length Obito sighs and turns away, looks at Kurama with something as weary as the very oldest veteran in his lone eye. “That seal,” he says.

Kurama nods, re-crossing his legs and settling his elbows on his knees, chin resting on his clasped hands. “It’s getting faster,” he offers. “In a week or two I should be able to do it within five minutes. For now, I just need to refine it and experiment with the necessary amount of chakra.”

“Good. It’s likely we have a bit of time before it’s needed, but I’d rather you have it ready. And it will work on any seal?”

That earns him a mock-offended huff. “That almost sounds like you’re doubting my sealing ability, Obito. What, don’t you trust me?” He flutters his lashes innocently at the brunet.

Obito rolls his eye again. “Stop that, you’ll give me nightmares again. Just keep working on the damn thing. If I know my past self, you’re not going to get five minutes worth of fighting at half-power; he’ll decimate you.”

“Ambush him, maybe?”

“Possible, but unlikely. And don’t give me that look. I’ll tell you all about the plan as soon as I’ve ironed out the kinks. Be patient, brat.”

Kurama huffs a soft laugh and stretches lazily. “I suppose I can manage that, as long as you tell me eventually. But don’t take too long, all right? I know you're a tactical genius, but two sets of eyes are always better than one.”

Obito waves him off. “Yes, yes, go wander around the village again or something. I need to think and you never let me concentrate. Go away.”

“Who sealed your sorry soul away to honor your last, dying request?” Kurama retorts without any heat. “I could have left you in that river, you know.”

The look Obito gives him is one part incredulous to three parts droll. “Really? And lost your best chance of beating my past self? Even you're too smart for that, brat.”

Kurama waves him off, rising to his feet with smooth grace. “Maa. Just so long as you’re prepared to hunt down that stupid cousin of yours at any point now. With the Nagato and Konan in hiding and the rest dead, he’s going to be getting nervous.”

“You’ll have to be more specific,” Obito drawls. “Which stupid cousin? I have several.”

With an eye-roll of his own, Naruto answers, “The really stupid one,” and ends his meditation with a flick of his fingers. As he comes back to his body, he can feel Obito grumbling, but it’s indistinct. That’s probably for the better, honestly—the man can grouche like no other, and he does put-upon better than Kakashi has ever dreamed of.

But he’s a good ally and a good friend, regardless of how they met the first time, and Kurama carefully conceals the wash of amused affection that floods him. It wouldn’t do to give the bastard too much ammunition, after all.

Kurenai Yuuhi drags herself into the Jounin Standby Station, just about the one place in Konoha guaranteed to be entirely free of children, and tries not to think uncharitable thoughts about the Hokage who thought she was a good match for Team 8. She doesn’t even hesitate as she staggers
over to where Anko is sprawled over one end of a couch, munching on dango, and collapses into the cushions with a groan.

“Long night?” Anko says sympathetically, though her eyes are bright with mischief. “You should have told Asuma to go easy on you. It’s—”

“We’re not dating!” Kurenai hisses, even as her cheeks flame. “Stop saying that, Anko!” She sits up straighter, though, and adds wearily, “It’s this team. I’m really not sure I’m the best to handle them. Hinata is excessively timid, Kiba is excessively brash, and Shino is excessively reserved. If you could smash them all together you’d get a solid shinobi, but as they are now…” She trails off helplessly, throwing her hands up. “I don’t know what to do, Anko.”

Anko eyes her, clearly unimpressed, and then says, at a completely normal volume, “Shh. Wake him up and you’ll spend the next hour getting clucked at by Genma-senpai.”

Kurenai follows her head-jerk to where an unfamiliar figure is reclined on a couch in the corner, breathing gently in sleep. Garnet-red hair half-covers his face and tumbles over the edge of the cushion to brush the floor, and a blue-wrapped katana is tucked against his side, one lean, long-fingered hand closed around the hilt. She blinks, because even though she’s been focused on preparing for her team for weeks now, she’d have thought that she would hear about someone passing their jounin exam at the very least.

“Who—?” she starts, but before she can even finish the question Anko has her Bingo Book out and is flipping through the pages. Kurenai gapes at her, because she’s in the very back of the book, far past Konoha’s pages, and when she finally shoves the book across the gap the symbol at the top of the page isn’t a stylized leaf, but a spiral within a circle.

However, the man pictured on the page, half-turned away from the photographer so that only a sliver of his face and part of one blue eye are showing through the red mane, unsheathed sword in his hand, is most certainly the one asleep on the other side of the room. And, Uzushio affiliation or not, he’s wearing a Konoha hitai-ate now.

Kurenai manages to drag her gaze away from the real-life version to skim the page. “Uzumaki Kurama, called the Red Maelstrom, of the former village of Uzushiogakure. A-rank bounty hunter and a seal master, responsible for bringing in…” Her eyes widen at the list of names. “S-rank? All of them?”

With a huff, Anko crosses her arms under her breasts and sinks back into her seat to pout at the sleeping man. “But he’s boring,” she whines. “He’s been sleeping for three hours already! I wanna wake him up and bug him, but Genma-senpai said if I did he’d make me do all of Ibiki’s paperwork for a month.”

That’s a bit of a relief, at least—Genma's threats are generally enough to keep Anko in line, after all—but Kurenai still eyes the man warily. “If he’s a bounty hunter, do we really want him here?” she asks softly. “Anyone could have hired him.”

Anko blows out an aggrieved breath. “Hokage-sama accepted him,” she points out, “and he’s strong. We need more strong jounin. But that doesn’t change the fact that he’s about as boring as watching paint dry.” She scowls at the man like this is a personal affront. Knowing Anko, it likely is.

“He’s sleeping, Anko,” Kurenai points out exasperatedly. “Everyone’s boring when they sleep.”

Anko turns on her instantly, eyes wicked. “But you're not, Yuuhi-chan,” she purrs, leaning in like she’s going to go for a kiss, her eyes going heavy-lidded and sensual. “You're so cute, and you
always cuddle right up to me and tease my—”

“Shut up!” Kurenai hisses, slapping her palm over Anko's mouth. “I thought we agreed never to talk about that again!”

Anko peels her hand away, not phased at all as she grins at her friend. “What? Afraid Asuma is going to find out about your dirty past as my—?”

Luckily, Kurenai has two hands, and she slaps her free one into place without pause. “*Stop. It. Or so help me I will tell Ibiki about that time in Grass.*”

Anko blanches, if only slightly. “You wouldn’t.”

“Try me.”

The kunoichi eye each other for a moment before Anko mutters her defeat, subsiding into the couch. “You're no fun, either,” she whines, and then flops over into Kurenai’s lap with a dramatic sigh. “Damn, now I'm wishing that the Hokage had given me a genin team, too. Torture’s fun, but there just aren’t enough prisoners to go around.”

“Anko, you hate children,” Kurenai points out in what is (she hopes) a reasonable tone.

Anko frowns up at her. “Yeah, but *kids* are different than *genin,*” she points out. “No way would I want to take care of some snot-nosed little brat-thing. But genin are cool! I could teach them to be just like me... Can you imagine, Kurenai? Wouldn’t that be cool?”

“I don’t think the village would last beyond a week if there were more than one of you,” Kurenai says with absolute honesty, offering up a surreptitious prayer that Anko never manages to convince the Hokage that she’d make a good jounin instructor. She doesn’t *think* Anko would be able to, but the mere idea of it is enough to give her nightmares.

Come to think of it, that might be the perfect material for a genjutsu in her next spar with Asuma...

“Hey!” Anko cries, suddenly bolting to her feet. She makes a sound of outrage, leveling a threatening finger at the couch in the corner. “The bastard bolted!”

Indeed, the sofa is entirely empty, and there's no telltale red hair anywhere in the room. Anko sprints for the door, Kurenai following in the vain hope of keeping her out of trouble, and they stumble out into the street together. But the lane is entirely empty of shinobi, and there isn't even anyone crossing the roofs. Anko snarls in frustration.

“Oh, no,” she hisses, sounding just like her summons. “He must have heard us talking about him and thought he could get away. But Mitarashi Anko doesn’t give up so easily. I've been waiting three hours to see what you're made of. Your ass is *mine,* pretty boy.” With a predatory bound, she takes to the rooftops and leaps away.

Kurenai sighs, pressing a hand over her eyes for a moment before she follows her friend, hoping that Uzumaki Kurama will have enough sense to lay low until something else new and shiny distracts Anko for the day.

Given a choice between facing Pein again and having to face Anko when she’s feeling inquisitive, it’s a bit of a tossup which Kurama would choose, honestly.
Crashing and screaming rises a mere street behind him, and Kurama winces, picking up his pace. The woman is a menace, and a damned single-minded one at that. He ducks behind a water tower, slithers down a flight of stairs, hops an alley, and takes to the streets again, hoping his memory of Konoha is still accurate enough not to lead him into any dead ends. Anko is ridiculously persistent—she’s just about the only person in all of existence that can make Naruto look easygoing and reasonable—and also ridiculously hard to shake. She’d have been ANBU, Kurama suspects, except for the whole fiasco with Orochimaru.

And except for the fact that she is terrifyingly fond of torture, of course.

Swearing softly, and hardly about to lead the crazy kunoichi back towards his apartment when both Naruto and Sasuke are there, Kurama slips around a shadowed corner, waits until he hears the double thump of shinobi sandals hitting the street—and Anko has apparently dragged poor Kurenai into this, like always—and then leaps straight up, bounces off a flowerbox, and takes to the roofs again.

From behind him, a crow of triumph makes his blood run cold.

“Oh, hell,” Kurama mutters. He casts around wildly for somewhere to hide, latches on to the brilliance of a familiar chakra signature, and suppresses the urge to cry with relief. Without pause, he runs two steps, hops off the edge of the building, and flings himself through a handily open window. Thankfully, there's only open floor beyond it, and Kurama rolls and comes easily to his feet, then ducks around Kakashi with a hiss of, “Hide me, she’s almost here!”

Kakashi blinks bemusedly at him for a moment, then glances out the window. The amusement turns to horror and a bit of sympathy as he catches sight of the madwoman coming over the inclined roof across the street. “Ah,” he says, and promptly drops into a crouch. Belly-crawling his way towards Kurama, he hooks a hand around his elbow and tugs, jerking his head towards the sofa that sits with its back towards the window.

“Trust me?” he hisses.

“It’s not like I have a lot of choice,” Kurama growls back, but at that moment sandals clatter back towards the building and he immediately adds, “But yes I do. With my life.”

Kakashi takes him at his word and bolts to his feet, killing the overhead light with a desperate fumble, then dragging Kurama up, tossing him onto the couch, and throwing himself on top of the red-haired jounin. Deft fingers yank his mask askew and rake through his hair, and he pauses to snarl at Kurama, “You could help.”

Kurama simply blinks at him for one long second, neurons not connecting, and then the idea of what Kakashi is trying to do hits him like a freight train. One more precious half-second of hesitation and he joins in, rumpling Kakashi’s hair, tossing his jounin vest over the back of the couch, and rucking up his shirt. Kakashi ducks down to bring them nose to nose just as feet thud against the windowsill. Their cheeks brush, their eyes meet, and they both completely freeze.

“Kakashi, I know he’s in here! Send the bastard out!” Anko demands.

But Kurama can’t think of her, can’t even move, because suddenly there's nothing in his field of vision but pale skin and a sharp grey eye and a wealth of silver hair. His breath is caught somewhere deep in his chest, but he can still feel Kakashi's warm and soft against his cheek. The body on top of him is lean and strong, taller and heavier than his, and the heat of it is shocking.
No one’s gotten this close in a year.

No one’s gotten this close since Sasuke.

Kakashi stares right back down at him, their faces separated by less than two centimeters of space. Kurama can see it, feel it when he swallows, and somehow nothing has ever felt quite as intimate as two bodies pressed this closely, clothed or not.

“Where’s Uzumaki? He’s mine, Hatake!”

“Anko,” Kakashi manages, and his voice is startlingly low and hoarse. He lifts himself up on his forearms, and Kurama can see the muscles cording under his thin shirt. His grey eye is still fixed on Kurama, unwavering and full of something Kurama can’t name. Shock, maybe, but there’s more as well, something he can’t even begin to comprehend. “You have absolutely the worst timing of any living creature I have ever met, and that includes Pakkun.”

“Anko!” another voice hisses. Kurenai, and she sounds mortified. “Anko, he’s busy! Let’s look somewhere else!”

Anko scoffs. “No, he’s getting busy. There’s a big difference, Kurenai, and I though we covered it back when—”

“Oh my god stop talking. Sorry, Kakashi, sorry! Anko, look, isn’t that red hair over there?”

“Argh! Little bastard thinks a crappy henge is gonna stop the great Mitarashi Anko?! GET BACK HERE, UZUMAKI, YOU'RE MINE!”

There’s a rush of air as Anko throws herself back at the street, probably in pursuit of whatever poor soul Kurenai picked as a sacrificial offering. Another whispered apology and then Kurenai leaves as well, calling ineffective pleas to her friend as she goes.

Silence falls over the apartment like weighted ice, and Kakashi is still looking at him.

Kurama resists the urge to bite his lip and instead meets that sharp gaze, because he really can't do anything else. He doesn’t say anything, likely couldn’t even if he tried, and the air between them feels like syrup sliding down into his lungs. The weight of Kakashi is unnerving in how intense it is, in how much he can feel it, pressed right up against every inch of him regardless of both their uniforms.

Kakashi looks back down at him, and even though this is where he would normally makes some sly comment, claim that Kurama is now in his debt, there's only silence.

_How long?_ Kurama thinks almost desperately. _How long since I felt someone else this—"

Since Sasuke.

_Sasuke._

Kurama closes his eyes, takes a short, cautious breath, and then twists out from underneath Kakashi as quickly and carefully as he can. He rises to his feet, hoping that the other jounin won’t see the faint tremble in his hands, the sudden hot ache in his eyes. “Thank you,” he manages after several moments spent fumbling silently for words. “I-I owe you for that, Kakashi-san, thank you again.” He doesn’t wait for a response before he heads for the front door, not a bolt and not a run no matter how he wants to let himself. His entire body feels strangely shaky, uncertain in the face of such a shock, and Kurama hopes like hell that Anko is gone because he’s in no condition to outrun her right now.
“Kurama,” Kakashi says softly, just as he puts his hand on the knob.

Swallowing the slightly hysterical laugh that wants to bubble up, Kurama turns and flashes the jounin a smile that with any luck doesn’t look nearly as fake as it feels. Judging by the expression on Kakashi’s visible face, it’s a vain hope. “It’s not you, it’s me,” he says lightly, aiming for a joking tone and falling somewhat flat, though he knows the words ring true. “I just—sorry. Thank you again.” He ducks out the door before Kakashi can call him back, pulling it shut behind him, but only makes it a dozen steps down the hall before he’s shaking too hard to keep going, and has to slump back against the wall.

“Damn,” he whispers into the still air. “Damn, damn, damn.”

Because Sasuke is one year dead and Kurama promised him that he wouldn’t dwell or linger on grief and regrets if another chance for something came along.

*Don’t you dare promise me that. You deserve to find someone else, to feel this again. It won’t be me, it won’t be the same, but swear you’ll let yourself. Swear.*

And Kurama had sworn, unable to deny him anything. Sworn, and he’s never, ever gone back on his word before.

And the very, very worst part of all?

If Kakashi wants a chance, wants anything real, Kurama isn’t sure he’d say no, whether he’d made the oath or not.

Somehow, that feels like the greatest betrayal among a host of them, and entirely unforgivable.
Perception

Iruka comes home to find all the lights on in his apartment. He lets himself in with a resigned sigh, sets his bag down by the door, and then makes his way towards his bedroom.

As expected, there's a big lump of jounin flopped out on top of the covers.

Studying the man, Iruka gives in with a faint roll of his eyes. He tugs off his chuunin vest, takes off his hitai-ate, and nudges Kakashi over to the right a little more before sprawling next to him. He rolls onto his back, studying the plain white ceiling for a long moment, and then says, “You know, if I were dating someone, they’d get entirely the wrong idea about this. You look like your lover cheated on you, not like you ran headfirst into the brick wall of your emotions.”

Kakashi doesn’t move the arm draped over his eyes, which is unusual—most of the time the damage isn’t so bad as to keep him from making eye contact. Or at least, not anymore. Bouts like that were reserved for his ANBU days. He just hums softly in acknowledgement, and though he looks relaxed, Iruka has known him long enough to recognize the bewildered tension in the set of his shoulders, the near-panicky slant to the mouth hidden under the ever-present mask. There’s no other sound, no indication of what’s happened to send him spiraling into the uncharted territory of feelings.

Realizing that whatever conversation takes place here, the majority of it will be up to him, Iruka strangles another sigh, resigns himself to babbling, and says, “Did you know that Naruto came to see me today after my shift at the Missions Desk? He said that newfound cousin of his is teaching him sealing, and that he’s already learned to make sealing scrolls and explosive tags with varying effects. I’m not sure whether to be happy or horrified—it’s not exactly the best news for the village, but I remember the unit we did on sealing in class. Naruto’s test came back with a picture of a frog on it and nothing else. Kurama-san must be a very good teacher, to dump all that information into Naruto’s head so quickly.”

It’s subtle, but Iruka catches the faint twitch at the mention of Naruto’s cousin, and the even more blatant of one at his name. This has something to do with the other jounin, then.

There’s silence as Iruka considers what he knows, his old Intelligence training coming back—Iruka has never been much of a frontline fighter, but he’s a damn good spy when he has to be. So Kurama has done something to make Kakashi think about emotions and feelings, has pushed him clear out of his usual routine of porn-training-missions-repeat. From what he remembers of Kurama, it’s unlikely to be exceedingly traumatic, if only because the redhead is polite enough not to mentally scar his colleagues without a good reason. And, as aggravating as Kakashi can be, he also knows when to stop pushing.

“I can hear you thinking.” Kakashi lifts his arm and gives Iruka a sardonic glance. “Stop it, I came here to wallow.”

Iruka rolls his eyes right back. “No, you came here because somewhere in that twisted mind of yours you understand that you need the more complex emotions that usually get shoved to the back and ignored, and you want me to help you deal with them.”

Kakashi doesn’t deny it, which might as well be conformation with him. He drops the arm and clasps his hands on his stomach, gaze trained on the ceiling like it’s the most fascinating thing he’s ever seen. Iruka studies him again, more carefully this time. There’s no outward indication of what’s wrong, and it’s likely that no one else would ever even guess that something is wrong. Kakashi hides things well, after all—all ANBU do. Genma does it as well, smiles and laughs and acts normally
even when stress and unhappiness and guilt are all tearing him apart inside.

And then, out of the blue, Kakashi says, “Did you ever have a crush on Genma?”

Iruka chokes.

“I mean,” Kakashi continues, ignoring the hacking, wheezing chuunin next to him, “it would be reasonable, right? He’s handsome, and he appeared out of nowhere and completely changed your life, and he’s very kind.”

“I never had a crush on Genma!” Iruka shrieks, bolting upright and only belatedly remembering that it’s almost ten o’clock at night and his neighbors are home. Forcibly dragging his voice a few decibels down the register, he takes a careful breath and then explains clearly, as though to a child, “I was ten, Kakashi. While Genma is certainly good-looking and definitely kind, he stepped right into the shoes of my mother, which would have made something like that a little awkward. And vaguely incestuous.”

The jounin looks like he’s drooping. “You mean—never?”

Iruka casts back through his memories, and shakes his head. “No,” he affirms, and then, catching the faint wilting of Kakashi’s expression, sighs, relinquishes all claim to dignity, and tacks on, “Hana. She’s the one I had a crush on.”

As expected, that makes Kakashi brighten immediately, something wicked crossing his face. “Inuzuka Hana?”

“She always beat me at spars,” Iruka hisses, feeling his face flush crimson. “And she was really strong. I thought she was cool.”

Kakashi pauses for a moment, expression going distant again. “And that was enough?” he asks. “Just…thinking she was cool? Her strength?”

Well, her generous, ah, assets didn’t really hurt, either, Iruka thinks a little guiltily—schoolteacher or not, he’s still male. But rampaging demons couldn’t drag that out of him, especially in the current company, so he simply nods.

For a long minute, Kakashi just stares at him. Then, with a huff of breath, he sits up and says, “I almost kissed Kurama.”

“What?” Iruka demands, almost falling off the bed in shock. He thinks back to Kakashi’s description of Genma—handsome, and he appeared out of nowhere and completely changed your life, and he’s very kind—and realizes that the same could be said of Konoha’s newest jounin. He’s certainly changed Naruto’s life, at least, and from what Kakashi has mentioned in passing he’s helped turn Team 7 from a gaggle of children eternally at odds into an actual team. Surely that’s enough of a change to count. And the man’s unquestionably pretty, while gentle is the very first word Iruka would use to describe him, if asked.

Taking a deep breath, Iruka wrenches himself back under control. “Almost?” he asks. “You mean you didn’t go through with it?”

Kakashi frowns faintly, just barely visible beneath his mask, and only then because Iruka is looking for it. “It’s…complicated.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Iruka mutters, dragging his palms over his face. With Kakashi, it could hardly be anything else.
The jounin shoots him an aggrieved look. “Kurama was running from Anko, and ended up in my apartment to hide. She would have sensed a henge or a genjutsu, but you can’t see past my couch from the window, so—”

Iruka holds up a hand and closes his eyes in resignation, already getting the picture. “And what would make someone leave you alone like walking in on two people going at it.”

Kakashi nods like this is entirely reasonable. Maybe ‘insane’ is the vital piece Iruka is missing that keeps him from making jounin. “She couldn’t see Kurama, so I thought it would work. And Kurenai certainly thought it was real.”

Poor Kurenai, Iruka thinks with a wince. Whatever her slightly ambiguous relationship with Anko—though, granted, all relationships seem slightly ambiguous when Anko is involved—she’s constantly getting dragged into things. “And…Kurama-san reacted badly?”

“He thanked me for helping him. Said it wasn’t me, it was him. But he looked like he was going to cry.”

Iruka thinks back to Kurama’s smile, that night when they walked together. The redhead had talked about his former sensei, and the look in his eyes—resignation and grief and loss, all mixed up together. “The rumors…” he says hesitantly. “I’ve heard he’s from Uzushiogakure.”

Kakashi blinks, like he’s not entirely certain as to the reason for this line of thought, but nods. Iruka rolls his eyes at the man’s obtuseness where anything even vaguely emotional is involved. And the Sandaime thought it would be good to give him a genin team? “Then…he probably lost everyone,” he says, feeling a flare of sympathy for the redhead, who can still be so astonishingly kind even when his world likely ended around him. “Family, friends, a lover—he lost them all, had nowhere to go, and was forced to wander. But he’s finally settled here, building another home, and suddenly he can have a relationship with someone. Maybe…maybe he just feels guilty, Kakashi.”

The silver-haired jounin looks away, but his expression is thoughtful. He lost everyone, too, Iruka knows. His entire world died with the loss of his team, and then with Namikaze Minato barely three years later. But at the very least, Kakashi had the village to fall back on, and if Kurama has been on his own as a bounty hunter since Uzushio fell—

Iruka doesn’t even want to think about the mess that the man’s head must be.

“Do you want to kiss him?” the chuunin asks gently, because really, that’s one of the more important questions, and Kakashi is likely to overlook it entirely in his bewilderment. “Just because you two got shoved into a situation like that doesn’t particularly mean anything. Would you want to even if Anko wasn’t there to…ah, motivate you?”

Kakashi snorts, dragging a hand through his hair. “I…yes,” he says eventually, sounding like it’s being pulled out of him with torture. “I would.”

“Then just—give him time. Let him know that you’re interested, but you’re not going to push him. Let him adjust to having a home again, and then…maybe then everything will work out for you. For both of you.”

With a sigh, Kakashi slides off the bed and stands, head cocked thoughtfully and expression distant. “That simple?” he asks, but before Iruka can answer he shakes off the mood and turns on the chuunin with a bright smile. “Thanks, Iruka-chan! As an expression of my gratitude, how about I set you up on a date with Hana? Or if you’re just trying to get her attention, we could try writing it in the
sky with fireworks. Oh! Or—"

Iruka thinks he’s entirely justified booting the asshole right out his bedroom window. It’s only the third floor, after all.

Naruto wakes to the sound of rain on his bedroom window and a breath of cool air on his toes. Sasuke’s stolen the blankets again, and is wrapped up like a caterpillar on Naruto’s right. The only part of him that’s visible is a shock of dark hair against the white of the pillow and the very tip of a pale nose. Three weeks ago, Naruto would have yelled and snatched his blankets back, kicked Sasuke out of bed and lorded the knowledge of him being a blanket hog over him at every possible turn. A month ago, had someone suggested that Naruto was familiar with Sasuke’s sleeping habits he’d have pranked them to kingdom come, and Sasuke too for good measure.

But now, one full month since his cousin suggesting they live together, two weeks since Sasuke spent his first night at their place—where he’s somehow spent the majority of his nights since—Naruto just rolls his eyes and slides out of bed, intending to find a few extra covers. He pads out the door, not turning on any lights to avoid waking his teammate, and slips into the hall, heading for the linen closet.

But there’s a light on in the kitchen, even though Naruto is fairly sure it’s well past midnight, and he pauses. No sound reaches him, though in a shinobi household that doesn’t exactly mean anything, and the only noise is that of the rain outside. There’s a draft, too, which is unusual—Kurama generally keeps everything tightly closed at night, and warded with some particularly creative seals.

Naruto only hesitates for another moment before making his decision and continuing past the closet. Carefully, he pushes open the kitchen door and steps in.

The air smells faintly of green tea, and the window above the sink is open, the counter wet with a good amount of rain. Kurama is seated at the table, leaning on his crossed arms with his head bowed and his hair covering his face. A cup of tea is sitting in front of him, but there’s no steam rising from it even in the cool room, and Naruto guesses that it’s been there a while.

“Kurama-nii?” he asks softly, because while he may not be the most observant of people, he doesn’t have to be incredibly sensitive to feel the sadness and confusion in the air.

There’s a pause, so long that Naruto half-wonders if his cousin even heard him. But then Kurama lifts his head, offering a faint, crooked smile that looks more like a grimace than anything. “Naruto,” he says, and it’s probably the first time he’s left ‘kun’ off the end in all the time they’ve been living together. “Are you all right? It’s late.”

Early, more like it, but Naruto doesn’t answer, studying his cousin. Kurama is pale, almost unnervingly so, and even though he’s looking right at Naruto there’s a distracted sort of distance in his eyes. “Are you okay, Kurama-nii?” he counters, clambering into the chair across from the redhead.

Kurama looks startled, as though the question is entirely unexpected, and he swallows once, hard, before looking down at his crossed arms again. “I . . .” he begins slowly. “I just… Right before he died, a very good friend asked me to do something for him. He made me promise, and I never break a promise, but—” He pauses, expression very far away and eyes so incredibly sad that Naruto wants to leap out of his chair and give the man a hug to take even the smallest bit of that pain away. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to keep my word this time, Naruto.”
Naruto watches his cousin for another moment, turning the problem over in his mind. He can imagine what it would be like, having to break a promise, and since he’s got the same nindo he can understand how much it would suck, having to go back on something that you’ve built your whole life around. And to break a promise to a dead friend is even worse.

Still, though…

“Was your friend a really good friend?” Naruto asks thoughtfully.

Kurama glances up at him, expression flickering to surprise again before he nods. “My best friend,” he confirms.

“And you were his best friend too? He knew you really well?”

“I was, and he did.” There's no hesitation in the words.

Naruto smiles at his cousin, and it’s not quite as wide or bright as normal, because Kurama still looks so sad, but it’s still there, and it makes something in Kurama's gaze soften. “Then your friend probably knew how hard it was when he asked you,” he points out. “And even though he knew you weren’t going to like it, and that it’d be really difficult, he asked you anyway. Doesn’t that make doing it even more important?”

Kurama closes his eyes, and the expression on his face is somewhere between amusement, resignation, misery, and relief. “And the bastard would expect me to go through with it, just because he asked,” he murmurs, and then laughs faintly. When he opens his eyes, they're bright with something Naruto can't name. “And… I will, because he was the one who asked. Because he let me go, and he would expect me to let him go if something like this happened.” He rubs his hands over his face, then rakes one through his hair, and when he looks up again there's a smile on his face, soft and sweet as he meets Naruto’s gaze. Reaching out, he ruffles Naruto’s hair and leans forward to kiss his forehead. “Thank you, Naruto. You're far smarter than me about these kinds of things. Thank you.”

Kurama smells like rain and matcha, and his hair is soft and silky where it brushes over Naruto's face. The kiss is something entirely new, and Naruto is frozen, because he’s seen parents do that, but only rarely. Affection, he thinks belatedly, even more than the normal level, and Naruto has dreamed of having a family with hugs and hair-ruffles and fondness, but that’s far closer to love, and no one has ever loved him before, not that they’ve shown in gestures or said in so many words. He swallows and looks up as his cousin comes to stand by his chair, a gentle smile on his face. “Kurama-nii?” he says helplessly.

Kurama leans down and hugs him, wraps him in strong arms and lets Naruto bury his face in citrus-sweet crimson hair. Another kiss is pressed to his forehead, and Kurama murmurs, “I'm very, very lucky to have you in my life, Naruto. Thank you for everything you’ve given me.”

“Kurama-nii?” he says helplessly.

Don’t cry, Naruto berates himself fiercely, even as he feels his face screwing up to hold off the tears. Don’t cry, stupid! It's nothing to be sad about.

But maybe it is, because Naruto can't remember anyone ever thinking they were better off for knowing him. No one, ever, but now Kurama does and Naruto can't even believe his luck in having such a cousin. He’s just never thought that Kurama would feel the same, especially about him.

Kurama pulls back just a little, and his smile has only gotten more brilliant. He sets a hand on Naruto's head and says gently, “Now, why are you up, Naruto? You’ve got missions tomorrow,
Naruto makes a face, remembering Kakashi’s promise of multiple D-ranks as soon as they get done with the morning’s training. Hopefully they won't have to catch the stupid demon-cat Tora again, but Naruto's fairly certain their luck isn’t anywhere near that good, Kurama as his cousin or not. “Sasuke stole all the blankets,” he tells the redhead. “Are there any extras?”

“Of course. He does tend to do that, doesn’t he?” Kurama looks amused, and he stands back to let Naruto slide down from the chair. Then, like it’s entirely natural, he takes Naruto’s hand and walks him back to his room. “Go on and get comfortable, I’ll get them.”

“Thanks, Kurama-nii,” Naruto says obediently, slipping back through the door. Sasuke's still on the far side of the bed—regardless of his status as a blanket hog, he’s pretty fair about keeping their portions of the mattress equal.

Kurama comes in just as he’s getting settled, carrying a heavy quilt that Naruto recognizes from his cousin’s own bed. He opens his mouth to protest, but Kurama smiles and cuts him off, spreading the blanket over him with a few gentle motions. “Don’t worry about it, Naruto,” he whispers, just barely loud enough to hear. “I've got a late patrol anyway, so I’ll be leaving soon. Sleep well.”

“Be careful, Kurama-nii,” Naruto whispers back, not nearly as quiet even though he tries his best. Kurama ruffles his hair fondly, smooths down the blanket, pulls Sasuke's up a little higher, and then steals out of the room without a sound.

Naruto watches him go, no longer nearly as sad and with a new feeling of determination about him, and snuggles down into his pillow with a grin of his own.

He helped.

That’s...kind of amazing.

Kurama is grateful for the distraction of patrol, slipping silently over the rooftops of Konoha in the slowly lightening darkness. His partner for this particular patrol, an unfamiliar jounin Hyuuga, is three streets ahead, though she’s carefully keeping him within range of her Byakugan. In a world where sneak attacks are more common than straightforward ones, night patrols are always tense and serious, no matter how long Konoha’s relative peace has lasted. He’s glad for it, though, because keeping his mind focused as they check every corner and cranny of their route has kept his thoughts from creeping down other, more emotionally fraught paths.

Now, though, with false dawn just starting to touch the sky and their relief waiting by the gate, Kurama can't help but recall what’s been driving him to avoidance for the last six hours.

He’d wanted to kiss Kakashi. Had wanted it like breathing, or gravity—a fact and nothing less. But even now Sasuke is a hole inside of him, not just in his heart but deeper, graver, cutting down to the very core of his being. His soul, he supposes, though that makes it sound far more romantic than it feels.

“Almost six o’clock,” the Hyuuga comments as they fall into step. She glances at him with a faint half-smile. “Right on time, then.”

Kurama smiles back, shutting his thoughts away for the moment. “Quiet night,” he agrees as they drop down into the street.
“Team Five?” a soft voice calls as they approach the gate, and Izumo steps out of the shadows.

“Team Nine,” Kurama corrects, and it’s probably one of the simplest codes—nine for “all clear”, eight for “we’re compromised”, six for “suspicious activity”, and four for “internal disturbances encountered”—but it’s worked since the Nidaime, and for a reason.

Izumo nods in understanding, then gestures the next patrol forward. They salute as they slip past, bounding up to the rooftops as soon as they’re clear, and then disappear into the grey half-light.

“Thank you, Hyuuga-san, Uzumaki-san,” the chuunin says cheerfully, heading back to his post at the gate. From inside the guard’s outpost, Kotetsu gives a cheerful wave, and Kurama waves back.

“How’s good morning, Rui-san” he offers, inclining his head to his partner.

“You as well, Kurama-san,” she responds, then turns on her heel and vanishes with a flicker of chakra and a whirl of leaves.

Kurama hesitates, glancing back towards his apartment in the weak dawn that manages to break through the dispersing clouds. He could go back, say good morning to Naruto and Sasuke, but he feels restless and uncertain. Blowing out a soft sigh, he instead turns towards another familiar destination.

But when he reaches the Memorial Stone, someone else is already there, a small and familiar figure. Kurama watches her for a moment before approaching, settling at her side with his eyes on the carved stone.

“Good morning, Sakura-chan,” he murmurs.

The kunoichi spares a glance to smile at him. “Good morning, Kurama-san,” she answers, before turning her attention back to the stone. “I was just telling Kasumi-san about training the other day.”

The woman who inspired her, Kurama remembers. He tucks his hands into his pockets, eyes automatically finding his mother’s name on the list. It’s right below his father’s, and several down from Obito’s. A ways above Soma Kasumi’s. All the names that Kurama wishes to mourn are absent, though, because those who bear them are still alive. Not his anymore, not yet.

“I think she’d be proud of you.” Kurama studies the name of this strange kunoichi who had such an impact on the girl beside him. “You’ve started well, and you’ll only get stronger from now on.”

“Mm.” Sakura looks calm and settled, at ease with herself. “Kurama-san, can I ask you a question?”

Surprised, Kurama glances down at her. “Of course. What is it?”

She hesitates, biting her lips, and then says softly, “What does it feel like, to be in love?”

Kurama swallows, closing his eyes. Of all the questions to ask, and all the times to ask it—but it’s fine. She’s curious, and maybe…maybe she’s wondering about her crush. For that, Kurama will answer.

“Love is…” He frowns faintly, gathering his thoughts. “It’s…you go in with both eyes wide open, knowing that you’re being stupid, knowing that you’re a fool and that you’re taking idiotic risks and that there’s only the slimmest of all possible chances that anything will come of it. You’ve got no guarantees, no promises that can’t be broken in an instant, and somehow it doesn’t matter, because for all of that you’re drowning and it’s incredible and you never want to come up for air.”
Kurama smiles helplessly, remembering. Remembering what lasted through war and death and bloody tragedy, good even in the midst of an entire world ending. “It hurts you and it hurts the one you love and you can’t do anything about that, but you wouldn’t even if you could because you’re never, ever more alive than when feeling like that, even if it is pain and heartbreak and being closer to someone than was ever intended. That’s what love feels like. It’s stupid and agonizing and ridiculous, and you wouldn’t have it any other way.”

And maybe he’s biased, maybe for some people love is a kind and sweet and gentle thing, but Kurama has never wanted it to be that way for him. Can’t imagine it, actually. If he’s going to be consumed, to burn up and change and be reborn, he wants it to be something huge and vast and overwhelming, not a gradual and delicate difference.

The silence lingers between them in the cool air, fresh with the recent rain and the birdsong rising to greet the coming sun. Sakura is considering his words—her expression is thoughtful and calm, and her eyes are distant. She laces her fingers in front of her, turning her gaze back to the Stone, and then says carefully, “I…don’t think I’m in love with Sasuke-kun. Or. Or not yet. I know his favorite food and his favorite color and—fan-club stuff. But I don’t really know him. When Kakashi-sensei asked us about our dreams he said his goal was to kill a certain man, and I—I don’t know anything about why, or that kind of thing. I…don’t know him. And even if I did, Kasumi-san always said that she was too busy being a kunoichi and training to have a boyfriend. If I want to be as good as Tsunade-sama, I’m going to have to work really hard, and I won't have time, either.”

Her voice is sad, but not resigned, and Kurama can feel the steel within it. He wonders what he can say to that, so ridiculously mature compared to the fangirl she was just a few short weeks ago, and then offers, “For what it’s worth, I’m entirely certain that Ino isn’t going to win his heart any time soon, either.”

Sakura laughs at that, bright and surprised. “No,” she agrees, giggling. “From what I’ve seen Sasuke-kun doesn’t care about hair unless it’s falling in his eyes, so long or short or blond is hardly going to matter to him. Maybe when hormones kick in, but not right now.”

“Very sensible,” Kurama agrees, smiling, and this time the silence is warm and comfortable, regardless of the strengthening wind.

“What are you scared of, Kurama-san?” Sakura asks suddenly, keeping her eyes on the monument.

“Love,” Kurama answers, in a moment of wry honesty. A beat, and then he corrects himself, “Or at least, love that ends badly. I like to think of myself as strong, but…that kind of thing nearly destroyed me, and more than once.” Losing Sasuke the first time, even if he hadn’t known it was love at the time; battles and far too many near-deaths for both of them; and then the first few months here, when the only thing that could possibly drag Kurama out of his grief was the thought of his mission, the mission he and Sasuke had invested everything in—love has almost killed him enough times that he knows to be wary of it.

Sakura looks thoughtful again when she glances back at him, and there’s something firm and focused in her gaze. Just for a moment, Kurama can see a shadow of the woman he knew and lost to Madara, the brave and steady kunoichi that lies somewhere inside this little girl. “Do you regret it? Falling in love, I mean.”

“I—no. Never,” Kurama blurts before he can even think about it, and then pauses. It’s true. He’s never regretted loving Sasuke, regardless of their end, and never while they were fighting, either, no matter how hard their lives became. Sasuke, at the very least, is one area where Kurama simply can’t have regrets.
The kunoichi smiles at him, warm and encouraging, and she looks brilliant in the dawn, as though someone has lit a fire within her heart and its light is escaping through her skin. “Don’t you think,” she says, reaching up to hold her pink hair out of her eyes as the wind gusts past them, “that that makes it all worthwhile? Maybe no matter how it ends, or even how it starts, the real point to falling in love is being in love. It’s…it’s not a path to somewhere else. It’s the destination. It’s the point. Whatever happens afterwards, you still felt love, and were loved, and that’s—isn't that enough?”

For the second time in less than half a day, a child has managed to render him speechless. Kurama stares at her, wide-eyed and a little breathless, and he’s never thought of it that way. But in his life, with its clearly marked endpoints and the loss of so many before he decided to start all over again—those simple words somehow make it a hundred times better.

“You’re…very clever,” he says admiringly, offering her a small smile in return. “Whoever you fall in love with is going to be very, very lucky, Sakura.”

She didn’t have time for love, before. Not in his timeline, with Obito and then Madara and then Madara again. Only her crush on Sasuke, which settled into a strong and solid friendship without any interference from Kurama. But here, now, Kurama is willing to give so very much, so very close to everything, for her to have the chance to find someone she feels is worthy of her heart.

Sakura blushes at his words, and in that instant she’s a child again, too wise for her twelve years of life and not yet grown into herself. “You really think so?” she asks shyly, tucking her hair behind her ears. She’s beaming, though, beautiful in the dawn, and Kurama smiles back.

“Yes,” he says, entirely honest and glad to be. “Yes, Sakura, I do.”
It’s a sign of just how terrible the day is going to be when Kakashi arrives at the apartment, long before the sun is even a concept, to drag them out of their beds.

“Up, up, up!” he crows cheerfully, snatching blankets away from their desperate hands and tossing them gleefully to the side. Naruto, attempting to keep ahold of his pillow at the very least, is pulled out of bed right along with it. He yelps as he goes over the side, landing in a heap on the floor, and groans.

“UP,” Kakashi repeats, with all the manic cheer of a dog when the rabbit is finally cornered. “We’re taking a field trip today! Come on, get moving.”

Sasuke, bleary-eyed and ruffled, looks at Naruto sprawled painfully on the floor, and wonders if it’s too late to write the whole day off as a loss and just go back to bed.

When Kakashi finally chivvies them, reluctantly dressed, packed, and armed, into the kitchen, it’s to the sight of Sakura already there and waiting, looking just as unhappy about the early hour as the rest of them. Even Kurama, who is less a morning person and more a take-every-possible-second-to-enjoy-the-glory-of-existence person, appears distinctly irritated with the Copy-Nin.

“Kakashi?” he growls warningly, clinging to the large mug of coffee in front of him, and the sound is several measures deeper than anything that should conceivably come from a human throat. Sasuke doesn’t have time to consider it, though, as two ration bars are tossed directly into his face. He catches them with a growl of his own, directing a blistering glare at his idiot sensei.

“Now, now, Kurama-kun,” the jounin says almost gleefully. “Shinobi have to be prepared to move at a moment’s notice, no matter what time it is.”

As Kurama growls something back, Sasuke decides he’s probably best leaving them to it, and slinks over to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with his teammates in an attempt at solidarity. Sakura gives him a quick smile, but the usual fawning is entirely absent, and Sasuke is ridiculously thankful for it. He nods in return, because it finally feels safe to do so, and is relieved when this gets no more reaction out of her than Naruto’s mumbled, “Morning, Sakura-chan.”

“Do you know anything?” Sasuke asks in a low voice, eyeing their sensei warily. He and Kurama seem to be having some sort of debate, and it appears that Kurama is losing if the resignation in his expression is anything to go by. That’s…likely not a good sign.

The kunoichi narrows her eyes at Kakashi, looking sleep-deprived and mulish. “No,” she huffs. “He stopped by my house, dragged me out of bed, and gave me five minutes to change and pack as if for a three-day mission.”

Exactly the same as his instructions to them, then. Damn.

“I vote we dye his hair pink, next chance we get,” Naruto mutters, studying Kakashi’s silver hair balefully. “It should hold dye really well. Especially the permanent kind.”

For once, Sasuke finds himself entirely in agreement, and even Sakura looks tempted.

“Hot pink,” Sasuke confirms lowly.

Sakura looks back and forth between them for a moment, clearly torn, and then casts a look at the
clock on the wall. (Sasuke hasn’t been able to bring himself to check it yet; some things are better left a mystery.) At the sight of it, her expression firms, and she adds viciously, “With sparkles.”

They shake on it solemnly.

“Argh. Fine!” Kurama throws his hands up, stepping back in defeat. “You’re an asshole,” he tells the other jounin darkly, then spins on his heel and stalks into the hall. “Give me three minutes.”

Kakashi looks entirely too smug as he rubs his hands together and rounds on the three genin. “Good, good. A nice long hike is the perfect way to start a morning, don’t you think?” he asks cheerfully.

“…Hike?” Sasuke echoes warily.

“…Long?” Naruto repeats, suddenly pale.

“Nice?” Sakura demands, her voice dangerously close to a shriek.

But Kakashi is ignoring them. Like an overgrown, gangly dragonfly, he flits to the hallway and calls, “Kurama-kun? Surely it can’t take—”

A well-aimed shuriken cuts him off before he can finish, embedding itself in the wall half a centimeter from the tip of Kakashi’s gravity-defying hair. “Three minutes,” the redhead repeats threateningly from out of sight. “I still have a minute and thirty-seven seconds left, Kakashi-san.”

Never has an honorific sounded so much like a promise of bodily harm, and Sasuke’s fairly certain that this is love.

Kakashi eyes the deeply buried shuriken, then Kurama’s bedroom door, which is only open a crack, and offers, “Impressive.”

Emerging with a battered pack over his shoulder, still tying a kunai pouch around his leg, Kurama gives the man a flat look. “Oops,” he says breezily as he passes. “Guess I missed.”

“Naruto, how would you feel having me as a stepfather?” Sasuke mutters, starry-eyed, to his… friend? Yes. His friend.

Naruto assesses him for a second, then looks back at his cousin, and then over at their instructor. “Can I kill Kakashi-sensei for you as a wedding present?”

“I’ll help,” Sakura volunteers cheerfully. “Can I be your maid of honor?”

“Okay, time to go!” Kakashi rounds on his snickering genin, eye curved up into a beaming smile. “Come on, march, off to the gate. We’re wasting daylight standing around.”

“What daylight?” Kurama demands sourly, bringing up the rear as they troop out of the apartment. He’s got his sword in hand, and looks to be contemplating the use of it on one silver-haired menace.

Sasuke drops back slightly to walk next to him. “I’ll help you hide the body,” he offers, not entirely facetiously either.

Kurama snorts, but flips his katana around and sheaths it, then slings the sheath across his back. “I appreciate the suggestion,” he says, “but in this case, I think someone might notice him being gone.”

“Really?” Naruto asks skeptically, from Sasuke’s other side. “All he does is laze around in trees and read his stupid porn.”
“He’s friends with Iruka-sensei. You really want to make your Academy teacher sad?”

“We’ll console him and help him through his grief.” Sakura chimes in. She looks entirely too sweet to be proposing bloody murder. “And it’s not like he has to know it was us. Besides, isn’t this good training for assassination missions?”

Kurama eyes the three of them with amusement. “Bloodthirsty little monsters, aren’t you?” he asks almost admiringly. He glances towards their sensei, clearly thoughtful, and then nods decisively. “All right, I’ve got an idea. If you can manage to take Kakashi down and out before we get back to the village, I’ll treat you guys to every meal for a week, and assuming you learn the chakra control techniques Kakashi said he’s going to start you on, I’ll teach you each a ninjutsu of my own creation.”

“Incapacitate or kill?” Sakura asks, because she’s their detail woman.

“Incapacitate,” Kurama says firmly. “If he dies on a training trip I will have to fill out so much paperwork. Spare me that at least, please.”

“Can we use anything, or just the Academy jutsus?” Naruto wants to know.

The redhead considers it for a moment. “I assume you're asking because of your seals? That should be fine. So, anything you have or can make. Deal?”

“Deal,” Sasuke says promptly. “Should I draw up a contract?”

The jounin laughs. “No, let’s call this a gentleman’s agreement. Now get plotting. I’ll go distract your sensei.” He takes two blurring bounds forward, dropping to a walk again beside Kakashi, and immediately strikes up a conversation.

The three genin stare after him for a moment in awe.

“Your cousin is awesome,” Sakura says after a beat.

“The most awesome in the world,” Naruto agrees with a grin. “Did you know he’s in the Bingo Book? And he took down five S-rank missing-nin while he was a bounty hunter.”

“Why couldn’t he have been our sensei?” Sasuke mutters, truly grieved. Somehow, without conscious choice, he’s spent the last two weeks and change camped out in Kurama and Naruto's apartment, first on the couch and then sharing a bed with Naruto when the sofa’s lumps threatened to twist his spine permanently out of alignment. And, while they're hardly the normal family that Sasuke lost five years ago, they're…good. They make him feel good, because Kurama is kind and generous and affectionate to both him and Naruto, and takes the time to train them both, and cooks for them whenever he doesn’t have duties.

He’s…different than Sasuke’s lost family, but he has something of the brother that Itachi used to be in him, only…easier. There’s no expectation of rivalry between them, the way there was whenever Sasuke’s father looked at him and Itachi, no genius firstborn and disappointing second son. There’s just Kurama and Naruto and Sasuke, all living in an apartment meant for two and creating something that feels suspiciously like home.

Sasuke remembers his brother’s taunts about strength and Kurama’s words about looking underneath the underneath, and as he looks around him, at the medic-nin-to-be former fangirl and the sealing-master-to-be former dead-last, he thinks. Just a little, and maybe a touch surreptitiously, but he considers his life right now and compares it to the emptiness of a month ago.
I'm stronger now, he thinks, remembering a their last team training session, where Naruto covered the area with smoke and Sakura called out enemy positions from above and Sasuke trusted them both to steer him, threw his shuriken and kunai on their direction and hit the target every time. I'm stronger here, but…

But what does that mean for his revenge? What does that mean, when he’s no longer entirely sure that he even should get his revenge? Sasuke is sufficiently self-aware to realize that he’s always focused on vengeance rather than grieving, that part of his drive to kill his older brother was a desperation to make the pain go away.

Or do you really think that the same brother who gave you piggyback rides when you were too tired to walk suddenly snapped and killed everyone for no reason?

What if Sasuke's been missing something all these years? He more than anyone is aware of the Sharingan’s capabilities; nothing he saw that night can be entirely trusted, though he’d never thought of it that way before Kurama's words to him. Maybe...maybe there’s a reason beyond Itachi testing his strength.

Sasuke desperately wants there to be one.

“You're up early, Kakashi-san.” The gate guard’s words pull him out of his thoughts, and Sasuke looks up. A sickly-looking tokubetsu jounin with a sword across his back is waiting, expression faintly skeptical as he takes in their ragtag group.

“Training trip,” Kakashi says cheerily, handing over a sheaf of papers. “Got stuck on guard duty again, Hayate?”

The tokujo coughs into his sleeve, the sound wet and rattling, and nods. “The doctor doesn’t want me doing anything strenuous until this new treatment takes effect,” he says miserably, then hands the papers back and waves them through. “Good luck, Kakashi-san, Team 7.”

But Kurama pauses next to Hayate, letting the other jounin pass. “You know, Hayate-san,” he says carefully, low enough that Sasuke only just catches it on his way past. “Tsunade-sama was seen a few days ago in Yugakure. Whatever problem she has with Konoha, it doesn’t extend to Konoha nin, and especially not sick Konoha nin. If you visited her…there’s no guarantee she can help, but it’s a chance.”

The sickly man blinks at Kurama for a moment, clearly shocked, and then ducks his head. “Yugakure, you said?” he murmurs, something painful to witness flickering across his drawn features. “I…thank you, jounin-san.”

“Kurama,” the redhead corrects with a gentle smile. “Uzumaki Kurama.”

“Gekko Hayate,” the tokujo answers, bobbing his head. “It’s...a pleasure to meet you, Kurama-san.”

“Kurama-kun! Falling behind doesn’t mean you get to stay behind!” Kakashi calls from outside the gate. “You don’t want to waste this beautiful morning, do you?”

Kurama's eye-roll puts any other Sasuke has seen to shame. “You say that like I can see something beyond darkness,” he complains, stalking past the three genin to join their sensei. “Why the hell do we have to leave right now? Wouldn’t dawn have been better? Or even ‘vaguely closer to dawn’, rather than ‘witching hour’? Have I mentioned that I hate you?”

He gets a beaming eye-smile in return, and Kakashi whips out his stupid orange book without hesitation, burying his nose in it. “Maa, maa, Kurama-kun, you're so spirited in the morning,” he
says cheerfully. “Off we go, then.”

Kurama’s growl echoes through the darkness like a living thing, too deep a note for a human throat to make, and the red-haired jounin twitches one hand towards his sword before clearly tamping down on his murderous impulses.

“Lead the way,” he snarls, like it’s a threat. Sasuke isn’t entirely sure it’s not one.

Hayate glances after the two, then back at the genin. “Good luck,” he says again, and this time it’s far closer to sympathetic than polite.

Sasuke reins in a wince, takes a fortifying breath, and marches forward. Naruto and Sakura fall in like they’re heading to war, and none of them are entirely certain they’re not.

Why the hell did they get stuck with the crazy sensei?

Kakashi’s first act of the day—once it really is day—is to lead them over a mountain.

It’s not even a nice mountain, either, but one of those ridiculous ones where the trees all grow at right angles and a single misstep is enough to send them cursing and sliding half an hour back down the trail. Not that it can even be called a trail in any sort of seriousness. It’s more akin to Kakashi picking a direction and saying, “Oh, that looks fun! Off we go!”

Sakura’s learning to hate those three words with the passion of a thousand burning suns.

She growls as pebbles start sliding under her sandals, knowing from experience that if she doesn’t find a solid foothold in the next ten seconds she’ll end up in an aggravated heap at the feet of the last trees they passed, about five hundred yards down. But there are no other places to stand that aren’t completely vertical rocks or even more treacherous patches of stone.

But just as she’s resigning herself to yet more gravel burns and another humiliating tumble back down the mountain, a strong hand catches her by the back of her dress and, with a nimble bound, her savior deposits her on a small patch of stable ground.

Naruto’s cousin is a saint, and no one will ever convince Sakura otherwise.

“Kurama-kun,” Kakashi calls back, sounding reproachful.

“You’re an asshole,” Kurama answers without missing a beat. It’s definitely not the first time he’s said it this morning, and Sakura can’t find it in herself to disagree. He turns warm blue eyes on the kunoichi, smiling sympathetically. “You all right, Sakura?”

“I’ll be a lot better once we’re off this mountain,” she says honestly, shoving a few strands of sweaty, dusty hair out of her face with a grimace. Kurama, of course, looks just as fresh as he did when they stepped out the door of his apartment, which should be against some sort of law. She turns a dark scowl on their sensei, who’s bouncing up the trail like a mountain goat. A few yards ahead of her, the boys have paused as well, and if looks could kill…

Well, they wouldn’t have to worry about their bet with Kurama, at the very least.

There’s a soft chuckle, and Kurama reaches out to pick up her disgusting hair. “This must be getting in the way,” he says. “I can braid it, if you’d like.”
“Yes please,” Sakura agrees with a grateful sigh. Already the cool breeze feels amazing against her neck, and Kurama's fingers are deft and practiced as he pulls the strands back from her face and weaves them into a tight plait. Like his own hair is in, she notices, now that she’s not fighting her way up the mountain.

“There we go,” Kurama murmurs after a moment, tying the braid off with a strip of leather. “If you're going to keep your hair long, it might be best to wear it like this for a while, at least until you're more experienced. Maybe even wrap it into a bun. Enemy shinobi tend to use it against you otherwise.”

A month ago, Sakura would have raged against the idea of cutting or changing her hair. Now, with a steady breeze cooling the sweat on the back of her neck and all of the dirt-streaked strands pulled out of her face, she agrees with relief. But the temporary reprieve has started her brain working again, and she considers the way Kurama is standing so easily on the precarious rock face.

“You're…doing something,” she realizes slowly, studying the redhead and then glancing up to do the same to the other jounin. “You and Kakashi-sensei. There's something you're doing that we’re not, and it makes this easy for you.”

Kurama chuckles, reaching out to rest a hand on her head. “Very clever,” he says, just like he did that morning at the Memorial Stone, and his voice is warm. “Since you noticed, I suppose it’s all right to tell you. Try channeling a little chakra into your feet to make you stick to the rocks. Not too much, or—”

“Or you'll get blasted off,” Sakura realizes, understanding snapping into place. “Oh! That’s how shinobi walk up vertical surfaces, or propel themselves across the gaps in the roofs. I thought it was just agility or something.” She beams at the jounin. “Thanks, Kurama-san!”

He nods in response, offers her a faint wink and a smile, and leaps ahead, passing Sakura's teammates with ease and then overtaking Kakashi. The two jounin fall to whispering, but Sakura shuts out her curiosity and focuses on her feet. She’s been reading about medic-nin control exercises, and while the application is entirely different than reading the theory, when she centers all of her concentration on moving just a touch of chakra it comes easily enough. She takes a step, and there's no risk of slipping, no threat of tumbling head over heels down the incline yet again. With a grin, she leaps forward, trying to emulate Kurama, and manages to keep her footing even on the most unlikely of surfaces.

“Chakra,” she says, breathless with success, when she lands next to Naruto and Sasuke. “Try channeling just a touch of chakra to your feet, and you’ll stick to the rocks!”

It never occurs to her not to share what she’s learned, because Naruto and Sasuke are her team, but more than that, they're her friends. She’s thought about it before, and she halfway suspects that the reason the Ino-Shika-Cho trio is so good is that they were all friends long before team assignments. They’ve got a foundation that Team 7 is only just now creating. And, Sasuke or not, Sakura's rivalry with Ino is still definitely there. She wants to show her former friend just how amazing she and these new friends can be. And if that means shaping them into the next legendary trio, well. Sakura's more than prepared to do her part.

“Thanks, Sakura-chan!” Naruto cries excitedly, closing his eyes. Suddenly, Sakura thinks of the insane number of clones her teammate can create and her eyes widen.

“Wait, Naruto, not—!”

There's a sound like an exploding tag going off, and Naruto is blasted ten feet into the air, the rock turning to sand beneath his feet.
“—that much,” Sakura finishes weakly, wincing as she braces for impact.

A flash of red streaks past her, leaps into the air, and snatches Naruto by the front of his jacket. Kurama drops back down, landing in an easy crouch, and eyes his cousin with amusement. “Naruto, what’s the first lesson in learning seals?”

The blond flushes and rubs the back of his head sheepishly. “Uh, read all of the instructions before I even think about trying it myself?”

With an amused shake of his head, Kurama rises to his feet. “Why on earth would you think that chakra techniques are any different, brat? Pay attention to your pretty teammate; she’s definitely the brains of this operation.”

“Hey,” Sasuke mutters in mild affront.

Kurama simply arches a brow at him. “Tell me you weren’t about to do the exact same thing, Sasuke-kun,” he says dryly. “Go on, I’m waiting.”

Sasuke flushes and looks away, and Sakura has to hide a giggle behind her hand.

“A little chakra,” she reiterates, once she can talk without snickering and Kurama has moved ahead again. “Like—like enough to fill an acorn. That’s how I pictured it.”

Naruto and Sasuke exchange glances, but close their eyes agreeably, and she can feel the familiar chakra rising. Naruto's is vast and intense and overpowering, like a hurricane, while Sasuke's is sharp and subtle and strong, like lightning. But they're controlling it fairly well, not letting it leak everywhere, and the next time they take a step she knows they’ve more or less got it.

They're not perfect, of course—Naruto still bounces a little higher than necessary, and Sasuke almost slips, but they’ve done it. They learned something together, and mastered it, and that makes something in Sakura's chest feel huge and warm and buoyant. She laughs, bouncing up next to them, and hooks her arms through theirs. “We did it!” she cheers.

“Hn,” Sasuke grunts, but there's a fierce sort of satisfaction in his eyes, and he doesn’t shake her off. Naruto grins just as widely as Sakura, sun-bright and excited. “Let’s beat Kakashi-sensei and Kurama-nii to the top!” he cries, pulling them forward, and Sakura laughs and keeps pace, Sasuke on her other side. Her legs are aching and she’s sore and bruised just about everywhere, filthy and sweat and thirsty, but her heart is light and her feet are steady as they urge each other on.

The second day of the hell-trip starts, like the first, in the pre-dawn. Naruto is entirely ready to chuck their all-too-enthusiastic sensei right over a cliff when he rouses them, the moon still high in the sky and the birds all still sleeping. Which definitely isn't what Team 7 is doing anymore.

“Argh,” he mutters indistinctly as the demon-sensei whisks the sleeping roll right out from under him and hides it somewhere he can't see. Sasuke and Sakura get the same treatment, and they stagger over towards the low light of the campfire with synchronized groans of complaint. They don’t even have Kurama as an ally this morning, as the jounin looks entirely resigned, sitting on the far side of the fire with a cup of steaming tea.

“Ah, ah,” Kakashi says cheerfully, stepping in front of them as they make to sit down. He points behind them, towards what is just barely recognizable as a trail leading deeper into the forest. “There's a river about half an hour’s steady run that direction. I'll give you an hour and fifteen
minutes to get there, bathe, and get back. Off you go!”

They go.

“How’s that plan to kill him coming along?” Sasuke asks darkly as they bolt down the rutted, overhung, rock-strewn path.

“I just found some more motivation,” Sakura mutters, then trips over a root with a yelp. Naruto manages to catch her before she falls, and Sasuke falls back a little to help him tug her upright. They all keep going, not wanting to find out what Kakashi’s punishment for being late is.

The river is, of course, snow melt directly from the mountain, and instead of taking fifteen minutes to bathe they’re in and out in under five, shaking and nearly blue but much cleaner. Naruto offers Sakura his jacket, and even though it’s definitely seen better days, she takes it gratefully as they huddle around the fireball Sasuke manages to conjure.

“Th-th-that eraser, our first meeting,” Naruto manages to get out, trying to wring feeling back into his fingers even as he counts down the time they have left. “May-maybe something like that? A trap?”

“M-m-m-make it humiliating,” is Sasuke's vote. His lips are blue, but the glint in his dark eyes promises retribution.

“I'll pl-plan it out,” Sakura volunteers, tugging Naruto's coat a little more tightly around herself as she shakes. “Naruto c-can set the trap. Sasuke can be the—” A particularly violent shiver interrupts her “—can be the b-b-bait.”

They all agree with the gravity of generals preparing for battle.

Naruto checks the level of light around them and makes a face. “Time to head back,” he says, trying not to let his teeth chatter. “Running sh-should warm us up.”

The run back is slightly easier, as they’re familiar with the path, and they make it with three minutes to spare. Kurama looks up and smiles at them from where he’s sharpening his sword, and nods at the pot of tea and three bowls of rice porridge set out in front of him.

“Eat up,” he urges. “Kakashi-san is out scouting for clearings to practice in. You’ve got about twenty minutes, I think.”

Naruto staggers over to sit next to his cousin. “Thanks, Kurama-nii,” he says gratefully, and takes a moment to pass Sasuke and Sakura their bowls. Sakura pours tea for all of them, and even though the run has stopped their shaking the hot liquid is more than welcome. He downs half of it without caring that he burns his tongue, and then glances at Kurama. The redhead looks thoughtful, but distant, and Naruto wonders if something happened while they were gone.

Before he can say anything, though, Sasuke swallows his mouthful and asks, “Why did Kakashi drag you along with us?”

Kurama snorts, turning his attention back to his katana. “Because I attempted to be supportive and suggested a training trip to help with teamwork,” he says dryly, and catches their horrified stares. “Oh, don’t look at me like that. The trip was my suggestion, not the contents. That’s all him. But still, it’s for the best. This way all three of you can get the training you need: chakra control, kenjutsu, and taijutsu for Naruto and Sasuke, stamina and strengthening exercises for Sakura. Then tomorrow we’ll head back and do more teamwork-centric stuff on the way.”

Naruto just barely manages not to cry. He had—perhaps optimistically—thought that they’d simply
turn around today and head for home, but apparently Kakashi feels the need to include an entire extra
day of hell-training.

Sakura, though, looks thoughtful. “The other teams aren’t doing this,” she points out, and that’s true.
Naruto’s seen Kiba a few times since graduation, and Team 8 has mostly been working on tracking
and taijutsu. They haven’t taken any three-day trips out of the village, certainly.

“No,” Kurama agrees, looking at them with warm blue eyes crinkled in a secret smile. “They're not.”

Sakura smiles back at him, like she’s sharing in the secret, and then stands. “Come on,” she says
cheerfully. “If we’re going to be working on taijutsu we should stretch.”

“I'll take care of your dishes,” Kurama agrees easily, the motions of the whetstone never faltering.
“Good luck, you three.”

Naruto hastily swallows the last few bites of his porridge and bolts after her, tugging Sasuke along
with him. The other boy looks irritated, but doesn’t resist, and with Sasuke that’s the equivalent of an
enthusiastic agreement. Sakura leads them over to a small patch of wispy grass and drops down,
carefully stretching out her legs. She glances at the two of them, copying her motions, and then back
at the red-haired jounin by the fire.

“I think Kakashi-sensei and Kurama-san are setting us up to be ready for the Chuunin Exams,” she
says, her voice soft but with a thread of excitement in it.

Mid-stretch, Naruto pauses, blinking. “Really?” he asks, feeling anticipation thrum through him.
“You think so?” The very idea of it—becoming chuunin only a few short months after graduation—
is incredibly cool, and he can hardly contain his whoop of joy.

Sakura nods, switching to stretching out her arms. “Training trips are generally preparation for
starting C-rank missions,” she explains. “The textbook said it’s a way for jounin sensei to judge their
team in unfamiliar surroundings, without the pressure of a paid mission. A team has to have
completed a certain number of C-ranks before they're eligible for the Exams, and if we’re going to
start them this early…” She trails off, but her eyes are bright. “Maybe they think we have a chance.”

Naruto glances over at Sasuke, just time to meet the Uchiha's gaze. He’s fairly certain his own
excitement is mirrored in the dark eyes.

“We’re…doing better as a team,” Sasuke says, and it’s not even grudging. “A lot better,” he adds
after a moment, and there's a faint smile on his face as he glances between the three of them.

“Yeah!” Naruto agrees enthusiastically, grinning right back. He’d never have imagined, a month
ago, that Sasuke-teme could somehow turn into ‘my friend Sasuke.’ Who is, granted, still
occasionally a teme, but he wouldn’t really be Sasuke if he wasn’t.

“Like the Sannin,” Sakura murmurs, and then flushes when they glance at her questioningly. “Ah,
Hokage-sama had a team years ago, and people called them the Sannin because they were three of
the best ninja to ever come out of Konoha. Tsunade-sama was their medic, Jiraiya-sama was their
taijutsu specialist, and Orochimaru was their ninjutsu expert before he betrayed the village. They’re
still considered three of the most powerful shinobi in all the Elemental Countries.”

Silence falls as they concentrate on loosening up, but it’s careful, thoughtful, and considering. They
all avoid each other’s eyes, nobody wanting to be the first to say anything in case what they’re
thinking is different.

But Naruto’s never been willing to let awkwardness stand in the way of anything, and after a long
moment he looks up with an even wider grin. “I bet the Sannin passed the Chuunin Exams on their first try,” he says, and it’s almost a dare. “Ninjutsu expert, huh?”

“Probably,” Sasuke agrees slowly, but he’s already got that focused, determined look on his face that he gets when Kurama shows him a new and complicated kenjutsu move. “Taijutsu. That… sounds right.”

It does.

“And I’ll be a frontline medic, just like Tsunade-sama,” Sakura confirms. Her tone is iron and forge-fire and tempered steel, and she stretches out a hand into the middle of their small circle. “We’re going to be the next Sannin.”

It isn’t a suggestion, or a question, and Naruto finds himself reaching out before he consciously thinks about it, laying his hand over hers. “The dead-last, the fangirl, and the teme?” he says with a grin. “We’re gonna show them all. We’ll be stronger than the Sannin. Orochimaru betrayed the village, right? But none of us will.”

Sasuke looks between them for a long, breathless moment, and Naruto can hear his own heart pounding away in his chest. This… feels important. It’s not just an oath between three children. It’s a thousand times more significant than that. It’s three completely different people thrown together in one team, with failure on one side and success on the other, and this feels like choosing in which direction their next steps falls.

Now they’re just waiting on one thing.

Slowly, slowly, Sasuke reaches out and lays his hand over Naruto’s, over Sakura’s. He meets each of their eyes in turn, intent and ferocious, and says, “As a team. We’ll do it. We’ll get stronger, become the strongest. We will.”

None of them see it, but back by the fire, sharpening his sword, Kurama smiles.
Kakashi waits until the genin are a good ten minutes down the trail to take his seat across the fire from Kurama. The redhead glances up at him with mild interest, which is far better than the growling, snapping, and snarling Kakashi got when he went to wake the other jounin yesterday morning.

Honestly, Kakashi hadn’t even known the man could be grumpy—though, granted, perhaps leaning right down into Kurama's space and staring him awake wasn’t the best way to get on his good side. The man has fast reflexes, and only Kakashi stealing the three kunai and set of poisoned senbon out from under his pillow kept those reflexes from being deadly.

But Kurama is quiet this morning, something easy in the set of his shoulders and the lines of his face. His blue eyes are calm and almost serene, and in the very first light of dawn filtering down through the trees his garnet hair glows brighter than coals. The scars on his face are milder in this light, not so much kinder as simply lesser. The golden skin glows, the tattooed seal shimmer faintly violet, and he looks somehow both strange and entirely suited to this place, this moment inside of time.

Kurama is beautiful, though no one would ever mistake him for a woman.

Kakashi’s never particularly thought of beauty as confined to a single gender, anyway.

He meets blue eyes squarely, to find them regarding him in return, thoughtful and composed, with no hint of the shaking, grieving man who bolted from Kakashi's apartment the other day as though a whole pack of missing-nin were on his heels. Instead, there's a centered sort of peace, closer to acceptance, and Kakashi figures this is about as close to a perfect opportunity as he’ll ever get.

It’s just about all he’s thought of lately, aside from planning this trip. Kurama and his smile and his laugh and his hips, his wry good humor and the sharp edge of his tongue and the way his hair seems to catch the light and burn. Maybe Anko was the catalyst, but these thoughts aren’t new. Even now Kakashi remembers that afternoon in the rain, when all the world was a wonder and Kurama was the one to let him see it, witness his village through the eyes of a stranger with no roots to keep him steady. Not then, but Kakashi would like to think that Konoha has given him roots again, ties to people and a place and an idea.

Because the Will of Fire burns just as brightly in Kurama as any Konoha-bred shinobi—brighter, Kakashi sometimes thinks—and he’s good for them, for all of them. The lost Uzumaki, and maybe it’s destiny that he settled in Konoha after wandering for so long with the wind. Other Uzumaki have found a home there, and with any luck and hope at all Kurama will as well.

There’s an expectant sort of openness in Kurama's face as he watches the other jounin, mug of tea cradled between his palms. It smells faintly floral, delicately sharp, and it fills Kakashi's lungs when he takes a breath in preparation.

“'The other day,’’ he says softly, and it’s a relief when Kurama doesn’t tense. The redhead simply looks at him, even though it’s entirely clear what he’s talking about. There’s no other response, though, and Kakashi resigns himself to muddling through this the hard way and forges on. “It was… my idea, and Anko's presence, but—” He fumbles, not sure how to end that sentence regardless of how many time’s he’s rehearsed this in his head.

Did you want to kiss him? Iruka's voice whispers in his ear, and yes, he does, which is half the problem. Kakashi doesn’t do things like this. Have relationships. Want to kiss people on anything
more than a one-night-only basis. He hasn’t ever had a stable anything with someone else, and the thought of having his first when it’s actually important is mildly terrifying.

(Or completely petrifying, one of the two.)

But Kurama is watching him thoughtfully, and his blue eyes have a faintly warm crinkle to them, amused and sympathetic and kind, and it eases the wild lurching in Kakashi’s chest. Another moment and Kurama drops his gaze, looks down at the cup in his hands and twists it carefully, making the pale green liquid shimmer.

“But you’re wondering if it could be anything else? Something more?” he finishes for the Copy-Nin, and there’s a slight, wry tilt to his mouth. “I’m…not entirely sure.” Another pause, longer this time, and he adds slowly, “I suppose…that would depend on what kind of ‘something more’ you wanted it to be.” The wry smile gets stronger, edges towards wistful. “I’m…not good at casual. For anything, but especially when it comes to people who are important to me, and you are, Kakashi. My…last partner—I knew him from the time we were children, and he was—well. First and only, since then.”


Kurama laughs, bright and startled, and the sound is brilliant and sweet in the morning sun. He’s grinning when he looks back at Kakashi who simply freezes, because he’s the type of beautiful that just doesn’t make sense and it’s—

His hair slides over his shoulder, garnets and embers and crimson spun out into strands, and that alone is enough to steal all of Kakashi’s higher brain function.

“Don’t worry,” the man says, still chuckling softly. “I won’t tell anyone you have them. It can be our secret.” Catching Kakashi’s half-hopeful, half-wary glance, he adds with a warm smile, “And…I think that us together would be…acceptable. Maybe even good.” He looks down at his cup again, smile faltering, and murmurs, “I don’t know how much beyond ‘not casual’ I can promise, Kakashi, but…I’ll try if you will.”

“Maa, I think I can live with that,” Kakashi answers, and he thinks he feels relief and hope and anticipation and maybe even delight, but really, with these emotion things, who knows?

The kid’s avoiding him, feeling guilty. Obito would find it sad, if it wasn’t so annoying.

A twist of the seal around him, a simple demand for attention, and the air shimmers as the brat appears before him. So different from the boy Obito first met, but the same in all the ways that matter. He’s watching Obito with wide and wary blue eyes, and even though he’ll never admit it Obito can understand both Sasuke and Kakashi’s infatuation.

“Bakashi, huh?” Obito questions dryly, lazily whirling his shakujo through the air in front of him. He ignores the faint wince his question earns. “You know he used to be your teacher, right?”

The smile Kurama gives him is small and fleeting and bitter. It doesn’t suit him. “A lifetime ago,” he says cynically. “Sometimes it feels like more. We’re…both different people now. I don’t think it could have happened in my time, but here…” He trails off helplessly.

There’s an apology on his lips, but Obito slams the butt of his shakujo into the ground with a sharp thud before he can get it out, setting the rings to jangling. The tense silence holds for an endless
moment, and then Obito allows himself to chuckle softly.

“Well,” he says philosophically, “I can't say much for your taste. Or mine, for that matter.” Another attempt to protest, doubtless to do something stupid and noble like step aside, but Obito waves a hand, cutting him off again. “Stop it. Kakashi and me as I am right now—there's no chance of us working, not in hell. Even beyond the soul-in-a-seal thing, this Kakashi hasn’t ever had to face the idea of me not being dead, or me being anything less than the ridiculous saint-thing he made me into. It took ours watching me try to enslave the entire world followed by three years of constant warfare to adjust. This one… I’ll always be the teammate martyred in the name of friendship to him. And maybe somewhere inside I'm still that kid, but it's buried deep, and I'm not about to dig it out again. Sorry, brat. This Kakashi's yours, bought and paid for. No take-backs.”

For one terrifying moment, Obito thinks the kid is going to cry.

He recovers, thank fucking hell, and manages a faint, wry smile in place of tears. “Thanks,” he whispers, dropping his head and scrubbing his palms over his face. “Thanks, Obito. I-I never told you, I don’t think, but I'm really grateful you’re on our side. Not just because of mokuton, or Kamui, but—”

To his own horror, Obito feels a flush rising in his cheeks—and really, with his scars, that kind of thing is never pretty. He harrumphs and twists around, giving Kurama his back. “Go on, get lost,” he snaps. “Don’t you have innocent little kids to corrupt?”

That earns him a soft laugh. “Ah, you're right. But—thank you again, Obito. You're…a good friend.”

*The damn brat just doesn’t know when to quit*, Obito thinks, hoping beyond hope that his ears aren’t quite as red as they feel.

He feels the last of Kurama's chakra fade and sighs, turning around to survey the empty clearing. Just for a moment, he lets himself long for their own time, for a slyly smirking Copy-Nin whose forgiveness he earned through fire and blood and death, for a man with silver hair and big hands and a bigger heart, a soft mouth over his, deft fingers tracing his scars and a low, lazy rumble in his ear.

They had so much, something so beautiful even if it was forged in ash and destruction. They had it until Madara wrenched it away, the way he did everything even remotely good in Obito's life. Rin, and Minato-sensei, and Konoha, and Kakashi.

So much, and Obito was so blinded by madness and grief that he never noticed the first three being taken away until it was too late, didn’t have nearly enough time for *anything* with the fourth. Lost it all, and he can never get it back now, because like Kurama's Sasuke, they're dead. Those here are different people, separate, and can never be what Kurama and Obito lost.

A spot of color on the other side of the clearing makes Obito sigh. He releases his shakujo, leaving it planted in the ground, and steps across the grass to stand before the little thing.

The book is small and lurid orange, the cover tattered and stained with blood and soot, one corner blackened from fire or lighting. (And that’s only improved the contents, he knows.) But still, Obito lifts it carefully, like it’s something precious, and cradles it to his chest.

It’s enough.

He closes his eye, shuts out this nighttime world that's so achingly, unbearably empty, and tries not to let the grief overwhelm him.
Naruto staggers to his feet, blood leaking from a bitten lip, covered in scratches from his last flight into a tree, with bruises already blooming on his face and arms and shoulders. But he’s firm despite the aches and pains, as set and steady as one of Konoha’s ancient oaks for all that he and Kurama share the blood of a coastal city. He brings his hands up, drops into a ready stance, and breathes out.

“Again,” he says stubbornly.

Across the small clearing, his cousin watches him placidly, arms loose by his sides. His garnet hair is brown with dust and half of it has fallen out of its braid, and even if that’s the only sign that they’ve been sparring for close to two hours now, Naruto is still absurdly pleased with himself to have gotten that much of a hit in.

“Again,” he insists, trying to hide the fact that he’s panting, almost swaying where he stands.

Orochimaru, he thinks, steeling himself to stand straight once more. Ninjutsu expert, possibly knows more jutsus than anyone else alive. That’s who I’m going to surpass. That’s my goal. That’s what matters.

He sets his feet, calls up the last reserves of his stamina, and repeats, “Again.”

Something flashes through Kurama’s eyes—it could be amusement or indulgence, admiration or irritation, but Naruto can’t see clearly enough to tell through the sweat dripping down into his eyes. “Very well,” he says softly, and brings his hands up.

Naruto takes half of a very short second to identify the shape the seal takes and then moves, leaping out of the way. Rat seal, damn, chances are it’s a Katon jutsu, water, water—

Flame roars past his head like a dragon’s breath, and Naruto backpedals just in time, fingers flying through a series that’s become second nature over the course of the morning. Ox, tiger, three more in quick succession, hands together and then— “Suiton: Gunshot!”

A flicker of red too dark for flames makes him dive to the side, just as another surge of fire decimates the ground where he was standing. He wheels around even as he falls, trying again—not water this time, there isn’t enough nearby for the powerful jutsus and Kurama’s good enough with fire that anything less won’t even faze him. Earth now, and it’s hard, the chakra slipping and sliding from his grasp as he tries to force it into shape, but it still comes. Another dodge, more fire, and he rolls away, sheep horse dragon and hands up again. “Doton: Earth Dragon Bullet!”

The jutsu leaves his fingers just as Kurama is leaping for him, and it actually forces the jounin to twist and change trajectory. He lands off to the side, already beginning more hand signs, but Naruto started as soon as he completed the Doton—with Kurama he learned not to rest on his laurels within the first ten minutes, on pain of utter humiliation.

“Katon: Balsam Spread!”


The bare second when neither of them can see is enough. Naruto races through the necessary seals—
his last jutsu, because he’s only learned four of them, one for each element and that’s all he can use, while Kurama throws out things he’s never even heard of. He nearly fumbles more than once, but manages to finish and cries, “Fuu ton: Great Breakthrough!”

Unlike with the other elements, wind comes to him like a friend, happy to go where he wants it and so blindingly simple to shape. He takes it, molds it, and releases it, and the result is the next best thing to a hurricane, roaring and shrieking through the trees and making the entire surrounding forest lash wildly as it passes. Naruto stares after it in awe, hardly feeling the way his muscles have turned to water in the face of something so awesome.

“Congratulations,” Kurama says from behind him, making Naruto flinch and whip around, wide-eyed. His cousin grins at him, only the faintest hint of mischief to show how much he delights in scarring the stuffing out of Naruto, and adds, “I think you just survived your first ninjutsu battle.” He reaches out and fondly, proudly ruffles Naruto’s hair. “Good job. You’re better at memorization than you give yourself credit for, as long as you put some effort into it.”

Naruto pulls a face. “Yeah, but ninjutsu is cool. All the other stuff people asked me to memorize was dumb and useless.”

Kurama laughs softly. “I suppose,” he admits. “But really, you did well even with opposing elements. Though I’m going to assume you’re wind natured, after that last blast.” He offers Naruto a hand up. “Ready for taijutsu training now?”

Naruto manfully bites back a whimper, even as he allows his cousin to help him get vaguely upright. “I guess.”

“Don’t sound too enthusiastic, brat,” Kurama orders with a wicked grin, mussing Naruto’s hair. “We might have to give you a double lesson.”

“Kakashi-sensei infected you!” Naruto realizes with a surge of horror, leaping back and leveling an accusing finger at his formerly sweet relative. “He’s—he’s contaminated you!”

Kurama just laughs again, pushing him in the direction of their camp. “Get lost, brat. You earned a half hour break, so go enjoy it. I’ll make sure we didn’t leave anything smoldering.”

Right now, thirty minutes of inaction sounds like the next best thing to nirvana. Naruto groans gratefully and staggers in the direction Kurama pushed him, trying to work with feet that feel like blocks of lead. He can’t remember the last time he was this tired, not even the day where Kakashi had them doing D-ranks back-to-back from noon until nightfall.

It’s small comfort to find, when he drags himself back into the clearing, that Sasuke looks just as thoroughly beaten as he feels. The other boy is sprawled out on his back next to the cold campfire, eyes closed and breathing hard, his face sweaty and bruised. Naruto groans something that might be a greeting, dropping down next to him. After a moment of debate, Naruto decides that yes, he really is that ballsy, and tips over with a grin. His head lands square on Sasuke’s stomach, and the Uchiha grunts, then snaps, “Get the hell off, dobe!”

“Make me, teme,” Naruto shoots back, closing his eyes so as to fully appreciate his pillow. “This is revenge for all those times you’ve stolen the blankets.”

“I do not steal the blankets,” Sasuke hisses. “Dobe, I’m warning you.”

“Teme—”

“Please shut up,” Sakura groans, soaked from head to toe and clearly at the end of her tether, before
collapsing beside them and promptly listing over to use Naruto's arm as a pillow of her own. He whimpers, because the muscles there are all really freaking sore, seeing as Kurama made him practice the hand signs for all the new jutsus at least fifty times each before he was allowed to add chakra.

“Endurance training?” Sasuke asks, and it’s almost sympathetic. Naruto surreptitiously checks the sky for winged pigs.

“His hair will be pink with sparkles before we get back to Konoha,” Sakura growls, and it’s blatantly a threat, the or else merely left off the end for politeness’s sake. “He had me water-walking. On the river. Every time I fell in I’d get swept half a mile downstream, then have to run back and do it all over again.”

Soft, gentle laughter makes them all twitch their heads around to glare at Kurama, emerging from the trees. He muffles it quickly, instead turning a sympathetic smile on the three exhausted genin. “Take an hour,” he offers, settling beside the fire and poking at the coals with a stick. “We can afford to take that much time out of torturing you.”

Sakura mutters something that sounds suspiciously like saint—which she sure as hell won't be saying as soon as she gets Kurama alone for ninjutsu training, but Naruto will let her keep her delusions for now. It’s not like he wasn’t already aware of it, learning sealing from his cousin as he has been. Sasuke also looks skeptical, because he knows what a perfectionist Kurama is in kenjutsu, and the two boys exchange looks before unanimously deciding to keep their mouths shut.

Sasuke didn’t believe in Kurama's evil side at first, either.

The small clearing is quiet, Kurama humming as he heats water but no sound otherwise. Then, without warning, Sakura asks, “If a shinobi wants to specialize in something, is there an official process to it?”

Kurama glances up, slightly surprised, and nods. “Yes. For official specialization, you have to fill out a Declaration of Concentration form for your particular area and then file it with the Hokage. He adds the information to your file.” There’s a pause as he studies them, and then he adds, “But most shinobi don’t choose to specialize until they’re at least chuunin, and usually higher-level chuunin at that. People tend to wait and find out what they’re good at first.”

Naruto drags himself upright with a derisive snort. “It doesn’t matter if we’re good at it or not right now,” he says with mulish determination. “’Cause we’re gonna work hard enough that we’re the best at it, no matter what.”

Sasuke makes a noise of agreement, pushing up to sit cross-legged. Sakura joins her teammates after another moment, though she looks annoyed at being robbed of her headrest. “I was thinking…I would ask around the village for taijutsu masters,” the Uchiha says slowly. “When I unlock the Sharingan, I’ll be able to analyze and copy styles, but until then…” He grimaces faintly.

“Seeing isn't the same as knowing, though,” Kurama points out thoughtfully, his expression considering. “If you want to be able to incorporate another style into your own, you’ve got to understand it first. That takes time and dedication, even with a Sharingan.”

That just earns him Sasuke's ‘I know this already and you are wasting time for both of us pointing it out’ grunt, though it’s lacking the condescending edge it generally has. He eyes the redhead for a moment, then says, “You’re familiar with the Sharingan.”

Kurama smiles faintly at him, cupping his hands under his chin and resting his elbows on his knees.
“I told you I had a friend from the Uchiha clan,” he points out, looking wistful and a little sad. “He explained a bit about it for me. But I do think taijutsu is a good idea, especially with how you're progressing at kenjutsu. You're very fast, Sasuke, even for an Uchiha, and you've got far more determination to succeed than most people your age. That certainly helps.”

Sasuke flushes dull red and ducks his head to hide his face—very, very different, Naruto thinks almost fondly, than the arrogant teme who just a month ago would have accepted such words as his due. Of course, part of the reason for the blush is probably because it’s Kurama saying it, which is a little…weird.

“And Sakura?” the jounin asks, looking over with a one brow arched. “I take it you're thinking of specializing, too?”

Sakura nods, that now-familiar glint of steel entering her gaze again. “Medical ninjutsu,” she affirms. “And from what I've read Tsunade-sama augments her strength with chakra. Since medic-nins are usually weak and need to be protected, I want to learn something like that as well.”

“And I'm gonna master every ninjutsu anyone can teach me,” Naruto swears. “Believe it!”

“Hm.” Kurama looks between the three of them, then tilts his head thoughtfully. “You know, if you're really serious about this, there's a way to get declared a permanent squad, which will keep you from being separated, regardless of your ranks.” When they all perk up, listening intently, he adds warningly, “It’s not a decision to be made lightly. You need your immediate superior’s signature—in this case your jounin sensei’s—and the approval of at least two other nin above chuunin level who have either served with or trained you. And you can't undo it once it’s done; the Hokage takes such things very seriously, and it’s pretty much a lifetime commitment. It’s rare, too, because those kinds of bonds go beyond even genin team connections. You have to be sure.”

Another shared glance, and Naruto already knows what his teammates are thinking. They’ll let it drop for now, pretend to think it over, but they already know they're going to do it.

They can't become the next Sannin if they're separated, after all.

Naruto smiles a little to himself, thinking of their team introductions on the roof that day, and how Kakashi asked them their dreams. If their sensei asked again, Naruto thinks it’s pretty safe to say that they've all changed their dreams by now. Oh, he still wants to be Hokage eventually, and he doesn’t know if Sasuke's given up his goal yet, but still. It’s different. The Sannin are just as respected as the Hokage, just as acknowledged, and being the next Sannin is a team thing, rather than a personal goal. Naruto would rather have this team than that silly hat, frankly.

Meeting Sasuke's dark eyes, Sakura's steady ones, Naruto is entirely sure that they feel the same.
Their trip back is quicker, since the genin can now take to the branches without fear of falling. Kakashi also takes mercy—for some small measure of the word—on them and leads the whole group over the milder slopes of the mountain's feet, rather than the cruel summit. There's even a quick stop in a tiny village for lunch, which is a hundred times more preferable than choking down ration bars on the move, and Kurama is just as glad to pull up a seat at the local noodle bar as any of the kids.

Kakashi's been looking smug, Kurama thinks, stretching out his legs and studying the menu on the wall. He almost chuckles to himself, because even though he's known the man for years, he'd never expected such a straightforward confrontation. And maybe it's not nice to find amusement in the man's emotional awkwardness, but it's...refreshing.

He already knows that the infamous and unbeatable Copy-Nin is far from the porn-reading, eternally tardy reality, but even so, seeing this side of the man is very close to sweet, which is one word he's never before thought to use in regards to Kakashi. Kurama is still slightly wary, slightly unsure of whether this is the right thing to do, but he doesn't want to look at Kakashi and want to kiss him and force himself to look away.

Eight years with Sasuke, back in his own time, and he's far too used to being one half of a whole. Oh, he's hardly lonely, not with Naruto and this Sasuke and Sakura, Genma and Raidou and Iruka drifting around the edges, but—

There's a certain level of closeness in being with someone that's hard to find elsewhere, and that's what Kurama misses.

"Maa, Kurama, you're thinking deep thoughts," a voice drawls right next to his ear, and it's only years of practice living with a sneaky bastard who was far too fond of giving his partner heart attacks that keeps him from flinching.

"And you have no concept of personal space," Kurama retorts, gently pushing the silver-haired jounin back four inches. "I think I already proved liable to react badly if you stare at me like that."

Kakashi just looks cheerfully mischievous, lounging back against the bar with lazy disregard for manners. "And your first instinct to finding yourself unarmed was to try and strangle me with the blanket. Very interesting."

Kurama glances away to hide the flush creeping up his cheeks. He huffs, dragging a hand through his hair, and tries not to remember the reason for that. Not Madara, actually, and not bad, but...Sasuke. And embarrassing, because regardless of personal growth Sasuke was always a bastard at heart. "I'd apologize," he mutters, rolling his eyes, "except that I'm not sorry at all."

"At all?" Kakashi has the audacity to pout at him, though it's mostly hidden behind the mask.

"Maybe that I failed."

"Maa, you're so mean to me, Kurama. That's abuse."

"No jury on earth would convict me after ten minutes in a room with you."

Kakashi smiles at him, startlingly fond with his eyes crinkled warmly. "Mm," he hums, and reaches out to pick up a lock of hair from where it's fallen over Kurama's shoulder. With a light tug, he twists
it through his fingers, pale skin stark against the red, and lifts it up as though to kiss it, though he stops short. "I'm glad," he says softly, then lets the lock fall and turns away to give the waitress his order.

Kurama finds he can't even begin to recall how to breathe.

Before he can think of how to react, though, there's a slightly sheepish shuffle and three genin slide into the stall, their expressions suspiciously innocent. Naruto is tucking away a sealing scroll, motions quick and furtive, and there's a familiar devious glint in Sakura's eyes. Sasuke manages to look mostly guiltless, but even he has a faint (and evil) smile playing about his mouth.

Kurama stares at them for a long moment, brow arched, and then glances over at Kakashi, who appears entirely oblivious. (Odds are even as to whether he is or not; Kurama can never quite tell.) So, they're going to be making their move, then. It's equally appealing to dive out of the way as it is to stay for the show. After a second's debate, Kurama decides he's probably better off where he is, and settles into his seat a little more.

"Miso ramen, please," he tells the waitress hovering at his elbow, flashing her a distracted smile.

"We can have ramen, Kurama-nii?" Naruto chimes in excitedly, clambering up onto his stool. "Yeah!"

"Don't go overboard, brat," Kurama warns him, though it's fond. "If you eat too much you won't be able to keep up on the way back." Ignoring his counterpart's pout, he turns his attention back to the menu for lack of a less conspicuous place to stare. He wants to look over at Kakashi, check if the man is watching him too, but forces his eyes not to move.

He'd forgotten what it was like, this awareness, this constant attention to the whereabouts of someone else. It's not quite nerves and not quite obsession, a current of lightning beneath his skin that only reacts to one person, and Kakashi is it. The other jounin's lazy sprawl of limbs feels imprinted on Kurama's mind, layered into his senses. Every twitch Kakashi makes is recorded and remembered, analyzed for cause and intention.

It's a little frightening, quite a bit overwhelming.

Breathing out a slow sigh, Kurama props his elbows on the edge of the counter and leans on one arm, stretching the other out before him. He berates himself for overthinking things, can almost hear Sasuke's droll 'I thought I warned you about that and how it overtaxes your brain', but can't help it.

He's still a target, still in danger, still a danger to those around him, at least until Tobi and Orochimaru are dealt with. Even Itachi, because as much as the man is a pacifist, Kurama has screwed up pretty much every one of his plans, and he's not one to take that kind of thing lying down. What he'll do is the real question, as is what Kurama can talk him out of doing.

And then…Tobi. But at least in that matter, Kurama can leave the plans to someone else. Who else is better suited to understanding the insane mind of Uchiha Obito than a not-entirely-insane Uchiha Obito, after all? So Kurama is released from all but the most basic planning and training there, and it's undeniably reassuring.

He still definitely wants to see Orochimaru's head on a pike, though, that's for certain.

Calloused fingers ghosting over his arm make him flinch and look back towards his companion. Kakashi isn't watching him, though, has his eyes on the intricate seals on Kurama's left arm. Gently, carefully, he slides his fingers through Kurama's and lifts his arm, studying the markings as if he
didn't just take Kurama's hand, and Kurama has to give him points for sheer bold-faced smoothness. Whether or not Kakashi has had relationship experience, in this area at least he's accomplished.

"Pretty," he says, finger following the curve of a circle inked in azure blue, right in the middle of Kurama's forearm.

"Useful," Kurama counters, but he doesn't move away from the touch. "Seals aren't meant to be a decoration, Kakashi. Mine just...manage to multitask, I suppose." He watches those fingers against his skin and curses himself for feeling breathless, managing to get out, "Do you really have to feel up my elemental conversion matrixes?"

Kakashi just hums thoughtfully again, and says, "I heard you mention them before. Connected to your chakra reserves, right? Isn't that dangerous?"

"If I'm not careful," Kurama admits. "But...it's been a long time since I was forced to burn them out. It takes a lot of doing, because even though they're delicate, I designed them for use."

"Your own design, then?" Kakashi doesn't wait for an answer, but slides his hand up, touching another seal in black ink, which curls out like vines and then in with sharp edges. "And this?"

It's harder than it should be to remember. Kurama licks his lips and wonders if this is a subtle form of torture, revenge for leaving that night after Anko cornering him. But surely Kakashi isn't that sadistic, Naruto's complaints aside. "The sealing equivalent of a minor genjutsu. It uses chakra to create a sort of perception barrier, the same way a genjutsu would. If I add chakra to that, it makes my presences feel...less important, so people will overlook me. Mild, but it works."

Another touch, deft and bold, this time on the back of Kurama's wrist. "This?"

"To trap and contain any mind-altering jutsus directed at me. I don't like being controlled." Kakashi casts a fleeting, unreadable look at him and then moves on, and this time Kurama doesn't even wait for him to ask before he explains, "Simple cargo seal. And that's another. It's hard to fit a legacy of sealing and a whole arsenal of weapons into a single bag, and I wasn't about to put down roots while I was going after Akatsuki."

Not like I have now.

It hangs unspoken in the air, tentative and a little wary, but Kakashi glances up to meet his eyes and smiles faintly, just enough to show. "Mm," he says lazily, nodding his thanks to the waitress as his oden is placed in front of him. "For the best, I think."

Kurama wonders, sometimes. Straight revenge, taking out Akatsuki members one after another and claiming their heads—that was so much easier, really, than being a person. He thinks that maybe that's one of the reasons his Sasuke chose the path he did, in the end. Because feeling and loving and being a part of something is hard, and for all that Kurama would like to think he's adjusted, there's still a part of him that wonders if he'll someday wake up and still be in that barren, burned, and ruined world, with Sasuke's breath rattling in his chest and every kiss tasting of blood.

With a sigh, Kurama pushes his bowl of ramen over to Naruto, then stands. Kakashi is watching him a little warily, their fingers still entwined, and Kurama smiles at him even as he pulls away. "Too many heavy thoughts, sorry," he says, trying to keep his tone light. "I'll catch up to you guys in a bit, Kakashi."

Kakashi studies him for a long moment before he nods and lets Kurama go. "Don't take too long," he says, and it's as close to be careful as he'll get right now.
Kurama smiles at him, touches the back of his hand in silent gratitude, and reaches out to ruffle Naruto's hair. He ducks down in between Naruto and Sakura and murmurs, "Get him good," pats Sasuke on the shoulder, and steps out into the afternoon sunlight. There's a faint breeze, just enough to make the day comfortable, and Kurama tucks his hands into his pockets as he sets off down the street.

There's a desolate world in his thoughts, a dying best friend-lover who won't give up and won't give in but won't get better, a demon who is the incarnation of malice but a better friend than he ever deserved, a one-eyed man holding an orange book with an expression on his scarred face like he's once again watching his whole world crumble around him.

They're thoughts not fit for company beyond Kurama himself, who understands, who mourns them, who will do everything in his power to make sure they never exist again.

Sasuke watches Naruto's cousin walk away, shoulders a straight line and head held high, bright hair almost glowing in the sun. The man has descended once more to melancholy, and Sasuke hasn't noticed until now that lately such fits have become rarer, confined to the middle of the night when Sasuke comes out to get a glass of water and finds Kurama seated on the windowsill, staring at the moon. He's been happy lately, smiles genuine and laughter bright and clear, and only now, seeing the deep sort of sadness cross his blue eyes, does Sasuke understand just how much the change means.

He clenches his hands in his lap, staring blankly into his soba. Together, he and Naruto make Kurama happy, and somehow that feels...incredible. Humbling. It's different than being the son of the clan head, different than being another genius like his brother and getting a smile from his father that says I expected no less. Because there's something about Kurama that's very close to broken, and when he's around them, helping or teaching or cooking or just relaxing, the jagged edges seem less sharp, more bearable. They ease him, his heart or his loss or his soul or whatever romantic name can be put to those broken pieces, and that's—

Well. Sasuke's never been anything similar, to anyone, and it's all but impossible to look Kurama in the eye, see the way he needs them, and then go back to being cold and indifferent. Maybe Itachi would be disciplined enough, unkind enough, but Sasuke isn't. Not now, and hopefully not ever.

"Kakashi-sensei," Sakura says softly from Naruto's other side. "Kurama-san...he's from Uzushiogakure, isn't he?"

Kakashi makes a thoughtful noise, dragging his chopsticks through the broth remaining in his bowl. "Was might be a better way of putting it," he says, and the tone is light and absent, but the expression visible on his face is anything but. "Uzushio was destroyed almost thirty years ago, during the Second Shinobi World War."

For the first time that Sasuke can remember, Naruto isn't paying attention to the three bowls of ramen in front of him. He's gazing down the street, on the figure only just now disappearing into the line of trees, and Sasuke can't read his expression. Something sad, and fierce, and protective, and just a little helpless—though that could be Sasuke projecting, because that's certainly what he feels right now.

"Kurama-nii said that there weren't many Uzushio shinobi left," the blond says. "And that whoever did manage to escape scattered rather than go to another village. I don't think Kurama-nii has even met another one in a long time."
Kakashi dips his head, silver hair falling over his face. "I wouldn't be surprised." His voice is almost startlingly grim. "Whirlpool Country was small, and Uzushio even smaller—not even a quarter the size of Konoha. The Uzumaki were probably their most prominent clan, and they weren't even as numerous as the Hyuuga."

"But…" Sakura bites her lip, looking down, and then seems to come to a decision. She squares her shoulder, raises her head, and asks, "But why is Uzushio never mentioned in Konoha? Even if it was destroyed, the Second Shinobi War wasn't that long ago. There have to be records, or histories, or something, but when I looked in the library there were a couple of scrolls on advanced sealing theory and one recipe book and nothing else."

"Because Uzushio's destruction is one of the darkest stains on Konoha's honor," Kakashi says simply. He taps the spiral design on his jounin vest and explains, "We were allies, from the moment of Konoha's founding on. Senju Hashirama took a Whirlpool Country princess— an Uzumaki princess—as his bride. For years, when the rest of the Elemental Countries were at war or in turmoil, Konoha and Uzushio were stable because of their alliance. Trade, training, military support, political alliances—the villages were friends. But Uzushio specialized in sealing, taught its shinobi seals the way we teach bunshin. Other countries were afraid of that, and how powerful it made them, so Kiri and Iwa banded together and destroyed the entire village over the course of a few days. Uzushio sent a call for help, but Konoha was in the middle of several other battles and reached them too late. So it's our shame, as a village, and people don't tend to talk about it."

Sasuke looks down where his hands are fisted in his pants, curled so tightly the knuckles are bleached white, and wonders what it must be like to lose your entire home and be able to do nothing. Not even seek revenge, because one man—even a handful of shinobi—against two of the most powerful Hidden Villages is just another name for suicide.

And still Kurama can smile. Still he can laugh with them and teach them his family's kenjutsu and seals. Sasuke doesn't know whether to be impressed or horrified.

"Do you know what it was like?" Naruto asks suddenly, poking at his ramen without looking up. His brows are drawn down in an entirely unfamiliar expression, and even after living with him, Sasuke still isn't used to seeing Naruto any mood but bubbly. He…doesn't like it. "Uzushio. I…I don't really wanna ask Kurama-nii, in case I make him sad, but…I want to know. It's where my clan is from."

Sasuke's never thought of it this way before, but…he and Naruto have that in common, now. He's the last of his clan beside his brother, and Kurama and Naruto are the last of their clan as well. Both survivors of tragedies, and the only ones to carry their clans' legacies.

Somehow, Sasuke wishes it was one thing neither of them shared.

"I knew a girl from Uzushio," Kakashi says slowly, but it's more thoughtful than reluctant. "She would talk about it, sometimes, when she missed it. It was built around an inlet, right on the coast, with bridges out over the water and a large dock. Colorful buildings, built tall, and columns and fountains everywhere. There were hills all around it, steep and green. It was a small village, but beautiful. Lots of white stone and red tiles, and the whole thing was built on levels, terraces set into the hills. She would say that when the sun set, it made the whole place look like it had been dipped in gold, and the sea would turn as crimson as an Uzumaki's hair."

Naruto looks very close to shaken, and on instinct Sasuke reaches out to grab his wrist, gripping it tightly. On his other side Sakura is leaning into him, and when she meets Sasuke's eyes her expression is troubled. But they don't move, don't say anything, just offer all the silent support they can.
"It sounds…” Naruto trails off, then shakes himself like a dog getting rid of water. "No wonder Kurama-nii misses it! It sounds amazing!" But the enthusiasm is ever so slightly less than normal, and the blue eyes are still uneasy. He subsides after a moment, then takes a deep breath and blurts, "Kakashi-sensei, do you think that Konoha can be Kurama-nii's home, too, even if he lost Uzushio?"

There's a long moment of silence, and then Kakashi reaches out and drops a hand on Naruto's head. He looks between the three of them, eye curving into an honest smile, and says, "I think, between the four of us, that we can manage to convince him."

Kurama wanders through the forests, touching stately trunks and brushing through low-hanging branches. The air smells green and sharp and fresh, with an undertone of age and earth, and he loves it, missed it so very much when Madara scorched the earth bare. When the man was done there were only a few scattered stands of trees left, and even those were quickly destroyed in battle.

Obito might be the one with mokuton, but Kurama has long since learned to appreciate Fire Country's vast forests, and for more than simply their strategic value.

The day is warm and the sun is bright, and the dark thoughts are slowly filtering away. Kurama stretches his arms above his head to pop his spine, and contemplates calling one of his summons for a bit of uncomplicated company. Not toads anymore, not since the Kyuubi changed him—something about opposing prerogatives and only a moron contesting the claim of those allied with a bijuu. Foxes now, and as much as Naruto has always loved the toads there's something about his foxes that just suits him. They're shy and haven't contracted often, because humans too often look at them and think of the folk tales, wicked kitsune tricksters and innocent farmers set at odds, with the humans coming out on the losing side. But they're just another animal, many tails or not, and Kurama is hardly in any position to judge the truth of rumor.

They're tricksters, certainly, but so it Kurama.

He gives in after another moment, a puff of smoke dissipating on the wind and leaving behind a tall white fox with long legs and three tails, crouched beside him. She yips a greeting, high and bright, and Kurama laughs as he drops to his knees beside her. "Fuji," he offers, and in a moment she's put her paws on his shoulders and is inspecting every inch of his face.

"So long," she bemoans, and cuffs him in the side of the head with a paw. "We thought you'd forgotten about us, Naru—"

"Kurama," he corrects gently. "There's already a Naruto here, and I'm not about to take away his name."

Fuji pauses and cocks her head, studying him. "It worked, then," she says, and it's not a question. A moment later she shakes it off, white tails flashing in the sun. "Well," she says judiciously, surveying their surroundings like a very short queen. "It's certainly nicer than the last place. May I…?"

"Go ahead," Kurama chuckles, and she's off in a bolt of snowy fur and silent feet. Maybe this is why he likes the foxes so much, Kurama reflects with a wry grin as he rises to his feet. They're very much like he is, short attention spans and boundless curiosity and all. Fuji is one of the younger ones and all the more enthusiastic for it, and Kurama tends to call her first whenever his mood needs lightening.
"I'll bring you back a rabbit if I find one!" Fuji calls back, and Kurama might be worried, except that for all that she's formidable in a fight, she's an absolutely lousy hunter.

"Sure!" he answers. "Sometime next year, right?"

There's no answer but an indignant huff and a swish of tails, and then the fox is gone. Kurama shakes his head fondly and turns, looking back through the wood to the village. Naruto, Sakura, and Sasuke are likely still eating, and Kakashi is probably keeping them company. If he goes now, he can catch them before they even leave, and hopefully they'll forget his descent into reminiscence. Naruto will like Fuji, too, and Sakura will doubtless think she's pretty, which Fuji will enjoy.

Decided, Kurama allows himself a smile and takes three steps in the direction of the village.

Then, without any warning, a long-fingered hand closes around his throat and he's all but hurled back against the bole of a tree. He hits the wood back-first, all the air driven from his lungs, and reacts automatically, one foot lashing out even as one hand closes over his attacker's wrist and the other goes for a poisoned senbon. Poison's not his first choice, never seems fair, but Kurama has learned the hard way not to give anyone an opening for anything. He flicks one out and palms it, stabs forward only to be blocked.

Another kick, harder this time and aimed to do damage, and the man grunts, falling back with a pained sound. He immediately lunges again, but Kurama is used to having far less reaction time than even that and ducks away, leaps out of reach and meets the next barrage of blows head-on. He stabs again, scratches skin and feels a thrill of victory, then ducks to the side and disengages. It's a fast-acting paralysis, and while a tiny scratch won't release much into the bloodstream, it will be enough to hinder movement. Enough for a victory, hopefully.

But the man is moving in again, a blur of dark hair and dark clothes. Kurama makes to take a step forward and meet him when suddenly a vicious snarl splits the air. Something white and shining flashes in between them, cutting the attacker off mid-movement as Fuji bristles. She's as big as a normal nin-ken, but wilder, more feral in appearance with her sharp snout full of needle teeth and pointed ears flat back against her head. Her head is down, her tails are fanned out behind her, and her claws are digging deep into the soft earth, leaving furrows.

"Kurama?" she growls, a request for permission to attack.

Kurama doesn't answer. He straightens, stepping forward to put a hand on her back, and turns his gaze to the man across from him.

"Uchiha Itachi," he says politely, and if he doesn't quite meet those red-and-black eyes he thinks he can be forgiven. "I was wondering when you would find me."
Atonement

Itachi straightens, expression icy as he stares across the gap between them. The Akatsuki cloak is gone, likely surrendered for the sake of subtlety, and the nail polish is gone as well. He looks calm and entirely composed, and Kurama is willing to bet that the man didn’t hear his conversation with Fuji; after all, that sort of thing is hard to keep such an even keel about.

“You are the bounty hunter known as the Red Maelstrom, formerly of Uzushiogakure,” Itachi says, eyes narrowing, “known for claiming the bounties of five S-rank missing-nin.”

Kurama stifles a snort, because that nickname will never not be ironic. “Yes,” he agrees easily, twisting his fingers into Fuji’s fur. Then he adds agreeably, “Of course, I also killed Zetsu, but I suppose one can hardly claim a bounty on a creature created by Madara. Even one that’s an imperfect clone of the first Hokage.”

The other man’s entire body goes taut, as though he’s been electrified, and he takes a menacing step forward. Fuji drops her head and snarls, sharp and warning, and he stops again. “How do you know of that, bounty hunter?” he demands.

Kurama studies the former clan heir, trying to find the cracks he knows are there. Every part of Kurama’s plan has driven the man into a corner: the deaths of the Akatsuki members one by one, the disappearance of Konan and Nagato, the sudden frenzied distraction of Tobi and his lack of orders. Akatsuki has completely fallen apart, and with it have gone most of Itachi’s own plans, the little stability left in his life after fleeing Konoha. Everything has shattered around him, leaving him flailing for a reason, a path, and somehow Kurama can’t find it in himself to be sympathetic.

He’s always considered Itachi a great man, but he’s not a good one. And as much as Sasuke always worshiped him, mourned him, Kurama has never truly been able to bring himself to do the same. Itachi participated in the murder his entire clan, and even if he was backed into a corner, given no choice, commanded by the very village he served to do such a thing, Kurama has always felt that there are limits to what a good man can force himself to do. And, while he can never put himself entirely in Itachi’s shoes, he knows himself well enough to understand that he would have found another way, had it been him.

He wouldn’t have done it. He’d have made a different choice, taken another path, and perhaps it’s cruel and selfish, but he can’t respect Itachi for not doing the same.

“I know a lot of things, Uchiha,” he says at length. “Including who else was there the night you murdered your clan, and on whose orders it was. I also know your brother, and what you plan on making him do.”

There’s rage creeping into that icy gaze, fury and something very close to panic. “You—”

“You think it will fix anything at all, atoning like this?” Kurama demands, and he’s learned over the years not to lose his temper, to keep himself contained, but regardless of how fair it is he’s always at least partially blamed Itachi for what Sasuke did, what he became in those years after he left Konoha. His composure is slipping through his fingers, sliding away from him, but he doesn’t bother reaching for it again. Not now. “You practically destroyed him trying to make him stronger, and he loved you. He still loves you, even if he’ll never admit it. It’s taken so long to even begin to put the pieces back together. I won’t let you break him again, Uchiha.”

Red-black eyes narrow, shoulders stiffen, and this time even Fuji’s snarl doesn’t deter Itachi as he
takes three looming, deliberate steps closer. “Sasuke has nothing to do with me,” he says, and there's a level of acid beneath the ice in his voice. “You will not touch him.”

Kurama resists the urge to draw his sword, and instead loosens his grip on Fuji’s ruff. She doesn’t tense, gives no sign, but Kurama has fought with her long enough to know that she understands regardless. “That’s where you’re wrong, Uchiha,” he counters. “Sasuke is on a genin team with my cousin. They’re friends, and the three of them together are finding their reasons to be strong.” He smiles, faint and mocking, and says, “Did you know that they’re going to be the next Sannin?”

“Orochimaru,” Itachi hisses, just the faintest thread of sound. He shifts back, as though to run and find the Snake right this moment.

“No.” Kurama cuts him off before he can even move, entirely amused. He chuckles, remembers that morning in their camp, three small children with all the resolve of those five times their age and the strength and determination to make it come true. “No, that would be Naruto's role, I believe, as ninjutsu expert. Sasuke has been collecting taijutsu style ideas. I assume he plans to emulate Jiraiya.”

Were the atmosphere any less tense, Kurama would laugh at the strange, pained twitch that crosses Itachi’s face. As it is, he simply smiles at the man, and even he can tell that it’s more a baring of teeth than any expression of amusement. “They’re progressing,” he says sharply. “They’re going to become something great, the three of them together. And I won’t let you ruin that, Itachi, not for the sake of your guilt and what you think you need to atone for. More than revenge, more than vengeance or strength, Sasuke needs his brother. I can be a friend, an ally, but not blood. You’ll have to do that.”

He lifts his hand completely, and Fuji blurs forward, almost too fast to see. Itachi catches it, tries to leap back and away, but for all the Sharingan’s prediction powers it has no effect on the reflexes, and Fuji is a fox summons, a creature of fire and wind and speed. She slams into him, bears him to the ground, and half a second later Kurama joins her, pinning Itachi down bodily with his naked sword pressed against the man’s jugular.

“One last warning,” Kurama says softly, knees trapping Itachi’s hands and gaze fixed just below his eyes. It’s hard to make a firm point without eye contact, but he’s not willing to give the man even three seconds of his will. Or seventy-two hours, depending on one’s perception. “You’re a genius, I know. So find another way. Madara will be dealt with in less than a year. Akatsuki is gone. I’ve upset his plans and stalled him at every possible turn. I’ll even break his hold over Kirigakure soon enough. So look at what you have right now, Uchiha. Look at what you had in the past. Look at what you want from the future. And make your choice.”

He rises to his feet and steps away, sliding Ginkaze back into its sheath with a soft hiss. Fuji remains where she is, crouched and growling, so Kurama feels safe enough turning his back and heading back towards the town.

“Wait.”

Kurama pauses beside a tree, lightly resting a hand on the gnarled bark. “Yes?” he asks politely.

“Five bounties, one death,” Itachi says, and Kurama can hear him pushing to his feet. “There were ten members.”

“Mm.” Kurama looks up to where the sun is cresting in the sky. It’s brilliantly blue, the color of his counterpart’s eyes when he’s laughing, when he and Sasuke stagger in from training bruised and breathless but entirely satisfied. “Five bounties, one death, one plan that will not fail, and two in hiding, no longer a threat. Nagato was never a villain, Uchiha, much like you, and Konan simply
followed him. The Rinnegan eyes are gone, and soon Madara will be no more than a bad memory. You don’t have much time, if that cough of yours is as bad as I think it is, so don’t hesitate. Fuji, let’s go.”

Fur brushes against his leg as the fox slides under his hand, tails flicking warily, and Kurama spares one last glance over his shoulder as he leaves. Itachi stands frozen amongst the trees, gaze fixed on him but distant, no longer a threat, and Kurama nods in satisfaction. He cards his fingers through Fuji’s fur and walks away.

He’s made his point. The rest is up to Itachi now, and entirely out of his hands.

Itachi has been hearing rumors for months, almost a full year, that whisper of Uzushio’s Red Maelstrom. His strength, his viciousness, his cunning, the bounties he has claimed, and his status as one of the last remaining nin to wear an Uzushiogakure hitai-ate.

But he wears Konoha’s mark now, and Itachi has seen nothing vicious about him. He could have claimed another bounty, larger than most, when he had his blade at Itachi’s throat, but he hadn’t. He had pulled away, stepped back with only a spoken warning, and even turned his back. The summons’ assistance or not, it was a bold and reckless thing to do. Almost stupid, especially when facing an Uchiha, but he’d done it nevertheless.

Cunning he is, most certainly. Itachi swallows, leaning back against the tree behind him and closing his eyes. Uzumaki knows about Madara, about everything, and Itachi has to wonder how such a thing is possible. No one knows outside of Itachi and Madara himself, and even that is mostly guesswork, the assumption that the one posing as Tobi is speaking the truth where his identity is concerned.

But—

Sasuke, Itachi thinks, hands clenching until his nails cut into his palms. Sasuke.

Uzumaki said that they’re going to be the next Sannin, but that Sasuke has not taken the role of the power-obsessed traitor. He isn't thinking of revenge, or if he is it isn't foremost in his thoughts. He has a team and a goal beyond Itachi’s death, and Itachi can't decide if he is relieved or horrified. So much planning has gone into his death, this one last act for the sake of his little brother. Itachi has devoted himself to it for five years, almost six, and now it’s gone, vanished in the face of two other children and a shared dream.

What should he do now, then, that his own goals have been shattered so irrevocably?

For one mad moment, he considers ignoring the bounty hunter’s threat, going after Sasuke right this moment. Surely, surely Sasuke has not entirely given up on revenge. Surely it can still work. And if not, Itachi can remind him—a genjutsu, a memory of that night, three seconds in Tsukiyomi and Sasuke will want nothing more than his death. And should that fail to be enough, Sasuke has opened his heart. They're only children, easy targets, and—

No, Itachi thinks, pressing his hands over his eyes as horror races through him. No more. He’s murdered children already, knows just how simple it is to steal such new and fragile life, and he can’t do it again. Not if he wants to stay sane. Bad enough, when Akatsuki was making plans, to learn that at least three of the jinchuuriki were children, two of them young enough to nearly be Sasuke's age and one not much older. Itachi’s sanity can't bear the thought of more deaths just in the name of his own. Not now. Maybe, maybe, with time he’ll have the necessary resolve, but Uzumaki has shaken
Madara will be dealt with in less than a year. Akatsuki is gone. I've upset his plans and stalled him at every possible turn. I'll even break his hold over Kirigakure soon enough.

Itachi wants to call it the worst kind of hubris, those words. Bravado and boasting without any sort of substance behind it, but he can't. Even if the bounty hunter never met his gaze, Itachi looked into ocean-blue eyes and saw the resolve there, the burning certainty in his very soul. Uzumaki Kurama is a man to be feared, a man with a heart full of conviction and a willingness to go to any lengths in the name of protecting those close to him.

Somehow Sasuke has been included in that number, fallen under Uzumaki’s regard and out of Itachi’s reach.

Suddenly, the desire to see his little brother grips Itachi, wrenches at him like an open wound, and he’s moving before he even considers it, before he remembers that Sasuke is traveling with Copy-Nin Kakashi and the Red Maelstrom, who has already seen him, and that Uzumaki has yet to dismiss his summons, who doubtless has sharp senses. But they're weak objections in the face of his sudden need, this unexpected weakness.

He moves swiftly and silently through the trees, flying across the branches towards the chakra signals on the road. Four of them, with two more joining, and Itachi slows as he approaches, taking extra care to remain unheard. There's a break in the trees, just enough to see through, and he hides himself among the leaves and looks out.

Uzumaki is laughing as the three genin surround him and the fox summons. The pink-haired girl as bright-faced and clearly besotted, and the blond boy—the jinchuuriki, Naruto, and the bounty hunter's cousin—is all but bouncing, dividing his attention between the white fox and the red-haired man, mouth moving in a constant stream of questions. Kakashi is standing beside Uzumaki, leaning casually over his shoulder to see the creature, who’s clearly preening under so much attention. His eye is crinkled in a smile that Itachi can tell is genuine even from his current distance, and he’s just a little bit closer to Uzumaki than is entirely appropriate for friends.

Kakashi's hair is also bright, brilliant pink and...glittering. Itachi blinks slowly, deliberately, and then forcibly ignores it. This, at least, is something he’s probably better off not understanding.

It’s Sasuke he looks to last, and it takes a moment to spot him, because every other time Itachi has seen him since that night he’s held himself apart, aloof and curt and cold, entirely derisive of everyone. But now he’s on his knees beside the fox, one hand rubbing behind her ears, and he’s speaking to his female teammate without any sort of contempt in his expression. Even when Naruto bounces close and nearly knocks him over, the only reaction is a roll of the dark eyes and a faint, true smile as he makes some sort of retort. The blond parries cheerfully, grinning widely, and the kunoichi giggles, and they all smile at each other for a moment, united.

It’s...staggering.

Four months since Itachi saw his little brother last, and in that time he’s returned to being the child that Itachi knew, that he carried on his back and tucked in at night and promised to train with even if he could only rarely keep his word. Perhaps not entirely, and perhaps Sasuke will never again fully be that innocent and kind boy, but this…

This is enough.

Itachi sinks back against the bole of the tree, drawing in a shaky breath, and unconsciously runs a
hand over his hair to smooth it down. Sasuke is smiling, and has made friends, and has a dream now, a reason for strength beyond revenge. Seeing him, watching him, there's no possible way that Itachi can take that away from him, regardless of future plans and Eternal Mangekyo and the threat of Madara. Already Itachi has taken away his family and his innocence, all but his entire childhood.

He won't take this—won't take them—away from Sasuke too.

Itachi draws in a deep breath and stands, looking after the retreating team as they take to the trees beside the road. He considers the path before him, remembering Uzumaki’s words once more. Look at what you have right now, Uchiha. Look at what you had in the past. Look at what you want from the future. And make your choice.

Itachi takes a breath, another, a third, and each one feels like courage, like fear overcome and fortunes decided. He looks at the sky, the sun so high and bright, a raven circling in the distance, and makes his choice.

Perhaps it’s time the Hokage hears of his suspicions, of Madara’s possible return.

Perhaps something can be done where he can finally go home.

They make it back to the village by nightfall, the three genin all but asleep on their feet. Kurama looks them over, something soft and fond and gentle in his chest, and suggests, “Sakura, do you want to stay at our apartment tonight? It’s near here, and I can send a message to your parents.”

Sakura covers a yawn that almost splits her face, staggering a little with tiredness, and nods sleepily. “Thank you, Kurama-san,” she says gratefully.

There’s no question that Sasuke will be spending the night. He and Naruto are leaning on each other, though not blatantly, as they stagger down the street. Kakashi—newly bright-haired and sparkly, which is astonishingly brilliant and ridiculous, and Kurama adores the three little monsters for doing it—is shepherding them around turns, looking entirely too amused, and he arches a brow at the redhead as he and Sakura catch up.

“Kurama…” he starts, a pout threatening.

Kurama stares at the other jounin for a long moment, then rolls his eyes. “Sakura's taking the couch,” he points out, though he’s not really hopeful that such a thing will be any sort of deterrent to a determined Copy-Nin.

And, indeed, all it gets him is a blinding smile. “That’s all right,” Kakashi says cheerfully. “I’m sure your bed can fit two if we squish.”

It takes very, very much effort not to drag his hands over his face and mutter oaths. Instead, he levels a flat look at the other man. “Squish?”

“Cuddle, spoon, snuggle, huddle, nestle together, hug, share space—”

“Oh dear god stop please coming up with synonyms.” This time Kurama gives in, pressing a hand over his eyes and sighing heavily. “You enjoy torturing me,” he accuses without lifting his head. “I just—you know what? Fine. Just…keep your hands to yourself or I’ll pin them to the wall with kunai.”

Kakashi tries the pout again. It doesn’t work any better this time. “You say that like I have impure
intentions, Kurama. That wounds me.”

“I’ll wound you,” Kurama mutters, but it’s half-hearted at best. The idea of sharing a bed, even innocently, with someone else is…appealing. He hasn’t done so in a very long time. Even with his Sasuke, they were always on the move, on the run, and since Kurama needed far less sleep and Sasuke was often frighteningly ill, Kurama spent most rest periods wide awake and on alert. The thought of having another body next to him, warm and peaceful and comforting, is…good.

That it’s Kakashi, that they might have…something, is even better.

Soft fur brushes his leg, Fuji nosing her way underneath his hand again, and when he looks down the fox offers him a toothy grin, her dark eyes mischievous. “Should I let Sakura-chan’s parents know?” she asks, and he’s known her long enough to read the teasing she’s not giving him in that look.

With a sigh and a halfhearted swat to her ears, he nods his agreement. “Thank you, Fuji. Would you like to stay, or go back?”

Fuji tips her head, considering, and then huffs in resignation. “I’ll dismiss myself when I’m done,” she says. “There’s news I need to share with the others. You’ll stay out of trouble, Kurama?”

“Don’t I always?”

She barks out a high, yipping laugh and swats him with her tails. “We’re your summons for a reason,” she reminds him slyly, then bounds away, her brilliantly white form disappearing into the distance.

Kurama watches her go, feeling fond and unspeakably glad that she remembers. That they all will. The dimension where summons live exists outside of this time and space, and because they’re bound to him in blood and chakra they remember what used to be, what now will never be. It’s possible the toads will as well, though Kurama thinks they won’t—that tie is old, after all, and had been dissolved long before he and Sasuke started the time reversal seal.

“I’ve never met anyone with fox summons before,” Kakashi says almost idly. He’s got his nose buried in his book, and Kurama just rolls his eyes tolerantly as he turns the genin towards his building and herds them up the stairs.

“They suit me, I think,” he says simply, and Kakashi offers no response. Still, Kurama can feel that sharp gaze on him, considering.

He wonders if Kakashi, genius that he is, will ever be able to find all the pieces and assemble them, be able to pick out all the facts among the half-truths, and what he’ll say if he does.

Wonders if he’ll say anything at all, because Kakashi of all people understands desperate measures and suicidal plans that have only the slightest chance of working.

The apartment is warm and quiet as Kurama turns on lights and pulls out bedding. Sakura is already sprawled out on the couch by the time he gets back, but she’s not alone. Naruto is curled up at her feet, and Sasuke is mashed in between them, bare feet tucked under her knees and head resting on Naruto’s hip. Kakashi is standing over them, staring down in clear, affectionate bemusement, and there’s something wistful in his eye.

“They’re a good team,” he says, and his voice is startlingly hoarse. “I…didn’t expect them to be.”

“I don’t think anyone did,” Kurama answers honestly, remembering his own fractured genin team,
and the absolute lack of surprise in the face of it. He steps forward, around Kakashi, and spreads the gathered blankets over the three genin, careful to make sure that none of them are uncovered. They don’t even twitch, and though Kurama knows they’ll likely be sore and a little cranky tomorrow morning, for now they're peaceful and at ease.

“You did.”

It takes a moment to remember what they're talking about, and when he does Kurama bites his lip, wondering how much to say. “I understand what it’s like for a team to have potential,” he offers at length, and feels his heart clench a little. It hurts sometimes, looking at these three and seeing what his team could have been with the right push. “And…for that potential to be overlooked. I just…if they did have potential, I didn’t want it to be wasted.”

He looks up at meets Kakashi's gaze, helpless to explain, because he hadn’t known that this would happen with just a little care, a little nudge to each of them. Hadn’t expected it, for all that it now means to him. That they now mean to him, or mean to him again. “They’re…they're going to be great someday, Kakashi. They're going to be the best. They want it, so much more than most shinobi ever do, and they can. I just—why not give them the means to do it?”

There's no response, but Kakashi reaches out and takes his hand, pulls him away and down the hall, right into the bedroom. He wraps his arms around Kurama, strong and immovable and irresistible, and topples them onto the mattress, curling up around the redhead. Kurama doesn’t fight it, can't, lays his arms over Kakashi's and presses back as the taller man pulls him closer. It's the closest he’s been to anyone but Naruto since his return, since that last kiss with Sasuke beneath the stars, and something in him aches as it releases, a long coil of tension unwinding from his spine and leaving him boneless and all but shaking.

Kakashi says nothing, curls his body around him and kisses the back of his neck softly, sweetly, and Kurama closes his eyes and lets the warm darkness close in around them both.
Goals

Chapter Notes

Yes, the foxes all have flower/plant names. (Fuji – wisteria, Momiji – Japanese maple, Kaede – maple, Ran – orchid, Ume – plum blossom, Oka – cherry blossom.) I’ve never claimed to be overly imaginative.

English is ridiculously hard right now, between the fever and the cold medicine. If there’s anything glaringly wrong, I’ll come back and fix it after the room stops spinning.

**Edit:** fixed all the random non-English words inserted wherever my vocabulary apparently failed me. Sorry!

All motion within the Jounin Standby Station grinds to a complete halt when Kakashi saunters in the next morning.

Nose buried in his book, Kakashi doesn’t even bother looking up, though Kurama, walking next to him, seems to have been overcome by an abrupt coughing fit and is politely trying to cover his mouth. Kakashi eyes him sidelong, amused, and then goes back to his Icha Icha.

Somewhere in the room, a shinobi chokes, and someone else breathes, “Pink,” like it’s a prayer.

Truthfully, Kakashi really couldn’t care less. In fact, he’s vaguely sort of proud of his team for being cunning and vicious enough to pull the whole thing off, though he finds it slightly suspicious that they did it the minute Kurama was depressed and then lit up like it was their birthdays come early when he laughed. Sasuke distracted Kakashi while Sakura baited the trap, and then Naruto led him right into it. It was a stroke of genius on their parts to use a copy of the newest Icha Icha as a lure, and it shows that Sakura—who used to scream and hit Naruto whenever he descended to using…less savory tactics—is finally adjusting to the shinobi anything-goes-as-long-as-it-works mentality.

Either that, or she just really wanted revenge.

(To be entirely honest, Kakashi figures the pink, sparkly hair is a small price to pay for a brand new copy of *Icha Icha Seduction*. He’s been wanting to get his hands on this one for a while now, but the bookstore in Konoha has been sold out. Not that he’s going to let his adorable little monster-genin know that. They seem satisfied, regardless.)

Genma whistles softly in admiration as Kakashi perches on the arm of the couch, Kurama settling on the cushions next to him. “Going for a new look, Kakashi? It’s…bright.”

Kurama laughs softly, and Kakashi flicks his eye up just in time to catch it, feeling something warm and squiggly twist through his chest at the sight of that genuine grin. “I think his genin team disagreed with his method of training,” the redhead says mirthfully. “Or it’s payback for being late all the time.”

“Maa,” Kakashi drawls, wondering if he should uncover his Sharingan so that he can keep half his attention on Icha Icha and half on Kurama. He’s torn, really. “It was only a small mountain. And the river wasn’t that cold.”
With a soft snort, Genma sinks back in his seat, arching a brow. “Translation?”

“Training trip,” Kakashi explains, flipping to the next page with interest.

There’s a moment of silence, uncharacteristic of Genma in the middle of a conversation, and when Kakashi looks up there’s surprise written clearly across the tokujo’s features. “Training trip?” he echoes. “Already? It’s only been a month, hasn’t it?”

Kakashi tips his head, dismissing that. “A month and a half. But they’re ready for C-ranks. Might even make it through the Chuunin Exams on their first try.”

Because if they can work together well enough to prank a jounin who’s already mildly wary of them, if they can survive a training trip and come back even stronger and a more tightly knit team, then they’ve got a chance. They’ve got a hell of a lot more of a chance than Kakashi’s own team ever did. Kurama’s told him about their goal, their new, shared dream, and it makes something inside of him tighten and ache and feel warm all at the same time, because he remembers another team that started with a prodigy and a fangirl and a dead-last. And sometimes, over the last few weeks, he’s wondered what would have happened if there was someone like Kurama for his team, to push Kakashi to open up and Obito to do better in the areas he was good at and remind Rin of her goals rather than her crush. To care, and make time, and just put in a little more effort than most people would.

It hurts to wonder, but he can’t help it.

“Huh.” The senbon clicks against Genma’s teeth, and the tokujo is gazing at him thoughtfully. “I thought you were dreading having a team. Weren’t you in despair of them passing? What changed?”

Kakashi looks over at Kurama, who’s working on one of the notebooks full of seals he always seems to carry around with him. The redhead doesn’t seem to notice, but Kakashi can’t fight the smile that crosses his face. He’s thankful for the mask that hides it, because something like that—it’s personal. It’s special. “They remembered why they wanted to be shinobi,” he says simply. “They got better.”

And it’s true, in the basest sort of way. They have improved, and they did remember, but not alone, and not without help. Kakashi’s done some, helped them build stamina and increase their speed and iron out their flaws, taught them a few simple jutsus and tricks, but Kurama’s been the one to take them aside and say you can do this if you push yourself, I know you can. And because it’s Kurama saying it, because the red-haired jounin has never shown them anything but attention and support and kindness, they try. They push themselves beyond what Kakashi expects and do everything that’s asked of them, and then go beyond even that.

It’s good, Kakashi thinks, and his throat is tight with something that’s not gratitude or sadness or regret or joy, but could possibly be a mixture of all those. It’s good, because in all likelihood if Kakashi was their only support they’d still be the broken, squabbling mess he first got saddled with. Kakashi isn’t good with people. He can read their emotions and analyze their motivations, figure out how to kill them and manipulate them and turn them against each other, but he doesn’t know how to build bonds. He doesn’t know how to keep three vastly different people from tearing themselves and their team apart.

But Kurama knows where to push, where to hold back, where to hug and comfort and where to challenge. Kakashi wonders if the man ever had a genin team of his own, though likely he was too young when Uzushio fell. It’s a shame, because he’s a good teacher. Naruto’s been learning seals at a slightly alarming rate, and he’s already got one jutsu from each element except for lightning, which Kurama has been promising to teach him soon. Sasuke seems to be progressing too, pestering—as much as a non-Obito member of the Uchiha clan is capable of pestering—Kakashi into teaching him the basics of several new taijutsu forms in between bouts of kenjutsu training. Sakura, as well, has
started spending most of her free time around the hospital, watching medic-nins and learning whatever they can teach her in their less busy moments. Her stamina’s increasing, and as far as Kakashi can tell she’s entirely recovered from her fangirl phase. It’s…refreshing.

It’s also a little terrifying, because sometimes when Kakashi looks at them he can half-see what they’re headed towards becoming, tall and strong, Naruto in the middle with Sakura on one side and Sasuke on the other. They cast long shadows in the sunlight, stretching out like the future selves they simply haven’t grown into yet. But soon, Kakashi thinks. Soon, all too soon and they’ll be taking the Elemental Countries by storm.

It gives him shivers sometimes just thinking about it.

“That’s all?” Genma asks, pulling him back to the present. The tokujo doesn’t look doubtful, though, simply surprised.

Kakashi stares at him for a long moment before shrugging lazily and turning his attention back to his book. “Isn’t that enough?”

Genma probably doesn’t remember being that age—or, more likely, he never had to worry about losing sight of his goals, not when he was on a team with Gai and Ebisu and came from a strong, if small, shinobi family himself, already promising even as a genin. But Kakashi does, remembers it all too well, how his team lost sight of the important things under the weight of their separation. Teamwork took too much out of them, and trying to cooperate left no time for shared dreams. But the new Team 7—

They have those dreams, the right balance between individuality and teamwork, and Kakashi is going to do everything in his power to make sure it stays that way. For them, for himself, for Kurama, and for what his Team 7 could have been with the right push.

At his knee, Kurama makes a sound of triumph, startling him out of his contemplation again, and says, “Kakashi, mind being a test subject for a second?”

Across from them, Genma winces slightly, but Kakashi’s already got his mouth open and spilling, “Anything for you, Kurama-chan,” before he can think better of it.

“Oh, good,” Kurama says brightly, then turns and slaps an open palm against the bare part of his face.

There’s a crackle of now-familiar violet chakra, a surge of prickly numbness that makes him twitch away, and then a faint burn of warmth on the struck skin. Kakashi resists the nearly overwhelming urge to go for a kunai and instead hisses, “What was that?”

Kurama beams at him, so ridiculously innocent that it can’t be anything but an act. “Seal duplication,” he explains blithely. “I’ve been working on a way to transfer seals through skin contact, and I think I’ve got it now. I’ll have to modify whatever seals I want to copy, but I can do that ahead of time easily enough, and it makes the transfer instantaneous.”

Only slightly mollified, Kakashi pokes at the seal on his cheek. “And this is?”

The redhead waves him off without concern. “Oh, don’t be an infant. It’s just a slightly revised storage seal, and I can take it off easily enough. Here.” A simple pass of his hand and the foreign chakra disappears, fading away into the air.

“Fixed the wait time, then?” Genma asks, sounding amused. When Kakashi levels a dark look at him, he raises his hands innocently, though there’s a suspicious twitch to one corner of his lips. “Hey,
I tried to warn you. And besides, the one I got hit with was a hell of a lot worse.”

“I apologized!” Kurama defends, though he looks faintly guilty. “I even treated you to lunch afterwards for helping me!”

“You did,” Genma agrees with a lazy grin. “Doesn’t mean I have to let it go, does it?”

Kurama rolls his eyes. “I suppose not.” Decisively, he closes his seal notebook and rises to his feet, indignation in every line of his form, like some sort of offended cat. “If you’ll excuse me, I'm going to go play with my summons. At least they're nice to me.”

“Maa, maa, I was nice to you last night,” Kakashi teases, shooting the redhead a quick, wicked smile.

With a sound of affronted frustration, Kurama levels a threatening finger at him. “You,” he hisses, “are going to get what’s coming to you.” Then, with a whirl of red hair, he turns on his heel and stalks out, head held high.

There's a long moment of silence in his wake. Genma clicks his senbon against his teeth and says with amusement, “Last night? As in the it-was-completely-platonic-and-I’m-a-misleading-bastard kind of last night, or the let's-get-nekkid kind of last night?”

Kakashi can't help it. He shoots Genma a speaking look. “Nekkid?”

“Well, yeah. Naked is naked. Nekkid is naked and up to something.”

Kakashi just beams at him and gives a noncommittal hum before lifting his book, deciding to finish this chapter and give Kurama time to cool down before he goes to look for the other man. That sort of thing always worked for Minato with Kushina, after all, and Kakashi’s drawing most of his knowledge on how to deal with redheaded Uzumaki from that. Kurama certainly has the bone structure and coloring of a typical Uzumaki, and for all that he’s generally rather easygoing, there’s still both a temper and a wicked sense of humor buried under the laidback exterior.

On the other couch, Genma sighs and shakes his head. “You're no fun,” he grouses, pushing to his feet. “I'm going to go find Raidou and see if he’s up for something.”

“Something nekkid?”

“In broad daylight, before lunchtime? I'm hurt by your insinuation that I could be so gauche, Kakashi.”

“...Genma.”

The tokujo waves cheerfully over his shoulder. “At least one of us is getting laid,” he calls back. “Keep the hair. Pink and glitter suit you.”

When Kakashi finally drags himself out to find his wayward redhead, it's already past noon, and finishing one chapter somehow turned into getting halfway through the book before he’d realized it. He’s still faintly flushed and trying not to giggle when he follows Kurama's chakra signature to Training Ground 29. It’s looking a little worse for wear, with craters here and there and a few scorched patches and one pool of water that Kakashi is fairly certain wasn’t there before. He surveys the scene with a faintly arched brow, then meanders down the hill to where he can feel Kurama behind a scattering of rocks.
What he finds there stops him in his tracks.

It’s Kurama, definitely—no one else in Konoha has hair quite that red—but he’s half-buried under a pile of multicolored foxes, each with multiple tails. There’s one serving as Kurama’s pillow, another on each side of him, and at least three—though possibly more, Kakashi can’t quite tell—sprawled out over him. The jounin himself is asleep, breathing evenly, with one hand buried in black fur and the other arm draped over Fuji’s white back.

Kakashi just stares for a long moment, entirely dumbfounded, and then has to smother a laugh. Quietly, trying to keep from waking anyone, he settles on the ground, leaning back against a rock, and flips his book open. Fuji lifts her head at the sound of rustling paper, but as soon as she catches sight of him she subsides again, dropping her chin back to Kurama’s shoulder with a huff. The redhead doesn’t stir, and Kakashi starts reading again, entirely content to let things be.

It’s only when the sun is low on the horizon and the birds have started up their evening song that Kurama stirs, stretching gracefully and then carefully sitting up, dislodging grumbling foxes as he goes. Fuji just whines as she loses her headrest, but rises to her feet, shaking herself briskly.

The soft thump of a book snapping closed makes Kurama glance over, and he’s surprised to find Kakashi watching him, still pink and sparkly, but calm. He smiles at the other jounin, warm and welcoming. “You should have said something. I didn’t need to sleep that long.”

Kakashi looks politely skeptical, but doesn’t answer. Instead, he turns his attention to the six foxes scattered around Kurama and says mildly, “These are your summons?”

Kurama nods, crossing his legs under him and grunting when Ume promptly sprawls across the proffered lap. “Yes, they’re the ones I usually call. There are others, but they’re shyer.” He glances around, taking in the group, and smiles. “You already know Fuji. The silver one next to her is Momiji, her brother. The red one is Kaede, and the black one by him is Ran. This beauty”—he pokes the five-tailed grey fox collapsed across his legs—“is Ume, and her twin is Oka.”

“You smell like dog,” Kaede announces, wrinkling his nose at the Copy-Nin. “Don’t you bathe?”

“Shut up! Be polite, you imbecile!” Oka whacks him over the head with her tails, then rises to her feet and pads over to Kakashi, dipping her head. “He’s crude. I apologize.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Kakashi assures her, sounding bemused. He studies the group for a moment, then waves and offers, “Yo. I’m Hatake Kakashi. Nice to meet you.”

“You’re cute,” Ran chimes in, also coming closer. She sits down beside the jounin, tilting her head, and then adds, “I can see why Kurama-chin likes you.”

Kurama, entirely used to the fact that his foxes have never so much as heard of tact, just rolls his eyes and pushes Ume off his knees. “All right, you vicious demons,” he says tolerantly. “Shoo.”

Momiji whines, the same way his sister does when she’s trying to play pitiful. “But, Kurama, I thought you were going to buy us **oden**.”

All of the rest snap to attention, turning hopeful gazes on the redhead.

“You’re pathetic,” Kurama retorts. “So I call you out, let you play for hours, practice with **all** of you, and that’s still not good enough?” He offers up his own version of a puppy dog pout—learned and perfected with them, of course.
Ume groans and levers herself to her feet, then heads over and starts shoving Momiji with her nose, herding him back towards the center of the group. With a longsuffering sigh, Oka copies her, until the other four are all pressed together. “We’re leaving now,” the five-tailed fox announces, then turns back to Kurama and offers him a bright grin. “We’ll save the oden for next time, then.”

Kurama rolls his eyes at them again, waving Ume off. “Maybe. Shoo.”

Six puffs of smoke fill the training ground, and when the wind clears it away, they’re alone again.

“Cute,” Kakashi says eventually, voice dry.

“They’re something else,” Kurama agrees with a snort. “There’s a reason most folktales featuring kitsune or youko end with the humans getting the short end of the stick. But they’re also clever, loyal, and powerful, so spending a year’s wages on oden once in a while isn’t such a bad trade.” He glances at the sun, which has almost disappeared behind the tree-line, and levers himself to his feet with a sigh. “Which reminds me: I promised to get the kids takeout tonight, since it was their day off.”

Kakashi rises with him, tucking his book away, and falls into step with the redhead. “Room for one more?” he asks cheerfully, though Kurama is fairly certain that a negative answer will have no effect whatsoever.

“Why not?” Kurama mutters, but he can’t help that it comes out entirely fond. He tries not to let it, truly he does, but Kakashi is like the cheerfully sadistic, annoying river wearing away at a stone. Kurama does his best to resist, but the man manages to get under his skin far too easily. “It’s not like you’ll listen either way.”

Kakashi chuckles, completely unbothered. “Maa, Kurama, you're learning.”

“I suppose I am. But—”

“Yes, yes. Hands to myself or you’ll pin them to the wall with kunai.” He offers Kurama a faint smile. “Really, Kurama. One would hardly think we're dating.”

“Is that what we’re doing?” Kurama asks before he can stop himself. But once it’s out he can't take it back, and rubs a hand over his hair with a sigh. “I mean—never mind. I know we are. It’s just…”

“We can call it ‘two blind men fumbling around in the dark’, if that makes you feel better,” Kakashi says dryly. “One could draw parallels.”

That makes Kurama laugh, and without overthinking it, he reaches out and picks up Kakashi’s hand, turning it over and studying the long, graceful fingers. “One could,” he agrees with good humor. “But…I think I like ‘dating’, personally.”

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“Then let’s go with that.” Kakashi twists their fingers together, squeezes gently, and then lets his hand drop as they step out onto the main street. Kurama doesn’t reclaim it, because he understands—and sympathizes with—wanting to keep this private. It’s…personal. Special.

Their comfortable silence lasts until they’re waiting for their food at the sushi restaurant, leaning back against the wall as other customers flow past. Kakashi is the one to break it, looking out through the wide window and across the street.

“I'm going to enter them in the Chuunin Exams,” he says, as though it’s a revelation. A long pause, and then he looks over at Kurama, who can read the trepidation mixed with pride that fills his gaze. “I'm going to enter them,” he repeats, “and I want you to help me make sure they win it.”
Kurama stares back, feeling his heart flip over in his chest. There are butterflies in his stomach, warm and nervous, but full of something very like anticipation. “You think they can?” he asks, because if Kakashi’s just doing this for pride, or glory—because Kurama was never entirely certain why his teacher entered them when they most definitely weren’t ready—

“Yes. I do.”

Three words, so simple, but there’s so much faith in them. Kurama closes his eyes, lets his head rest back against the wall with a breath too light to be a sigh, and then he nods. There’s certainty and hope and eagerness filling him, excitement slipping like a bright thread through his thoughts. He’s seen Sakura and Naruto and Sasuke fight together, seen them fight separately, and he’s achingly, bone-deep convinced that they can win.

And Kakashi thinks so too.

“We’ll have to get Naruto started on more jutsus,” he says. “Sakura needs to increase her chakra reserves and smooth out her taijutsu, and the boys need to refine their control. Sasuke can be faster, if we push him. If he pushes himself. And I’ll see about getting him a real sword instead of that practice one he’s using now. Maybe let Naruto advance with his seals a bit. We’ve got, what, two months?”

“Just about,” Kakashi agrees, and he’s smiling. Like he’s pleased, like something’s gone right, and hopefully it has. “I’ll have to start them on C-ranks soon. Escorts and low-risk courier missions, hopefully. A border patrol would take too long.”

Kurama laughs, his heart light and free. “I think that more than your hair would be pink and glittery if you took them on another trip into the wilderness so soon,” he points out, then hears the woman at the counter call his name and turns away, pulling out his wallet.

Kakashi’s eyes are on him as he goes, but it’s thoughtful rather than penetrating. Warm and some sort of grateful, though Kurama can’t quite understand for what.

The medic-nins at the hospital assign more reading than all of the teachers at the Academy, likely combined, and Sakura isn’t even officially a medic-in-training. And even she, bookworm that she tends to be, groans when she sees today’s pile, half as tall as she is and the culmination of several friendly ‘suggestions’. She’s learned by now that if the medics suggest something in that particular tone of voice, she sure as hell better have read it by the next time they talk, or that particular avenue of learning will close entirely. Being a medic is ridiculously intensive work, and those doing it don’t have any tolerance for less than complete devotion to the task.

It makes her feel a bit better, when she staggers into Kurama’s apartment, to find Naruto sprawled out over the table, several thick scrolls on sealing theory around him and a distinctly glazed look in his eyes. Sasuke, too, looks worse for wear, crumpled in a sweaty and rumpled ball on the couch, his practice sword clutched loosely in one hand—where it looks like he physically can’t let go of it, rather than that he’s forgotten to. She dumps her load of scrolls next to Naruto, slumps into a free chair, and drops her head onto the tabletop with a sharp thunk.

“How about Naruto and his ridiculous stamina become Jiraiya?” Sasuke suggests, dragging himself halfway to upright and peering over the arm with eyes half-lidded in exhaustion. “I’ll start learning ninjutsu.”
“I’ve got the biggest chakra reserves,” Naruto points out, still face-down in his scroll. “But if anyone else wants to take over learning midlevel sealing theory and B-rank jutsus from all five elements, I’m game.”

There’s a moment of collective mourning for their chosen paths, and then Sakura gives in with a sigh, pushes herself upright, and pulls the first text towards her resignedly. “The medics I’ve talked to say I have an instinctive grasp of anatomy,” she says, trying to cheer herself up. “And that my memory is good.”

Naruto, always ready to be positive—especially after they successfully managed to dye Kakashi’s hair with twenty minutes of preparation and a quick (henged) trip to the bookstore—chimes in with a just-slightly-more-subdued-than-normal, “Kurama-nii says I’m definitely an Uzumaki with the way I can tweak seals, and I’ve got three Fuuton, two Doton, four Suiton, and three Katon jutsus, and I’m going to be learning Raiton next week.”

There’s a long pause as the two look over at Sasuke expectantly and he gives them a flat stare in return. Then, clearly reluctant, he huffs out a breath and offers, “Kakashi’s given me katas in three new styles. I’ve almost got them down.” Another pause, and he tacks on grudgingly, cheeks flushing faintly, “And Kurama says I’m nearly chuunin-level in kenjutsu already.”

They all contemplate that for a few minutes. It’s…heartening, if still exhausting.

“We’re going to pass on the first try,” Sasuke says suddenly, and when he looks at the other two there’s only determination in his eyes. A beat, and he adds, “No way in hell am I doing this kind of cramming again for anything but our Jounin Exams.”

“Agreed,” Naruto says promptly, and Sakura gives the most vigorous nod she can manage.

Before anyone can say more, though, they’re cut off by the sound of the front door opening, and two sets of steps. “I’m home,” Kurama calls, half a second before the smell of food hits all three genin and makes their stomachs roar in unison. “Anyone want dinner?”

“If you still want to marry Kurama-san,” Sakura warns Sasuke as they bolt for the entranceway, “you’re going to have to get there before me.”

Sasuke’s dark eyes glitter with challenge. “Try me, Sakura-chan.”

It’s just Naruto’s bad luck that he’s between them when they go for each other’s throats, and he goes down with a wail, his teammates on top of him.

Kakashi, his hair still sparkling beautifully under the light, the pink entirely un-faded, cheers them on, calling jeers and encouragement in equal measure, while Kurama just hangs in the doorway and laughs.

Exhaustion or not, it’s a good night.
I recently received a suggestion that I make this story SasuNaruSaku. Normally, I’d shoo this idea under the rug with all the other pairing suggestions I’ve gotten, but I can actually see writing that. My question is, would people be interested? It’s a fairly neat solution, and I'm ridiculously tempted, so I'm curious as to other opinions.

Edit: All right, choice made. Since Team 7 is my platonic!OT3, pairings are going to stay as is. The romantic!OT3 will have to wait for another time and story. :)

Kakashi wakes to a dark, newly familiar room and an empty bed, the sheets long since gone cold. He sighs and gropes around on the nightstand until he finds his hitai-ate, slides it on and makes sure his mask is firmly in place before climbing out of bed and heading down the hall. In the week he’s spent at Kurama's apartment—since ‘just tonight’ went out the window the moment Kurama gave in—this has almost become routine.

When he steps into the living room, Kurama is perched on the windowsill, one foot flat on the floor and the other leg drawn up in front of him, his arm resting on his bent knee. The window is open, letting in the cool night air, and a breeze flutters the long red strands around his tanned face. He’s looking away, out over Konoha, and Kakashi can't read his expression. Not from here, and maybe not even if he stood directly in front of the man.

He pauses in the doorway, just watching. Over the two months the redhead has been in Konoha he’s noticed that, far more than most people, Kurama has a sort of drama to him. Not in the way of dramatics, or hysterics, but in the way that a sweeping sense of emotion hangs about him, something as subtle and breathtaking as the most wrenching scene in a very good movie. Kurama is cheer and mischief and kindness, but then he stops and suddenly he’s the kind of creature that poets write ballads about, something great and terrible and sad and fiercely joyful all at once.

Kakashi has never met someone like Kurama before. Not in bearing or manner, though some have come close there, and not in inner depth, because Kurama has so much depth that sometimes it’s even hard to identify things on the surface. He’s mercurial but not in a jarring way, quietly devastating in the manner of all incredibly beautiful things, whether that beauty is superficial or profound. And Kurama's is most certainly more than skin-deep. One only has to look to Team 7 to see that.

The silence in the room is thick and heavy, making it hard to breathe. Kakashi tucks his hands in the pockets of his sleeping pants, wondering how to break it. Before he can, though, Kurama glances away from the view and smiles at him, small but warm.

“I'm just thinking,” he says, as though that's a reassurance. Maybe it would work on someone else, but Kakashi knows better than most the dark turn thoughts can take. Stifling a sigh, he pads across the room to lean against the window frame across from the redhead.

“Pleasant thoughts, I hope.” But he’s not really that optimistic. Kurama is awake and here, doing his version of silent brooding, and that means it’s already bad enough to drive him from a soft, warm bed and out into the loneliness of the midnight world.
Kurama smiles again, but this time it’s wan and a little wry. “Sorry. I just…was thinking of what it means when a shinobi hates to kill, but takes a life regardless.”

Kakashi looks at him for a long moment, remembering five heads delivered to collect bounties, one turned in still talking with the explanation that it would starve to death eventually. And there are other bounties registered under Kurama's name in his Bingo Book profile as well, men and women, rebels and missing-nin and traitors, turned in alive where possible and dead where it wasn’t. Remembers Kurama's ever-present gentleness, his easy friendship and kindness that is far more than an afterthought.

“It means we’re still human,” Kakashi says softly, closing his eye. It’s one of the things he misses least about ANBU, not being able to turn down the assassination and elimination missions. For the most part they aren’t so bad—people generally pay for shinobi to make a kill only when the target is corrupt and powerful, though there are certainly exceptions, and Konoha is careful of the assassination contracts it accepts. But elimination orders, being told to wipe out a whole family or clan, are the one thing Kakashi thinks he will never adjust to. “Human and doing our duty to the village, regardless of personal cost.”

“Really? We’re not just fooling ourselves?”

The redhead sounds almost unbearably sad, and Kakashi flicks a sharp look at him. There are lines in Kurama's face that make him look older, that make his features almost match the age of his eyes. He hesitates, weighing his possible responses, and asks carefully, “Why do you say that?”

Kurama sighs and rubs his hands over his face, hiding his expression for the moment. When Kakashi can see again, it’s weary. Worn. “Because…I've had to kill before, and I hated it, but at the same time I was glad. Glad that that particular person was dead, glad that I was the one to strike the blow, glad to put an end to them. And not just for the sake of others, the sakes of those they manipulated and killed. For my own sake. It feels…unforgivable.”

Kakashi studies him for another moment, reading the truth of his words in his face, his turbulent blue eyes. With a faint sigh, he crosses his arms over his chest and looks out as well, surveying Konoha in the glow of human-made light. It’s pretty, peaceful, no place at all for a force of ruthless hired killers to live.

But then, those hired killers are the reason Konoha has never fallen, never lost a war or even a major battle. Those hired killers are the ones that keep its citizens safe and able to make that beauty.

“We’re only human,” he repeats. “We’re stupid and emotional and unreasonable, easily led and manipulated. We pick our morals and then have to stand by them, but we have hearts. Morals don’t. They're ideas, ideals. No matter how much we try, we’ll never manage to perfectly embody what we believe, and I don’t think it would be good for anyone if we could. Humans are meant to make mistakes and falter and fall. That’s why we also have the ability to get right back up again and keep walking.”

He pushes himself upright, nothing left to say, and brushes his fingers gently over Kurama's shoulder as he steps past. Kurama catches his hand, twines their fingers together, and lets Kakashi pull him to his feet. It takes effort not to immediately tuck Kurama underneath his arm and steer them back towards the bedroom, but Kakashi restrains himself, waits to see what the redhead wants to do.

Kurama simply smiles at him, far more genuine and heartfelt this time, and tugs him along, back into the small, close little world they’ve taken to sharing.
The village is quiet and solemn when they next wake, hushed whispers running through the streets as people mourn the passing of one of Konoha's oldest war heroes. Danzo is dead, passed on from a heart attack in his sleep that no one is quite willing to call foul play, not with the man’s age and many personal losses in the name of Konoha. There are no signs of outside influence, at least, and the man’s guard is entirely unharmed, if a tad bit…strange.

(There will be people waking up now, Kurama knows, and he thinks of Sai and his flat smiles, his complete absence of understanding in the face of human foibles. Thinks of the many, many broken shinobi the Hokage will now be faced with fixing. But there was no other way, no possibility of Danzo submitting to reason or clever words or sentiment. He and Sasuke had agreed, back in their time, that death was the only possible answer, but Kurama feels both viciously satisfied and…empty. Divided and defeated by his own conscience. Danzo, rather like Itachi, was a great man, but in no way a good one. He’d cared for Konoha in his own manner, and Kurama wishes he could have been turned towards a better path, but the time when that would have worked is long since passed.)

Because of his status as a newcomer to the village, Kurama is excused from the collective mourning, allowed to walk where he wills even as Sarutobi speaks pretty, polite words about the man who was once his friend. It’s not all lip service, because for all that he had done Danzo is still a hero, but to Kurama it’s simply another reminder that monsters can hide under the brightest faces. He knew, he knows, but sometimes it’s stupidly easy to forget.

Kakashi attends the speech, is even mostly on time, because Danzo was a shinobi too and that’s a part of being a Konoha nin. Teamwork and comrades above all else, even when they're not really your comrades at all. It’s made Konoha strong, kept her standing, but at times like this it chafes at Kurama, aggravates him and gets under his skin.

But Danzo is dead, and of the twelve enemies Kurama came here prepared to face there are only two remaining—because right now Madara is dead and will remain dead, Akatsuki is defeated, Itachi is wavering if not entirely turned, and only Tobi and Orochimaru are left. Two more, and Danzo is dead, and Kurama killed another Konoha shinobi with forethought and malice. A bad man, perhaps, but also a great one, and one whom the entire village will mourn.

(But not his twisted little brainwashed army, and thinking of them it’s very, very hard for Kurama to feel any remorse at all.)

It was so easy, too, and maybe that’s a large part of the reason for Kurama’s guilt. He’s perfected the seal transfer with Obito, can now do it even with a seal that isn’t already present on his body. For someone practiced in slipping past Madara’s ever-vigilant eyes for years on end, getting past a handful of Root guards hadn’t been challenging at all. A sedative in Danzo’s evening sake, small enough in dose not to be noticed as anything other than bodily weariness and quick to burn off so as not to be detected after death, and Danzo had slept even when Kurama laid a single finger over his pulse.

Seals are tricky little things. Even those who call themselves masters now, like Jiraiya, were never taught them the way Uzushio shinobi were taught them, the way Kurama taught himself with scrolls and records and endless, painstaking hours of practice. Uzushio shinobi used seals the same way Konoha shinobi use kunai, and to even greater effect. Tricks, disguises, traps, transportation, protection, communication, assassination—it was all seals. Most of that has been lost, but not all.

Not everything.

This particular seal is a clever one. It’s small and simple and so very, very deadly, because human bodies are ridiculously fragile. Kurama transferred it to Danzo’s skin, where it wrote itself in chakra and then activated, sending roots deep into the man’s chakra system and settling, integrating. Kurama
had left then, slipped back out into the midnight darkness and returned to his peaceful, if overcrowded, apartment. But the seal had done its work. All seals are basically containers, and this one had contained just a tiny bit of extra chakra. It had released it in a pulse, a jolt that on the surface wouldn’t have done a single thing.

But tied into the very core of Danzo’s system, with roots in every part of his body, a little jolt was all it took to stop his heart and keep it from ever starting up again.

When they examine the body, it will show all the signs of a heart attack, because that’s exactly what happened. The seal is gone now, shattered with the death of its host system, and regardless, it’s subtle, delicate work. Only those looking for it and nothing else could have any chance of finding it, were the seal still present. With it gone—

Danzo is dead and no one can bear the blame, and Kurama is not certain whether he will sleep more soundly now or entertain yet another nightmare.

No more manipulations, he thinks, standing before the Memorial. There are no names here for the Uchiha who died in the massacre, as they weren’t killed in action, but there are a few Uchiha names. Enough that Kurama can offer up a prayer or two. Danzo will never stand trial for his actions—wouldn’t have even if he had lived, because in this at least they weren’t his alone. The Hokage, the councilors, Itachi, Tobi—they participated as well.

But nevertheless. For Nagato and Amegakure, for Konan and Yahiko, for Sasuke and his mother and father and clan, for those in Root who will never live a normal life even for shinobi, for the boy Itachi used to be and his best friend Shisui—

For them, Danzo is dead. For them, Kurama killed him; for them he didn’t hesitate.

He has his regrets, but he also has his resolve, and that is by far the stronger.

Sasuke tumbles through the door of the apartment, Naruto gleefully colliding with his back and Sakura a step behind, laughing breathlessly. The village is eerily quiet, but Sasuke can’t bring himself to care. Not now, not when they just tried their first combination attack and it worked so well they had to rush over and get the shinobi on the adjacent training grounds to come help them put the fire out. He can feel the grin on his face, almost painful after so many years without, and it’s great, because he and Naruto and Sakura together nearly took out an entire training ground, and surely a couple of enemy shinobi aren’t going to be anything compared to that.

It’s not quite that simple, he knows, but they’ve been a team for far less than half a year and already they’re working in complete harmony, in tandem, never having to look over to be sure that someone’s on backup or on point, that there’s an extra hand if it’s needed. It’s like a ladder, or stairs—the next step’s there even if you’re not looking, because you can trust, and maybe, maybe that’s all you need.

Sasuke can’t imagine not trusting Naruto and Sakura, even Kakashi and Kurama, though he remembers being distrustful of all four when this started. But that beginning is long gone, far behind them now, and this is a different kind of beginning, one that feels a hundred times more important.

Sannin, he thinks. The Sannin. They’ve been repeating it all day, to themselves and to each other, and it still has a ring to it, a grace and gravity and allure. He wants, not in the way a part of him still wants revenge, but deeper. Not as sharp, but wider. Like a river in flood, eating away at the muddy ground of his insecurities and doubts and fear, carry all of that away and leaving earth rich for
growth in its wake.

“I win!” he cries as all three fall into the kitchen, one after the other like dominoes, and Sasuke is so satisfied he can't even begin to care that he’s somehow ended up on the very bottom of the pile. “I win, losers, so pay up.”

“Never!” Naruto declares, putting him into a headlock by virtue of proximity. “You cheated, teme!”

Sakura, enabler that she is, gleefully pins his arms to his sides, even if she has to half-sprawl over Naruto to do it. “He’s right, you jerk. You did!”

“No rules, so no cheating,” Sasuke reminds the two smugly. “You should have made an agreement beforehand if you wanted rules.”

There's a low chuckle, and all three of them freeze sheepishly. Kurama just shakes his head from where he’s laying out supper. “Talking like that’s going to get you into trouble someday, Sasuke,” he says, but it’s entirely amused. Sasuke feels his cheeks flush and curses himself, but he can’t help it. He’s never had a crush on anyone—never felt anyone was worth the time—but…

Kurama’s really pretty.

And really strong.

And really sweet (even though a month and a half ago Sasuke would have considered that a tragic character flaw. He’s seen the light, though).

And Sasuke kind of maybe just possibly wants—

Well, he’s not entirely sure what he wants, but it’s probably something to blush about, seeing as he does every time he thinks about it.

“Hn,” he grunts, because that way he won’t completely mortify himself tripping over his words like Sakura used to do (and god, that’s probably the absolute most disturbing thing ever, that he’s someone’s fan, argh). A few well-places kicks and a couple of elbows planted in squishy areas and his teammates are yelping and scrambling off of him, rising to their feet with grumbles about cheaters. Sasuke just smirks at them, standing and brushing himself off carefully.

Kakashi is sitting at the other end of the table with no Icha Icha in sight—and if Sasuke didn’t already think Kurama was one of the…Naruto would say coolest and for the life of him Sasuke can't think of anything more dignified, so if he wasn’t already one of the coolest shinobi in Konoha Sasuke would be his devout follower for that alone. Kakashi had come in to breakfast, and Kurama had taken one look at him carrying his beloved orange book and snapped “I don’t allow people to come to the table with dirty hands, Kakashi; what makes you think I’m going to let you sit down with your mind full of filth?”

There had been protests and melodramatic reactions and Kurama had weathered it all like a seasoned general. The end result was Kakashi at the table and his porn safely out of sight, and two senbon next to his hand had convinced Kakashi out of even attempting to read during the meal, regardless of his surreptitiousness.

“I heard you had a bit of an accident today,” the Copy-Nin says blandly, studying them with aloof disinterest, although Sasuke can see the bastard’s eye crinkling with mirth.

“It was not an accident,” Sakura protests, taking the seat that’s somehow managed to become hers. “That jutsu did exactly what we intended it to do.”
Kurama sets the last bowl down in front of Naruto, who’s looking faintly sheepish, and cuts in dryly, “This wouldn’t happen to have been the ‘raging inferno’ that Kotetsu and Izumo helped you put out, would it?”

“Ah…” Sakura casts around for backup.

Because teamwork is important and he finally is staring to understand Kakashi’s *those who don’t follow the rules are trash; those who abandon their comrades are worse than trash*, Sasuke obligingly jumps in. “They’re exaggerating. It wasn’t that big.”

Kurama gives him a long look. “The fire that made Iruka-sensei think the Academy was going to burn down, and that an army was invading? That one?”

Silently cursing the fact that Kurama somehow—between his shifts at the Missions Assignment Desk, his patrols, and his habitual aimless wanderings—seems to know just about every shinobi in Konoha, Sasuke subsides and tries to refrain from making eye contact.

With a snort, Kurama rolls his eyes and takes a seat. “Don’t worry about it too much,” he offers cheerfully, filling bowls with nabe and passing them around. “I think every shinobi destroys at least one training ground.”

“Except Ebisu,” Kakashi mutters, pulling a bowl of dipping sauce closer and picking up his chopsticks. “I think he’d faint in horror if you even suggested such a thing to him.”

Kurama laughs, and it’s odd, because even if a lot of the time Sasuke can forget that Kurama and Naruto come from the same clan, they have almost identical laughs. Not all the time, but when they both relax and are truly happy, it shows. It’s also really, really pretty and makes Sasuke want to smile himself, even if he’s never really thought about it in the terms of Naruto making him feel like that. The blond does, though, so maybe he *should* think about it, if only just a little more.

Come to think of it…Sasuke steals a glance at his teammate, studying his face. It’s rounder than Kurama’s, baby fat still present regardless of their training, and he’s got those strange lines, like clan marks except Kurama doesn’t have them either. He’s blond, and his eyes are a brighter shade, but…

In a few years, when he’s grown into his face and his shoulders and his boisterous cheer, Sasuke suspects that Naruto and Kurama will look very much alike.

There’s heat rising in his cheeks again, unbearably hot and likely enough of it to turn his whole face crimson. Cursing himself silently, Sasuke ducks his head and stuffs a prawn in his mouth to keep from doing something stupid. Like possibly blurting out, *Naruto, you’re probably going to be really hot when you grow up. I have a crush on your cousin right now, but since I already know that it’s just a crush and will probably die an embarrassing death, how about I fixate on you instead?* Oh god. Sasuke adds a chunk of cabbage and two cubes of tofu to his mouthful, vaguely wondering if he can choke on his dinner and spare himself any more early-onset hormones. Gah.

When he looks up, Kakashi is watching him, looking hugely entertained. Sasuke pins him with a *die right now you piece of slime* glare and viciously bites the tail off another prawn. The Copy-Nin chortles a little and keeps staring.

Sasuke hates him so much.

The sound of Kurama clearing his throat makes them all look over at him, where he’s eyeing Kakashi pointedly. For one horrified moment, Sasuke thinks it’s because of him, but then Kakashi raises his hands in clear surrender and says, “Maa, maa, Kurama, I wasn’t sure if you wanted to do
Kurama rolls his eyes again, even as he sets his bowl aside. “You’re their jounin sensei,” he points out. “As much work as you’ve foisted on to me, it’s still your responsibility.”

With a put-upon sigh, Kakashi nods, then looks between the three genin. He’s oddly serious, regardless of his demeanor a moment ago, and Sasuke feels his spine pulling up straight in response. This is important, then.

Kakashi lays his hands on the table in front of him, meets each of their eyes in turn, and then says, “I never expected you three to make it past the first week.”

That’s…not exactly heartening, if rather understandable.

There’s a sharp thud from under the table, and Kakashi winces like he’s just been kicked, then quickly continues. “The first month was a surprise, but to be honest, your chances still weren’t great. I was even considering enrolling you in the Chuunin Exams just to show you how far you had to go.” He takes a breath. “But…not anymore. You’re a team, and I’m proud of how far you’ve come, how far you’ve been willing to go. There’s still two months, give or take, until the Chuunin Exams, and right now, I think you’ve got the best chance of any rookie team in Konoha. The choice is yours, but if you tell me you want to take the Exams, I’ll nominate you.”

“If it’s worth anything,” Kurama adds softly, “I think the three of you will take them by storm.” There’s a light in his eyes, a certainty, a conviction. It’s something more than faith, or belief, because those are rooted in hope and this…

This has its roots in fact, in the blood and sweat and effort they’ve put into every minute of their training since they made their decision, and it stirs something in Sasuke. His heart clenches and his breath stutters, his blood pounds but his mind is buzzing with emptiness.

He’s not entirely sure which is more astounding to hear: the words of praise from both of their teachers, or the offer to enter the Chuunin Exams, for real. Not just Sakura’s theory anymore, a vague idea. It’s happening.

“Nominate us,” Naruto says, and his voice is steel, bright and rippling and with an edge that cuts, an edge that could kill if fully honed. “Nominate us and we’ll win the whole thing, Kakashi-sensei. We’ll beat the Exams on our first try, and then we’ll finish the requirements and beat our Jounin Exams, too.”

Kakashi looks between them again, from Naruto to Sakura to Sasuke and then back, searching for something in their faces. Whatever it is, he must find it, because he relaxes back into his chair like a puppet with its strings cut and beams around the table. “Maa,” he says, and it’s the same cheery, vaguely sadistic tone he always uses, but this time there’s something…else, buried just beneath the surface of it. Maybe pride, or pleasure, or satisfaction, or none of those at all. “Somehow, I thought you’d say that.” He looks over at Kurama, who’s smiling faintly, with that same steel-edge that was just in Naruto’s voice echoed in the curve of his lips. “Training?”

“Training,” Kurama agrees. “I hope you three aren’t overly attached to your sleep schedules, because most genin teams wait a full nine months after graduation to take the Winter Exam, rather than the Summer one three months later. We’ve got a quarter of that time to make sure you’re entirely prepared for anything the examiners could throw at you.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Sakura says stubbornly, and Naruto and Sasuke echo her words with firm nods. “We’ll do all the training you want, because we are going to pass. No matter how hard it
Kurama looks at them, then over at Kakashi, and his sharp smile becomes a grin. A fox-grin, with sharp teeth and wicked eyes, laughter and promise and an edge of wildness. It’s Naruto’s prankster smile, but honed. Refined. Terrifying. Thrilling.

“I have no doubt,” he says, like it’s an oath, and even if it’s not, Sasuke is willing to take it as one.

Sannin, he thinks again, and feels his heart pound. He meets Sakura’s eyes, then Naruto’s, and knows without having to ask or even wonder that they’re thinking the same.

*The Sannin. We are going to pass. We will.*
THE VERDICT: No SasuNaruSaku, at least not in this fic, sorry. I’ll write it someday, I swear, but after thinking it over and reading some of the very thoughtful feedback, pairings are going to remain as-is. Though, that said, subtext is always fun. :

Kiba is happy with his team, for the most part. Sure, Shino can be an arrogant, taciturn bastard sometimes, and Hinata is a bit too quiet and timid most of the time, but Kurenai is nice. She doesn’t work them too hard, and she understands that being clan heirs they’ve all be raised in different, unchangeable ways. She likes Akamaru, too, which is always a plus. All in all, things could have been a lot worse. His mother’s told him that his genin team will be a part of him forever, and he thinks he’s beginning to understand. Because his becoming a ninja depends pretty much entirely on these two kids and this jounin, and how he gets along with them.

With this in mind, he sometimes feels a brief flash of pity for Naruto, stuck with that brooding bastard and his obsessed fangirl for the next however-many-years it takes them to reach chuunin. A lot longer than it will take Team 8, probably, given Team 7’s members.

With a snarl, Kiba feels his foot slip, only four feet up the trunk of the tree he’s attempting to climb. He curses, but gravity’s already reasserting itself, and he gives in before he can take another tumble straight onto his head. Akamaru barks encouragingly as he lands, but it’s not helping. Hinata is the only one who’s gotten it so far, and she’s sitting up on a high branch looking exceedingly awkward and mortified, even though he and Shino haven’t said anything even remotely nasty.

“Kurenai-sensei,” he huffs, resisting the urge to kick the tree, “what the hell am I doing wrong?”

It’s little comfort that Shino looks just as aggravated. After all, he at least has managed to get halfway up the trunk before losing his grip.

Seated on a boulder in off to the side of the meadow, Kurenai looks sympathetic. “I’m sorry, Kiba, but you have the theory down. Now all you need to do is practice and refine your control, and that I can’t help you with.”

Kiba pulls a face and glares at his tree, distantly wondering how Naruto is doing at this. Probably badly, dead-last that he is. He can’t ask, though, since somehow the blond has managed to be entirely absent lately. Which is weird, because while genin are basically little more than slaves to training and D-ranks, they still get days off. Even so, Kiba hasn’t seen any of Team 7 since a few weeks after they graduated. Even that weird jounin instructor of theirs is nowhere to be found. They’ve been in Konoha—the scents are still fresh, after all—but they just haven’t been around.

“Again, Kiba,” Kurenai says, gentle but implacable. “You’ll never get better if you don’t work at it.”

Kiba wants to say something witty, make some reply that will show off his blinding intelligence and quick mouth, but before he can even think of a response there’s a rush of rustling leaves, a flash of flying kunai, and two forms burst out of the trees, spin back-to-back, and freeze, wary alertness in every line of their bodies.
Too startled to speak, Kiba just blinks at them. At Sasuke and Naruto, voluntarily standing together and breathing the same air without even bickering. It’s probably a sign that all of Konoha is going to go up in flames.

“N-N-N-Naruto-kun,” Hinata manages, flushing cherry red as she slides down the tree trunk. “Y-y-you’re…?”

Naruto glances over and grins at her, not seeming to notice that she’s about to pass out from all the blood rushing to her face at the sight of him. “Hey, Hinata-chan,” he says cheerfully, even as he switches his attention back to scanning the area. He’s got a kunai in one hand, and the orange jumpsuit is entirely gone, replaced with a long-sleeved mesh shirt under a half-sleeved black top and basic shinobi pants. That spiral design his jumpsuit always sported is still there, though smaller, stitched onto the shoulder in dark orange.

And…he looks happy. Maybe that’s not saying a lot, because Naruto always seems to be laughing and smiling and generally cheerful, but—but this is different. He’s just…he looks different.

“Hey, lamebrain, what the hell is this? Get off of our training ground!” Kiba bursts out, because he’s confused, and has never been one to take such things well.

“Don’t call him that,” Sasuke shoots back, flicking a truly venomous look in his direction. His hand tightens on the hilt of the katana he’s carrying.

Kiba’s jaw drops. Hinata blinks. Even Shino raises an eyebrow.

“Shut up, dog-breath,” Naruto agrees cheerfully, then snaps to Sasuke, “What the hell? I call double standard! You still—”

“Because you’re a dobe, and even Kurama can’t fix that,” Sasuke shoots back, but rather than a smirk, he’s…smiling? It’s faint, but Kiba’s pretty sure it’s a smile. What the hell?

Before he can say anything else, though, a new scent joins those already on the breeze, and Kiba lifts his head curiously. At the same moment, Sasuke and Naruto both tense and drop into ready stances. Sasuke lifts his sword, eyes narrowing, and then spins, deflecting three shuriken in quick succession and leaping back as kunai thud into the ground where he’d been standing. Naruto matches him easily, and says, “Where—?”

“Seven o’clock,” Sasuke answers tensely, then drags Naruto three steps to the left as senbon slam into the tree behind them.

“Argh,” the blond mutters, but he’s already flicking through hand signs, almost faster than Kiba can see and without so much as a single fumble. “Drive him—?”

“Yes, with your—”

“On it.” He steps forward, takes a breath, and cries, “Suiton: Exploding Water Shockwave!”

The stream on the far side of the meadow seems to burst, the water in it racing for the trees in a frankly frightening wave. Kiba wants to scream at Naruto, ask him when the hell he learned something like that, but the unfamiliar scent is moving, darting out towards the open ground in a flash of blood-red and steel-silver. Six more shuriken slice through the air, and Sasuke steps squarely in front of Naruto, only just managing to deflect them with his sword.

They don’t look at each other, don’t speak a word, but Sasuke is already racing through hand signs. “Katon: Great Fireball!” he orders, raising his fingers to his lips, and even as the surge of flame races
out towards their attacker, he drops flat to the ground.

Just in time, because as he does Naruto steps forward, pushes his hands out, and cries, “Futon: Great Breakthrough!”

Wind shrieks away from them with the force of a hurricane. It strikes the fireball, and the entire training ground seems to explode into a sheet of flames. Kiba yelps, Shino makes a sound that’s quickly cut off, and Hinata gasps, even as Kurenai jerks to her feet.

But where their eyes clear, the attacker, whoever it is, is gone, and Naruto and Sasuke are standing shoulder-to-shoulder at the edge of the clearing, looking around nervously.

“Thank that got him?” Naruto asks, though he doesn’t sound hopeful.

Sasuke snorts. “Got him? No. Made him retreat for the moment? Possibly.” He chances a look around, then flips his sword over and slides it away, into the sheath strapped across his back. “We should go, dobe.”

“Shut up, teme! I don’t want to face that stupid scarecrow’s punishment any more than you do.” Naruto shivers faintly in horror, face leeching of color.

Perhaps most frightening of all, Sasuke looks sympathetic. He nods sharply. “We need—”

“Sakura,” Naruto agrees, and then in a single bound they’re gone, leaping up into the trees like they’ve got glue on their feet and then vanishing into the shadows without a sound.

Kiba exchanges disbelieving looks with Shino.

The dead-last and the bastard?

Working together?

What the hell?

A flicker of red and black touching down draws their attention as a man lands in front of them, a jounin with long red hair pulled up in a high tail. He smiles at them, then inclines his head to their sensei. “Kurenai-san, I apologize for disrupting your training. I’ll try to keep them out of this area.”

“Uzumaki-san?” Kurenai asks, sounding startled. Not as startled as Kiba, though. Isn’t Uzumaki Naruto’s last name?

The redhead simply smiles, shaking his head. “Just call me Kurama, please. Uzumaki-san makes me feel old. I’m helping my cousin’s team,” he explains easily. “We’re playing tag. Ninja-style, of course.”

And…yeah, they’re definitely related. That mischievous grin is the same one Naruto wears when he’s pranked the teacher and knows it can’t be traced back to him.

Kurenai huffs a soft laugh, shaking her head. “Just avoid Anko,” she warns the man. “She hasn’t forgiven you for giving her the slip last time.”

That earns them a bright, sweet laugh, and Kurama salutes. “Thanks for the warning. I’ll let you get back to you training, then. Have a good day, Kurenai-san, Team 8.”

“You as well,” Kurenai answers, clearly bemused, and the redhead offers a swift wave before he leaps after the two genin.
There's a long, thick moment of silence. Then—

“What the hell?” Kiba explodes. “When did Naruto and Sasuke learn to do that? What did that weird sensei of theirs do to them?”

Kurenai stares after the red-haired shinobi for a long moment, then shakes her head. “If I knew,” she says dryly, “I’d do the exact same to you.”

Kiba splutters in outrage, and cries, “Hey!”

As long as he’s been consciously aware—which is a decent length of time, given that he’s a Nara—Shikamaru has known which team he was going to end up on. Not the number, maybe, or who his sensei would be, but he was the Nara heir. Like his father, like his grandfather, he was going to continue the legacy of the Ino-Shika-Cho trio with the other clan heirs of his generation.

There’s no use in complaining, and it’s just troublesome to do so when there won’t be any result beyond being told to suck up and deal with it, so Shikamaru never lets on that maybe kind of a little he’d wanted to be on a different team. With Choji, of course, because Choji is his best friend. But preferably without Sasuke's number one self-proclaimed biggest fan.

Ino used to be…bearable, if a bit high maintenance—though she’s a girl, and Shikamaru suspects that such things are a part of the deal with girls. She’d been a friend, too, when they were little, with Inoichi bringing her by almost every day. She was the pint-sized general who ordered him and Choji into all manner of trouble, and then got them off the hook as easily as batting her big blue eyes at whatever authority figure happened to be nearest. A terror, certainly, but she was fun (if still troublesome).

But now Ino is nothing more or less than a complete drag to listen to, and Shikamaru is one recitation of Sasuke’s perfection away from hogtying the Uchiha and leaving him on her doorstep with a big red bow, just to shut her up. Even that probably won’t work, though. Fangirls are truly formidable creatures.

“Are you listening, Shika?” Ino demands, stabbing her chopsticks at him threateningly.

It’s bad enough that Shikamaru is half-wishing they hadn’t stopped for lunch. At least when they’re doing taijutsu drills Ino is too occupied to keep ranting about her beloved Sasuke-kun and arch-nemesis Sakura.

“Not really,” he answers truthfully, and Ino puffs up dangerously. Shikamaru braces himself for the explosion, halfheartedly wondering if he’ll be able to get away with stuffing his fingers in his ears. Probably not.

Naruto, for all his boisterous good cheer, would have been an awesome third teammate. Kiba, Shino, Hinata, possibly even Sasuke—they’d all have been acceptable, too. Shikamaru silently curses the gods for having ever dreamed up this particular incarnation of the Ino-Shika-Cho and sighs, long and heavy and put-upon.

Choji gives him a sympathetic glance and steals the last dumpling out of his bento.

Shikamaru needs better friends. Really.

Then, with some surprise, Choji says, “Hey, isn’t that Sakura-chan?”
Entirely distracted, Ino whips around, eyes narrowed as she scans their surroundings for signs of the others on Team 7—meaning Sasuke. But Shikamaru's attention is caught by something different.

He’s looking at Sakura herself, and the change is…mind-boggling.

Her hair is the same pink as it ever was, but despite the ongoing war of vanity she and Ino have been waging via their hair for years now, it’s pulled back in a neat, tight braid bound not with a pretty ribbon but a serviceable strip of leather. The eye-catching red dress is gone as well, replaced by a forest-green apron-skirt over black leggings and a sleeveless dark red top. But more than the clothes, or the hair, it’s the way she moves that Shikamaru focuses on. That’s the biggest change, because when they graduated she moved like a little girl, the twelve-year-old with a smattering of training that she was. But now she’s moving like a shadow, her steps soundless, and whatever she’s been doing since graduation has added lots of lean muscle. Her gaze is calm and steady, and she looks...

She looks like a kunoichi.

Behind them, Asuma straightens up, eyeing Sakura with confusion. “Haruno?” he asks. “Aren’t you supposed to be with your team right now?”

“And where’s Sasuke-kun, Forehead Girl” Ino demands, like Sakura has him stuffed away in her pocket somewhere.

That’s…actually a fairly entertaining mental image, and Shikamaru files it away for later.

To his surprise, rather than snapping back or launching into a rant of her own, Sakura just rolls her eyes a little. “Hello, Ino,” she returns, then offer the two boys a small wave. “Asuma-san, Shikamaru-kun, Choji-kun. Have you Sasuke or Naruto recently?”

Shikamaru hasn’t, not in weeks, and it makes him frown faintly, even as Choji answers, “Hardly at all since graduation, and definitely not in the last week. Is everything all right, Sakura-chan?”

Sakura waves him off, as though missing Sasuke isn’t a big deal at all. “Oh, no, we’re just doing stealth training and I wondered if they’d come this way.”

“Naruto and Sasuke are working together?” Shikamaru asks with some disbelief, reading between the lines. He’s tempted to suggest that Sakura simply look for the cloud of dust as they attempt to pummel each other into the ground, but keeps his mouth shut at the last moment. This is a fangirl he’s dealing with, after all. There’s no telling what she might do.

But Sakura simply arches a brow at him, as though that’s a silly question. Before she can respond, though, a bright voice calls out, “Sakura-chan!” and two figures spring from the upper branches of the nearest trees and land in a crouch beside the pink-haired girl.

“Status?” Sasuke asks as he straightens, and it’s weird to see him without a superior or condescending look on his face, or even a moody scowl.

Sakura grins, and it’s unnervingly bloodthirsty. “Scarecrow’s out of commission, at least for now. He triggered the pit trap.” She sounds gleeful about that.

Naruto looks thrilled, too, and punches the air with a cry of, “Best trap in the world, believe it!”

Neither of his teammates hit him for it. Instead, Sasuke grins—really grins—and Sakura laughs.

“Report,” she orders, sounding disquietingly like Shikamaru’s mother. “What is Future Husband’s status?”
Naruto makes a face like he’s just bitten into something rotten. “Ugh. Can't we give him a different codename? He’s my cousin!”

“He’s also my future husband,” Sakura retorts cheerfully, and that alone is nearly enough to blow Shikamaru's mind, because Sasuke is standing right there and they're obviously not talking about him, so—

“Only if I don’t get to him first,” Sasuke points out smugly, and Shikamaru's world is officially destroyed. “I've got the Uchiha fortune going for me. What about you?”

“Medic-nins are well paid!”

With a sigh that says he’s suffered through this exact argument more than once, Naruto pinches the bridge of his nose, counts to ten under his breath, and then cuts in with, “You’re both idiots. Kurama-nii collected five S-rank bounties. At this point I think he could buy Konoha twice over and still live comfortably for the rest of his life.”

Sakura makes a face. “Don’t bring logic into this, Naruto! He’s going to be my husband, and—”

“Status!” Naruto says hurriedly, offering her a beaming grin. “You wanted to know his status, right? Kurama-nii is currently following the henged clones—” He breaks off with a wince, raising one hand to his head, and grimaces. “Never mind. Correction, he was following the henged clones. Apparently he got bored.”

“Argh,” Sakura mutters, apparently dropping the argument. Shikamaru still can't tell if it was serious or not. “Future Husband is a jerk.”

Sasuke makes a noise of disgruntled agreement, crossing his arms over his chest with a frown. “Then—”

“Yeah,” Sakura sighs, rubbing her temple. “Back to Plan…what letter are we on now?”

“Plan S,” Naruto chimes in dryly, and since when did he even know what sardonic humor was? “For ‘screwed’.”

There's a long moment of disheartened contemplation, and then Sasuke suggests, “Normally I’d laugh at retreat as a strategy, but against Kurama…” He trails off meaningfully.

“Discretion is the better part of valor,” Sakura agrees immediately, but it’s in no way fawning. “And I think that as ninja, it just counts as evasion and preparation for the next attack.” A pause, and then she starts, “Hide out with—?”

“Yeah,” Naruto agrees without even waiting for her to finish. “He won't tell anyone. Um. Hopefully?”

Sasuke snorts and rolls his eyes. “Encouraging, dobe,” he snaps, but somehow all the vicious bite has been drained from his voice, every last bit of it. At least when directed at Naruto, and Shikamaru has to wonder if it’s a sign that the end is near.

“Best option,” Sakura points out, then turns and offers Team 10 a quick half-wave. “See you, Ino, Shikamaru-kun, Choji-kun.”

“Have a good day, jounin-san,” Naruto chimes in cheerfully, while Sasuke simply grunts. A moment later they’re gone, fading back into the shadows and slipping soundlessly away, like real shinobi.
So much for the dead-last, rabid fangirl, and grade-A bastard, Shikamaru thinks through his shock. Huh. But mostly—

“Troublesome,” he mutters, rubbing his forehead, because it’s a mystery how Team 7 has changed so freaking much in such a short freaking time, and until he gets his answer it’s going to drive him insane.

Then, a little too late, he realizes that Ino never said a word, not one in all the time that Sasuke was present. He glances over at her, concerned, and finds her staring at the patch of ground where her former friend had been standing. There’s a nearly blank look on her face that Shikamaru doesn’t like at all. “Oi,” he tries.

Ino doesn’t even seem to hear him. Her eyes are wide, and she looks oddly shaken.

“You okay, Ino-chan?” Choji asks with concern, seemingly noticing the same thing.

The blonde doesn’t twitch, but this time she answers. “I’m…fine,” she says slowly, and blinks. “But…but Sakura.” She swallows, and then tries again. “I…she—she doesn’t love Sasuke anymore. She’s not in love with him.”

Well, that would certainly explain her strange behavior, though it doesn’t do anything to clarify how such a thing happened. Shikamaru wishes he knew, so that he could do the same for Ino and snap her out of it.

“Does this mean you're not rivals anymore?” Choji asks cheerfully, munching on a handful of chips.

He doesn’t catch the nearly dismayed expression that flickers over Ino's features, but Shikamaru does.

Iruka looks at the three genin sprawled around his apartment in various states of dusty disarray, all three of them bruised and filthy and ever so slightly charred, and holds in a sigh.

“Isn't this supposed to be your training?” he asks, though without much hope.

Sakura offers him the bright, sweet, utterly innocent smile he learned to stop trusting roughly ten hours after meeting her. “But Iruka-sensei, we’re taking advantage of the presence of allies within what is otherwise enemy territory; it’s perfectly logical for a shinobi. And the game only lasts until three o’clock, anyway.”

Even though he’s already fairly certain he’s going to regret asking, Iruka crosses his arms over his chest and demands, “How do you know I'm not a double agent? I could betray you in a heartbeat.”

As soon as the words leave his mouth, he’s pinned in place by three sets of razor-sharp eyes, one pair blue, one green, and one black. The genin study him for a long moment, as though cataloguing weak spots, and then turn away with a synchronized shrug.

“Eh,” Naruto says, entirely offhand. “Sorry, Iruka-sensei, but I think together we could take you.”

Iruka would be offended, if he weren’t quite so unnerved by three of his most adorable former students suddenly turning into predators right before his eyes.

But he gives up with a groan, throwing his hands into the air and slumping onto the couch next to Sasuke. “Fine,” he mutters—not petulantly, because he’s not a child, but…peevishly. Possibly
sullenly. “And Naruto! What happened to your jumpsuit? Did you destroy it again?”

Naruto just looks at him like he asked why the sky is up and the earth is down. “It’s orange,” he says, and scoffs, crossing his arms over his chest. “Like hell I’m going to give Kakashi-sensei and Kurama-nii another advantage over us. Besides,” he brightens with a grin, and points to the orange spiral on his sleeve. “Kurama-nii got the Uzumaki crest put onto all of my clothes. They’ve all got orange now, and I can wear them and still blend in!”

Iruka is…startled, to say the least. Naruto’s been wearing that jumpsuit for so long that it seems like part of him, even if he does appear much more the shinobi in training right now. “You—” he starts, not quite sure where his dismay is coming from, because he’s wanted Naruto to give up that eye-searing thing for years now.

But Naruto just laughs. “It’s still in my closet,” he admits. “I’m not always on duty, and orange is still almost as awesome as Kurama-nii!”

Behind his back, Sasuke and Sakura exchange clear let’s-burn-it-at-the-first-opportunity looks, but Iruka feels something in his chest relax, if only slightly.

Jutsus and new clothes and growing maturity aside, this is still Naruto.

Iruka smiles at him and reaches out, ruffles his hair and then, in the name of fairness, does the same to Sakura and Sasuke as well. “So I see,” he murmurs, and it feels like his heart is three and a half sizes too big to fit where it’s supposed to. “So I see.”
The mission comes while they're eating breakfast together—out, because this is the last day of Kurama's payment for the kids dying Kakashi's hair pink. (He'd added two extra days for the sparkles, because that was just vicious and wonderful and beautifully creative.) Kakashi has tagged along as well, hair finally back to normal—though Kurama suspects a henge at work. The restaurant isn't busy and the day feels lazy, regardless of training and missions later. Naruto is cheerfully explaining his new seal, while Sakura and Sasuke are carefully listening and Kurama is carefully not. Kakashi's watching them all, expression relaxed and easy as he leans on his elbows, and it feels good.

It feels like family.

But Kurama sees the messenger hawk alight on the windowsill, yellow band around its leg, and goes still. The bird turns its head, surveying the interior of the restaurant, and its sharp eyes settle on him without further hesitation.

No, Kurama wants to say, because for the first time he has a reason to stay, to be here and not traipsing across the most distant reaches of the continent. But he's a shinobi, he's a jounin, he was almost a kage, and he's long since learned that duty trumps his desires every time.

He slides the window open and lets the hawk hop onto his wrist. It sticks out its leg, clearly impatient, and as soon as he's taken the scroll it's gone again, swooping away.

Yellow band. A-rank mission. Red edging means it's urgent. Kurama breaks the seal and reads it quickly, mouth tightening. A solo assassination mission, critical, ordered to report to the Hokage at once for mission details—he crumples the paper without care, closing his eyes. He's been lucky so far, not getting called on for anything more taxing than a courier run, but he'd known it couldn't last. Not with his skills, not with his acceptance in the village. He's valuable, and even though he's not the Kyuubi jinchuuriki here, it's still just as true as it was back in his time.

"Kurama-nii?" Naruto asks, and there's poorly buried concern in his voice. When Kurama looks up, worried blue eyes are watching him as though he's about to disappear. "Are you okay?"

Kurama clears his throat and musters up a smile, though he's not entirely sure how genuine he makes it. Not very, judging by how the worry only increases. "It's just a mission, Naruto—not even a long one, probably. But it's A-rank and urgent, so I need to leave now."

"But…aren't you helping with our team?" Sakura asks, her face pale.

"Not officially," Kurama explains, even as he rises to his feet. "I'm sorry, but I have to go. The Hokage wants to brief me in person."

Sasuke, sitting between him and the end of the table, stubbornly stays seated. He looks up at Kurama with something strange about the set of his mouth, the lines of his face, and it's only after a moment that Kurama recognizes it as a mixture of dismay and fear. But he knows the cause well enough: Sasuke's scared of losing someone after he let them in. He's scared of his world ending yet again.

"Hey," Kurama says gently, looking between the three genin, and they're all wearing variations of the same expression. It's strange, because he'd half-expected Naruto to be enthusiastic and the others interested. "Hey, it's just a mission. Not even S-rank. I'll be fine, and back before you even start to miss me." He slides carefully past Sasuke out of the booth, then crouches so that he's looking up at...
the trio. “Have a bit of faith in me, please.”

Naruto's lower lip is out in a definite pout, and he leaps from his seat to throw his arms around Kurama's neck and squeeze tightly. Kurama grunts a bit at the impact—Naruto isn't any definition of the word waifish, and he’s put on muscle since training started in earnest—but hugs him back. An instant later Sakura is on him, too, and even Sasuke is hovering just a little too close, dark eyes full of a precocious sort of understanding and fear.

Without hesitation, Kurama opens his arms to Sakura as well, pulls Sasuke down into the group and murmurs to all of them, “Hey, don’t worry. If I didn’t know better I’d say you thought a simple A-rank could take me out. Come on.”

Sakura chokes on something that might be a laugh, and pulls back. She rises to her feet, carefully brushing down her skirt and smoothing her hair, and then nods decisively. “Come back quickly,” she orders, and the tone almost manages to hide how her voice is trembling. “Otherwise Kakashi-sensei will be completely useless and just hide in a tree with his book all day.”

“Maa, maa, Sakura-chan. Don’t be mean,” Kakashi protests, feigning wounded pride with the very best. “You make me sound lazy.”

Sasuke snorts derisively as he steps away, cheeks faintly flushed but composure firmly in place. “You promised to teach me that next kenjutsu kata,” he reminds Kurama. Kurama knows that tone, that phrasing; Sasuke wants a promise that he’ll return, but isn’t willing to ask for one.

“Yeah,” Naruto chimes in, voice suspiciously thick, though his face is buried in Kurama's shoulder so his expression is entirely hidden. “I want to learn that barrier seal you keep talking about, too. So come back quickly, okay?”

Kurama smiles softly, ruffles blond hair and drops a kiss on the boy’s brow. “I promise,” he says, and then meets Sasuke's eyes as he repeats softly, “I promise. Don’t worry about me, all right? Just keep training. Do your own missions and get stronger. Deal?”

“Deal,” Naruto agrees, pulling back, and he’s finally smiling. “It’s awesome that Hokage-jiiji trusts you enough to give you important missions, Kurama-nii. I can't wait until we’re jounin, too!”

“Soon,” Kurama assures him, grinning. “Practice more, beat the Exams, and then we’ll see. Stay safe, brat.”

“You too, Kurama-san,” Sakura whispers, and Sasuke nods sharply, just once.

But it’s Kakashi's eyes that Kurama meets as he stands. The other jounin looks relaxed, at ease, but there's a new tension in the line of his shoulders as he lifts a hand in lazy salute.

“Break a leg,” he says, and if Kurama didn’t know him better he’d mistake that tone for cheer.

He does know better, though, and offers the man a smile. “I'm looking forward to finding out what color your hair will be when I get back, Kakashi,” he teases, dropping a hand on his shoulder and squeezing gently.

“Kurama, don’t give them ideas,” Kakashi protests, but he lays his fingers over Kurama's and returns the gesture. They linger for just a moment, and Kurama sweeps his eyes over his gathered family, then smiles.

“I'm off,” he says with a wink and a wave, and engraves the sight in his memory before triggering a shunshin and disappearing from the restaurant.
It’s a simple mission in the end. The Daimyo has been watching a spy in his household, feeding her information, but she’s started to go beyond what he can control and he wants her eliminated. She’s a shinobi with a bloodline that negates other bloodlines, which is the reason for the high mission rank. Sarutobi hands over the details with an even expression. There’s no warning of danger, but Kurama has been a shinobi long enough, and through enough crises, to understand what’s merely implied.

“Don’t worry,” he tells the Sandaime, and it’s strange to speak that phrase so often. For so long it was only him and Sasuke, and such things were silently understood. “I should be back within three days.”

Sarutobi nods to him, but the lines in his face don’t fade. “She’s killed before to keep her secret,” he says. Sharp eyes meet Kurama’s, and he adds, “I hope you are, Kurama-kun. I would hate to tell Naruto that his last family was gone.”

Kurama winces, because as far as motivators go that much guilt is a good one. He steps back and salutes. “You won’t have to, Hokage-sama.”

The Hokage nods in return, gives him a small, warm smile. “Dismissed,” he says formally, and Kurama is out of his office and on his way to the gates before the last syllable has even left his lips.

The sooner he leaves, after all, the sooner he’ll get home.

Single shinobi mid-mission rarely have the luxury of stopping for medical treatment. It’s one of those unspoken rules; if a shinobi is able to move, they’re damn well able to return to their village and report in. If the injury is something life-threatening, there’s no other choice, but returning to their village is always supposed to be a shinobi’s priority.

Usually, this kind of thing never effects Kurama, because previously he had the Kyuubi, and then ever since the fox’s sacrifice his healing rate’s been slower, but still formidable. It’s a rare thing that he actually has to break out the bandages, regardless of who he’s up against.

(The last time was after facing Kisame. It was mostly his fault, because he hadn’t been able to get around the fact that Itachi had counted this man as something of a friend, but Kisame had taken advantage and Kurama had ended up convalescing in a cave in the middle of nowhere for a week afterwards. It’s not an experience he’s eager to repeat.)

Now, fresh from his encounter with the spy and her ability to block bloodline powers, healing is slow in coming, because the Kyuubi’s gifts are just enough like a bloodline to be effected and mostly shut down. Kurama's taped ribs and bandaged shoulder feel like he’s painted huge, flashing targets on them. He’s not used to being injured for more than a day, and it’s the next best thing to unnerving, being even a little bit vulnerable. Too long with Madara waiting in the shadows, ready to destroy him and Sasuke both at the first sign of weakness, probably, but it’s a habit that Kurama can’t shake regardless of the fact that Madara is currently dead and nearly all of his enemies are defeated or converted.

The forest feels endless, but Kurama favors it over the road regardless—another habit gained in a war that was more often fought with guerilla tactics than openly. It’s good cover as well, and the mere fact of its existence eases something in his mind that’s still far too used to being a resistance fighter forever on the run. Madara isn't here, there’s a day-pale moon above him, the air is fresh and free of smoke, and trees stretch away on all sides, vast and comforting.
Kurama breathes deep, tries to release his anxiety and accept the fact that his mission is nearly complete and he’s headed home. It almost works, so close, and he can nearly see the stately height of the Hokage Mountain in the distance. Home, his heart says, leaping bright and joyful in his chest, and he pauses, perched on a wide bough, to savor the feeling.


He’s distracted and finally focused on something more than his surroundings, blatantly in the open and unmoving, a perfect target. And when a hail of shuriken come flying out of the leaves and right for him, it’s only his complete reliance on long-since honed instincts that let him dodge even part of them. One clips his arm as he flips out of the way and he curses himself for his inattention, landing lightly on a higher limb three trees over. Senses straining, he catches the hiss of air just in time to leap away again as the branches fold in around him like grasping arms.

Mokuton means one of two things, and somehow, Kurama doesn’t think his attacker is Tenzo mistaking him for an enemy. The Konoha hitai-ate is clear, after all, and he knows that Tenzo has been Sarutobi’s guard at least one of the times they’ve met, enough to recognize his face at the very least.

But if it’s not Tenzo, then there’s only one other person with mokuton in all the Elemental Countries.

As if answering his thoughts, a flash of orange in the shadows catches his attention, and Kurama barely manages to flicker out of the way as a fire jutsu roars past, scorching the ends of his hair. He feels the presence appear behind him half an instant too late, and a strong kick catches him in the side, hurtling him back into an unyielding trunk even as his ribs shriek their painful protest.

Tobi’s chakra vanishes again, but even winded, aching, and half-dazed, Kurama manages to dodge, just as a warping spiral of flames consumes the tree he’d struck. It’s enough to pinpoint a location, and Kurama channels all of his speed as he leaps forward. Ginkaze whirls from its sheath like a flash of silver lightning, like its namesake, and he plunges it towards the heart of the fires that are just now dying.

Too late, always, always when fighting Tobi, and the blade simply catches a sleeve as he goes intangible, fades away and darts back into the trees. Kurama curses and doesn’t follow, heads the opposite way because facing Tobi right now is practically the same as facing Madara. He’s crafty and quick and has backup plans for his backup plans, never mind his damned ability to improvise and make it work. Tobi is fast and dangerous and ten miles of crazy on a very short track, and Kurama hasn’t learned his Obito’s plan yet, is still working out the final kinks in the seal transfer and has yet to even look for a tattoo artist to make the necessary alterations to his seals. If he’s not very careful, this will be a short fight, and Kurama won’t be coming out on the winning side.

Another streak of fire sends him darting out of the branches and onto the ground, where the weathered trunks are at least slightly less flammable than the leaves, and a moment later Tobi joins him, lunging forward. There’s no hint of his jokester mask, no masquerade as Deidara’s childish partner—this is a madman thwarted at every turn, all of his plans upended around him. Kurama hasn’t just been poking a sleeping dragon; he’s been setting off firecrackers under its tail, and Tobi is angry. The cold, burning fury is etched into every movement as he strikes out, taijutsu almost too fast to follow, let alone block, and Kurama doesn’t even bother trying. He flips over the man’s head and bolts, heading deeper into the shadows in the vain hope of at least buying some time.

Chakra flickers ahead of him, familiar and aggravating, and Kurama curses as he spins to the side to avoid the roots that surge up to grab him. Kamui has got to be the most fucking frustrating manifestation of the Mangekyo, or of any damn bloodline in general. Add mokuton to that, and even without the Rinnegan Tobi is a bitch and a half to deal with on a good day, let alone on one where
Kurama is injured and tired and already cranky.

A flicker of orange catches his eye again, and Kurama doesn’t wait, fires off three jutsu in quick succession, Raiton and Suiton and then Doton, in the vague hope that it will do something, then spins and catches Tobi’s head-aimed strike on the flat of his katana. The one-eyed mask is eerie this close up, a reminder of a time when everyone thought this was the worst they’d ever have to deal with. But he doesn’t speak, not even to taunt or gloat or try and crack Kurama open with words. Tobi is entirely silent, and that’s more unnerving than anything.

Kurama opens his mouth to try anyway, because words at least helped get through to him last time, but before he can even get the first syllable out Tobi is gone again, sending Kurama stumbling forward. He’s off-balance when the man appears behind him, unable to stop the kick, but he throws himself forward just in time to keep it from shattering his spine, lets it glance off his hip instead and drops into a roll. He comes up facing Tobi, Ginkaze still in hand through sheer stubbornness, and forms the familiar hand-sign. “Kage Bunshin.”

Three clones settle into being and immediately lunge forward, swords flashing. In the trees, two more flicker around to get behind Tobi, then leap at him. Another three, and another three, and another, and Kurama knows it won't hold him for long, will give away the fact that his chakra reserves are suspiciously large even for an Uzumaki, but there’s no other choice. Distraction is his only option, defense defense defense until Tobi gives up or a Konoha patrol notices and he decides to leave. And neither of those options have anything but the smallest chance of succeeding.

Ten clones vanish within seconds of each other, leaving Kurama with memories of ten merciless killing blows, and he knows better than to think that the last two will fare any better. Another half a heartbeat, and even though his next jutsu is already on his lips, about to fly, the forest comes alive around him. Branches grasp for him like hands, roots trap his legs like chains, and Kurama slices through them with a furious curse. There’s too much ammunition here for someone who can turn the very trees against him, and Kurama has been glad before that Obito changed sides, chose them, but never more than now, when he’s facing all of that power turned against him. Tobi has mokuton and Kamui and likely Madara’s eye as well, and it’s very possible he’s the deadliest shinobi alive today.

This isn’t the kind of fight Kurama can go into halfheartedly if he has any expectations of survival.

Ten more clones jump Tobi, barely enough to be cannon-fodder, but Kurama doesn’t have the Kyuubi’s all but unlimited chakra reserves anymore, no matter how much larger his are than the average shinobi’s. He doesn’t have a Tailed Beast Mode and he doesn’t have the ability to release the strongest of the bijuu, but he does have one trick left up his sleeve, desperate though it is.

The real Kurama was a creature all but made of natural chakra, forever open to the flow if it, and he passed that ability on to this Kurama with everything else.

It’s an advantage that he’ll never underappreciate.

Sage Mode comes easily, like slipping on a favorite coat, and the rush of it is heady, his sudden awareness of the rest of the world unfurling like a bud under the dawn. Not the toads’ Sage Mode, because his name was taken off their contract after the Kyuubi’s sacrifice. But the foxes bound themselves to him instead, so it’s their training that he calls upon, and moves.

Tobi is ready for him. If he feels any surprise at all it’s entirely concealed, and his strikes are harder than ever, rattling bones and forcing Kurama to dodge more often than not, even though he finally has the speed to match them. Ginkaze dances, a shimmering, twisting shield, but he’s still on the defensive, still being pushed back one step at a time, and—
A sword-hand blow to his ribs and he can all but hear them give way, the pain too heavy to even breathe through as he’s tossed away, thrown into the trunk of another tree. His world is white with agony even as forces himself to stagger back to his feet, and there’s barely enough thought left over to deflect the fuuma shuriken that flies at him. Even that rattles him, forces him another step back, and he’s healing but he’s not healing fast enough, a bare trickle when he needs a flood if he’s going to last.

“Pathetic,” Tobi hisses, and he’s right behind Kurama’s shoulder, snarling the word into his ear. Kurama tries to dodge, tries to get away, but a kunai stabs into his side, buries itself deep and tears a cry from his lips. He falls away even as he lashes out, feels Ginkaze catch flesh and tear half a moment before the sensation is gone. It’s too risky to use a Rasengan or any of its variations, too close to his true identity and even now he’s not willing to give that up, not to Tobi who has yet to become his friend Obito. No Rasengan, and his Hiraishin is poor at best even if he did dare use that. Instead he reaches for his wind, for the one element that’s always come easiest, even with the conversion matrixes inked into his skin.

“Fuuton: Blade of Wind!”

It’s Baki’s jutsu, taught to him by Temari, and meant to be done with no weapon in hand. But Ginkaze was forged for this, to channel chakra and shape both wind and lightning, and that makes it simple. Simple, too, is guessing Tobi’s point of emergence, because Kurama is wounded and dizzy with blood-loss and breathing’s getting hard, something wet in his chest that rattles when he inhales. He’s a target, weak, and Tobi won’t be cautious, won’t think that Kurama has anything left worth worrying about.

It’s sometimes amazing to think he knew another Uzumaki, knew Kushina, and still is able to make such assumptions.

A flicker, a twist of chakra in the same moment as branches shoot from Tobi’s stiffened arm like javelins, but Kurama is prepared. He lunges forward, even as pain makes his head spin, cuts through the reaching wood as if through water, and stabs the wind-honed blade deep into Tobi’s unguarded side.

It’s not a killing blow, but it’s a grave one.

Tobi chokes on a cry and his mokuton surges again, but it’s wild, uncontrolled. It knocks Kurama back into another tree, sword flying from his grasp, but he’s prepared for that too, blood-covered hand flickering through seals and then slamming into the ground.

The whirl of smoke, a deep snarling growl, and a shape bounds forward, settles itself defensively in front of him. Not Fuji, who for all her ferocity is made for speed and quick-darting, distracting attacks. Not Ume and Oka, who excel against large numbers. Not Kaede for stealth or Momiji for chakra attacks, but Ran. Black, fierce Ran who despite her delicate name is the biggest and bulkiest of his regular summons, who despite her laidback demeanor has seven tails and claws like a tiger and all the protective instincts of a desperate mother bear. She rises out of the shadows, white teeth bared menacingly, and in this light she’s the size of a horse.

Foxes aren’t like toads; they don’t get as large as houses as they age and gain power. All of their strength is confined in their tails, and while it puts them at a disadvantage facing creatures like Manda and Gamabunta, against a human—even a human as skilled, cunning, and ruthless as Tobi—it’s enough.

It’s more than enough.
And clearly Tobi knows it, because he hesitates. He’s wounded and outnumbered, and while there’s a chance he could still win there’s also the chance that he won’t, and Kurama is already certain that’s not a chance he’s willing to take.

With one final snarl he disappears, and the world goes still.

“Kurama-chin,” Ran says worriedly, pushing upright and darting over to his side. Her ears are laid flat back against her head, dark violet eyes full of worry as she noses at his side. Kurama has just enough strength to let his Sage Mode fade away, senses feeling deadened with its absence as he drops a hand on top of her big head.

“Ran,” he says. “Sorry, I didn’t have a chance to call you before. Do you—” Pain flares as the adrenaline fades, and he just barely manages to strangle a gasp. “Konoha—please, get help. Can’t heal—argh.” He grits his teeth to keep in the cry that wants to come out, swallows it down and drops his head back against the tree as he hisses, “Please. Go.”

Ume would argue, insist he call another fox to stay with him just in case, but Ran is easier to deal with; she doesn’t ask questions or make demands, just goes, as swift as a bird in flight as she bolts towards the far-off village.

Kurama listens to the faint sounds of her passing, already growing distant, and closes his eyes.

Just a moment’s rest. Just a minute. Then he’ll get up and keep moving.

Just one moment.

When she’s completely gone, he lets out a breath and closes his eyes, lets the darkness sweep in and take away the pain. He drowns in warm shadows, happily, contentedly, and surrenders himself to their gentle grasp.

“No matter how much you complain about the three of us, Genma, at least we never set Konoha on fire,” Kotetsu says cheerfully, dropping down on the Jounin Standby Station couch where Genma is doing paperwork.

The tokujo doesn’t even bother to glance up. “And the fact that I distinctly remember you brats scorching my kitchen almost beyond repair means…?”

Kotetsu has the grace to look sheepish. “Um…that you didn’t appreciate our birthday surprise nearly as much as we intended you to?”

Genma gives him a deadpan stare, one brow faintly arched, and says nothing.

“We weren’t as bad as Kakashi’s genin team are, though,” Izumo adds quickly, leaning against the back behind Kotetsu and fixing their surrogate mother with his most innocent expression. “They just about destroyed Training Ground 4 last week. Kotetsu and I had to help them put it out.”

“Is that why you came home smelling like smoke?” Genma asks absently, shuffling through his papers. Kotetsu and Izumo share a grin, because no matter how often Genma insists that his apartment is too small and that they moved out and therefore for longer have the right to loiter, he always calls it ‘home’, and they do, too.

A moment of shared glee, and then Kotetsu returns his attention to the older man. “Yep,” he agrees cheerfully. “It’s a good thing I have a water affinity, and 4 has a lot of rivers, or the whole thing
would have burned to the ground.”

“They also,” Izumo puts in, sounding inordinately cheerful, “told us the entire story of how they dyed Kakashi’s hair pink. With sparkles.”

That finally makes Genma look up, and his warm brown eyes are bright with mirth. “Oh?” he says in amusement. “Care to share?”

Izumo looks about as close to gleeful as he ever gets. They caught Kakashi flirting with Genma once, a couple of years ago now, and have never forgiven him for that, so Kotetsu is entirely in line with his way of thinking. “Well, apparently—”

The door of the Station flies open with a harsh crack, knob broken clean off, and a dark, hulking shape bursts through. Kotetsu is on his feet before he can even register moving, kunai in hand, and when he finally sees what it is his pulse only races faster, accelerating like hasn’t since that awful night twelve years ago.

A huge black fox with multiple tails, in a Konoha that’s finally, finally recovered, where the Kyuubi caused so many deaths—Kotetsu's entire clan, because Hagane clan lands were practically where the rampage started—

“Please!” the fox cries, and its voice is definitely feminine, definitely desperate. She darts over to them, and even though she’s hardly the Kyuubi’s size she’s still intimidating, as black as pitch with deep purple eyes and seven tails fanned out behind her. “Please, my master, he’s injured!”

Genma, who will forever be first to help regardless of his suspicious nature, is already rising to his feet, and Kotetsu follows him, because tokubetsu or no, ANBU assassin or no, he’s hardly about to let Genma walk into an uncertain situation alone. Raidou is the only one he’d even vaguely trust to go with the blond, but Raidou is on a mission and not due back until tomorrow.

“What and where?” Genma asks, already headed for the door.

The fox follows him in a blur of dark fur and anxiety. “Uzumaki,” she says. “Uzumaki Kurama. He’s about a mile to the west, and normally he heals but something’s happened and I don’t—”

“Kurama?” Genma repeats, and this time his tone is alarmed. Kotetsu feels the same thrill of apprehension lance through his chest, because he knows Kurama, if only as an acquaintance, and he likes the man, who always has a smile and a kind word to offer. Who doesn’t treat him and Izumo as lesser just because they’re chuunin and gate guards and sometimes-errand-boys for the Hokage. “He’s hurt?”

“He was attacked,” the fox confirms. Their group is drawing attention now—hard not to, what with the summons’s appearance. “He only called me at the end, but…I think it’s quite bad.”

“Go, Shiranui-san,” another jounin says. A Hyuuga, by her eyes and long brown hair. She’s on her feet and already headed towards the street. “I will alert the Hokage. Retrieve him quickly.”

“Thanks, Rui-san,” Genma acknowledges, and then darts forward, and even after years of practice it’s all Kotetsu and Izumo can do to keep up. They flash past the gate, then out into the forest, and the fox takes the lead. She’s quicker than they are, and Kotetsu can see that she wants to race forward, get back to her summoner’s side, but restrains herself.

He thinks how he would feel, if it were Izumo or Iruka or Genma hurt out there, and pushes himself just a little bit faster.
Haste

He comes awake to afternoon sunlight and a warm breeze that carries the scent of clean linens and starch and just the faintest hint of disinfectant. *Hospital*, he thinks before he even opens his eyes. Hospital means Ran got help, and help means Konoha, and Konoha means—

“Rise and shine, sleeping beauty,” a familiar voice drawls to his left. “I have to admit, you had me thinking we were going to need to find someone to administer a kiss. I’d offer, of course, but Raidou’s a tad bit possessive. Last time I had to flirt for a mission, he—”

“Genma-san,” Kurama groans, and if he were willing to move and test his body’s recovery he’d drape an arm over his eyes or shove his head under the pillow. “I work with both of you, and I’d like to be able to meet Raidou’s eyes sometime before next year. Keep that to yourself, please.”

Genma laughs, rich and throaty, and a moment later a warm, calloused hand closes loosely around Kurama’s wrist. “You bastard,” he says fondly. “What the hell were you thinking, having an S-rank fight right on Konoha’s doorstep? The way I hear it, you almost gave the ANBU patrol on the western wall a heart attack. They thought a kage was being killed or something.”

Kurama snorts disgustedly, opening his eyes and blinking in the unexpected brilliance of the sunlight streaming through the window. “No kage, just me. I take it Ran got help, then?”

As he reaches out to thoughtfully draw the curtains, Genma huffs a disbelieving laugh. “Your kitsune summons? Yeah, she came bursting into the Station and gave ninety percent of the shinobi there heart failure. I’ll assume she takes after you.”

“You say that like I startle people half to death on a daily basis,” Kurama protests, trying to judge whether or not he feels well enough to sit up. A moment of hesitation and then he mentally dismisses the concern. Either it will hurt or it won’t. Dithering isn’t going to change anything.

“You said it, not me. Careful.” Genma’s sharp brown eyes are narrowed in concern, but he says nothing as Kurama painfully, gradually eases into a sitting position and glances around. It’s a hospital room, definitely, and a fairly barren one at that, which is…slightly surprising. At the very least Team 7 should have *visited* him, and more than likely Naruto at least would have entirely refused to leave if they did. So this absence—

“Team 7?” he demands.

Genma studies him intently, then sighs and settles back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “I assume it’s too much to ask that you stay in that bed regardless of what I tell you?” he asks wryly.

Kurama levels him with a flatly furious look. “Genma.”

“Sheesh. Just asking.” The tokujo raises his hands in surrender. “Team 7 left shortly after you did for a C-rank escort and protection detail. Mission timeframe put them out of the village for at least two weeks.”

C-rank.

The pieces click together in Kurama’s mind, and he goes stiff. “Genma. *Where*?”

“Wave,” the older man answers, but his expression is grimly considering. “You know something.” It’s not a question.
Kurama closes his eyes and presses his hands over them, wondering how everything could have gone so wrong so quickly. First the damned spy and her bloodline, then Tobi, then this. “I have contacts in Wave,” he explains, and it’s not even entirely a lie. He just doesn’t have them yet. “The situation there is…not good.”

Genma blows out a short, heavy breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Fuck,” he mutters, and it’s rare to hear him swear in earnest. “You’ve been sleeping for two days, fighting off whatever your target did to you. Kakashi and his brats left four days ago. Even traveling slowly to accommodate a civilian, they would have made it over the border yesterday at the very latest, likely before that.”

Damn, damn, damn. Kurama has to fight down the angry surge and snap of his chakra for the first time in a very long while as his control wavers. He knows that they all survived the Wave mission in his timeline, knows that the genin are far better trained now than his team ever was, but that’s the problem. They’re better trained, more ready to fight and defend and so much closer to being killed because of it. What if Zabuza doesn’t hold back this time? There were moments before where he could have killed them, but didn’t, and what if their resistance this time means their deaths?

It’s not something he can stand to contemplate, that in giving them strength he might have also indirectly pushed them towards their deaths. Kurama grits his teeth and reins himself in, wrenching violet chakra back underneath his skin as it makes to escape.

“I’ll tell the Hokage,” Genma says grimly. “Even if it’s just a secondhand rumor you heard, it’ll be enough to keep him from risking a genin team. He’ll probably send reinforcements, just in case.” A quick, glancing touch to Kurama’s shoulder, half a heartbeat of comfort, and then the tokujo is out the door. Kurama follows him with his senses until his chakra fades into the distance, then grits his teeth and grimly swings his legs over the side of the bed. Pain sparks across his nerve endings but he pushes it down, ignores it as he rises to his feet.

Loss is pain. Sorrow is pain. Bodily wounds are a mere irritation in the grand scheme of things.

(Kurama has never been bothered by the physical, not really. Only the emotional is true agony, and he’ll do anything in his power to prevent himself from feeling the pain of losing someone precious again. Anything at all, and more besides.)

His clothes are gone, but there’s a fresh jounin uniform in the correct size folded in one of the closets, and Kurama takes it without pause, ducking into the bathroom to change. He rolls up the sleeves to leave his seals bare, and snatches up the hitai-ate that was left beside his bed. Ginkaze is leaning against the wall, and his weapons pouches are stacked neatly beside it. Blessing medic-nin who are used to dealing with paranoid, possessive jounin, Kurama ties them on as well.

By all rights he should wait for Genma to return, or for the Sandaime to summon him. But even now there’s a dull ache throbbing through him, a constant reminder of the fact that he’s injured and not healing quite as fast as he should. Sarutobi will confine him to this hospital room, forbid him from going anywhere—and maybe it’s the right decision, looking at things from the outside, but it’s not the right decision for Kurama.

Team 7 could be in danger, and that’s reason enough to go to their sides, regardless of what stands in his way.

He leaves a note for whoever comes looking for him with as much information on Gatou and Wave as he has time to give, then slips out the window. His ribs are aching lightly with even that little strain, and the stab wound in his other side is a sharper, throbbing hurt, but Kurama shuts them out as he ghosts away from the hospital. No one even glances at him twice, which, in a shinobi village, is about the best one can ask for. People will remember him, because the majority of them are trained
to, but no one’s going to stop him. Not yet, at least.

A stand of trees, thick and obscuring, edges a bend of the road, and Kurama slips through the wide trunks like a shadow, then pauses in a patch that’s relatively clear of undergrowth. Teeth to his thumb and three drops of blood, and thick grey smoke whirls up around him, dissipating in a moment. When it clears, there’s a tall silver fox standing stately in the green-touched darkness, watching Kurama with curious golden eyes.

“Kurama,” he says after a thoughtful moment, sitting on his haunches and wrapping his eight tails around his paws. “You're hurt. Ran said you called her for a fight.” Another beat, and he tips his head to one side, ears flattening against his head, and asks dryly, “Are you supposed to be upright yet?”

Kurama waves him off. “You worry too much, Momiji. I'm fine.”

The silver fox snorts. “I notice you didn’t answer my question, Kurama.”

The problem with trying to mislead foxes is that, being tricksters themselves, it rarely works. Kurama winces faintly. “I need your help,” he says instead of replying. “Do you have enough strength for a trip?”

Momiji’s ears perk up with interest, then immediately fold back again, and he whines softly. “If I say yes while you're still injured, Ume will have my tails.”

“So we don’t tell her,” Kurama offers quickly, though he also cringes at the thought. Ume isn't the oldest of his summons, or the most powerful, but she’s certainly the bossiest. And the most overprotective—which, with his summons, is saying something. “It’s not like she won't have my head for it, too. Just—our secret, okay?”

Momiji looks far too pleased with that idea. “Sure, I'm good with that.” He rises to his feet, gives a lithe stretch, and then crouches low. Muscles bunch, and with a single powerful bound he springs into the air. There's a glimmer of chakra, and then violet and gold flames flare into existence around each of his paws, carrying him up as though gravity has ceased to matter. He turns a graceful loop through a beam of sunlight, making his silver coat glow, and sweeps around the trees before returning to settle in front of Kurama.

“Amazing as always, Momiji,” Kurama says fondly. He reaches out and twines his fingers in the fox’s long ruff, then vaults onto his back and settles in behind his shoulders. Momiji isn’t as bulky as Ran, but he’s the second largest of Kurama's summons, leggger than the black vixen and leanly strong, with an affinity for chakra techniques of all types and a knack for flight.

Preening faintly, Momiji waits for him to get a good grip, then pushes off the ground and rises through the air like a wayward cloud. “Where to?” he asks, turning a wide circle above the treetops.

Kurama points off to their left. “Wave Country. Follow the road, please, but go quickly. Naruto, Sakura, and Sasuke might be in danger.”

“The kits?” Momiji snarls low in his throat. “Like hell.” Another bounding leap forward and they're soaring, faster than any bird, as Momiji’s foxfire carries them away from the village. Towards Wave, and Kurama can only grit his teeth and hope beyond all possible hope that they’ll make it in time.

Naruto leans back on his hands, staring mutinously up at the stars. It’s pretty here in Wave, far more open to the sky, and what trees there are tend to twist and turn as they grow down towards the water,
rather than standing straight and tall as they reach for the sun. The air smells of brine and faintly of fish, but it’s somehow soft, easy as it slides down his throat.

*Kurama-nii would like it*, Naruto thinks, and tries to keep from scowling. They left for their mission before Kurama could get back from his, and it’s…unsettling. Naruto would have never thought, just a few months ago, that he could so quickly get accustomed to someone’s presence in his life. Before Kurama, he never really had anyone like that. Sure, Iruka-sensei looked after him, and Jiji sometimes took him out to lunch or let him wander around the Hokage’s office, but they weren’t *always* there. More often than not, they had other things to do.

Kurama isn’t like that. No matter what else is going on, he always has time for Naruto, and more recently for Sasuke and Sakura as well. Naruto can ask him anything, bother him with the littlest things, and he seems…*happy*. Like it’s not just okay, but he’s *glad* that Naruto comes to him. And now Naruto can’t imagine him *not* being there, which is strange, because even if Naruto hasn’t lived very long the amount of time Kurama’s been in his life is still a tiny percentage. Two months, just about, but Naruto’s still happier than he’s ever been before.

*Do you…have someone who is important to you?*

The girl—the boy in the forest had asked him that, after waking him up from his jutsu training, and Naruto’s very first thought had been of his cousin. Sasuke and Sakura, too, of course—they’d been sleeping sprawled out a short distance away, and Naruto still half-wonders why the strange boy hadn’t woken them, too, but figures it must be because he was snoring loudest—and Kakashi, Iruka, the Hokage. They’re all precious, all dear, but Kurama is…

Kurama is the one who showed him that it’s all right to *have* precious things, and show it, and be *glad* for it. A hair ruffle, a hug, a kiss on the forehead, a whispered, “Well done,” or “I’m proud of you, Naruto”—those things have come to mean the world to him.

He wonders if he can call Kurama a father-figure, but that’s not entirely right. He’s not even a big brother—that’s what Iruka seems to be. Definitely not a grandfather, and not just a friend, either. Even ‘cousin’ seems to weak a word, because surely distant cousins don’t *care* like Kurama does. Maybe the only appropriate word is just…’family’. Kurama is family, and that’s all he needs to be.

Naruto thinks of Inari, crying over the death of *his* family, his hero, even as he denies that heroes exist. It’s a weak sort of refusal to grieve—Naruto can recognize that well enough. But it’s also sad, because Inari’s dad died for a reason, and for Inari to deny that reason…it makes his death cheap, meaningless. It’s close to cruel, but mostly just…really sad.

Soft footsteps sound behind him, a bare scuff in the night’s hush, and then with a soft sigh Sasuke drops down on his left as Sakura settles on his right. Neither one says anything, but just them being there feels like warmth creeping under Naruto’s skin and settling in the very heart of him.

The silence stretches, expectant but not pressing, and at length Naruto huffs out a breath and scrubs his hands over his eyes. “What’s the point of crying like that?” he asks crossly. “What’s it ever going to get him beyond everybody thinking he’s just a snot-nosed baby?”

Naruto hasn’t cried for himself in a very long time. He can still remember when he did, when he’d sobbed and carried on and hoped that *somebody* would notice, but no one ever had. It hadn’t made him friends or brought his parents back or made anyone like him more. He’d just cried and felt sorry for himself and done *nothing* until he finally stopped wailing and tried. Now he has friends—two *best* friends—and a cousin who tells Naruto he’s proud of him and a teacher who thinks they’re a good team. Crying wouldn’t have given him any of that. Not ever.
Sasuke gives a grunt of clear agreement, but Sakura bites her lip. “I think Inari-kun is just scared,” she says carefully, clearly still considering the situation. “He probably just…doesn’t want to lose anyone else close to him, but he’s not a shinobi. He doesn’t have our training, and…he’s never actually had to be brave before. Not really. Not in the way he needs to be now, or the way we all had to be against the Demon Brothers or Zabuza.”

Naruto shivers a little, remembering both of those incidents. “I wasn’t brave,” he says with disgust. “I froze up.”

“Only at first,” Sasuke counters sharply. “Then we took them down. We all did.”

They share a moment of silence, recalling it. Kakashi supposedly dead, Tazuna helpless, the two missing-nin so close and ready to kill them. Sasuke had attacked first, while Naruto and Sakura were still stunned and unmoving. He’d gone after the chuunin pair, and only a moment later Naruto and Sakura realized what he was doing alone and plunged into the fray after him, Sakura with her new poisoned senbon and Naruto with what close-range jutsus Kurama taught him, and—

And they’d won. Three genin against two chuunin-level missing-nin, and they’d beaten them, covered for each other and watched each other’s backs and attacked the way they’d trained for. It had worked.

Zabuza…

With Zabuza they were outmatched, that much was glaringly clear. But they’d still held him off, distracted him long enough for Kakashi to get free, and stayed alive doing it. That counts for a victory, right? Enough of one, at least.

“We did,” Naruto agrees, and grins. “We won, believe it! And when Zabuza comes crawling back, we’ll help Kakashi-sensei do it all over again!”

“Agreed.” Sakura is smiling, arms clasped loosely around her drawn-up legs and chin resting on her knees as she stares out into the dark forest before them. “We can't be the next Sannin if we don’t make it through our first two-week mission, right?”

“Right,” Sasuke agrees, falling backwards to splay out in the grass. “Are we going to go train again?”

Naruto’s kneejerk reaction is to say yes and bolt for their little clearing, but…

“No,” he mutters, lying back next to Sasuke and closing his eyes. “Let’s just sleep, okay?”

“Because of that boy finding our clearing?” Sakura asks, sounding faintly amused. “The one you said was prettier than me?”

Naruto blanches. “Sakura-chan! I didn’t mean it like that! He was just—I just—”

Thankfully, she just laughs and flops down next to the boys. “Someday I’ll find someone who appreciates me, body and mind. I already know you guys just want me for my brain and my medical ninjutsu.”

“Sakura-chan!”

“Hn.” Sasuke sounds derisive, but at the same time slightly abashed. “At least you’re not a fangirl anymore,” he mutters, looking away.
With a roll of his eyes at the brunet, Naruto quickly adds, “Besides, Sakura-chan, without you we wouldn’t even have a goal. You’re the one who started talking about the Sannin.”

“Because I’m a genius.” She sounds smug, and rolls halfway over both boys to scuff at their hair, surreptitiously grinding their faces into the dirt while she’s at it. “You’re grateful, right? Right?”

Sasuke splutters, Naruto cries for mercy, and Sakura laughs at both of them with that particular fiendish sort of glee found only in the very closest of friends and siblings.

_Precious_, Naruto thinks, and he feels warm down to his very soul.

_When a person has something important to protect, that’s when they can truly become strong._

_Kurama_, he thinks. _Sasuke, Sakura, Kakashi-sensei, Iruka-sensei, Hokage-jiji. They’re what’s important. They’re what I’ll protect. No matter what._

Fear or hesitation or whatever, it doesn’t matter. Because no matter how many times Naruto feels scared, or overwhelmed, or outmatched, he’s got a reason to push through it, move on. His village, his team, his _family_—that’s what matters. Nothing more and nothing less, and Naruto knows down in the very depths of his heart that such a belief will never, ever change.

Momiji flies until his foxfire is flickering and his sides are heaving as he pants for breath. Only then does he allow Kurama to coax him back to the ground. They camp right next to the road, too tired to worry about the dangers. The fox is asleep within minutes of touching down, curled into a tight ball among the roots of a particularly weathered tree, but Kurama resists the pull of exhaustion for a few more minutes, occupied with his spinning, twisting thoughts.

He’s doing this for the genin, because too much has changed to be sure of their safety. For Kakashi, who will break entirely if he loses another team member. For Wave, caught in the grip of a tyrant and suffering greatly.

But he’s also doing it for Zabuza, whose last request was to die beside the one he’d only ever called his tool. For Haku, so reluctant to kill regardless of what horrors he had faced as a child. So insignificant, their deaths, especially in the grander scheme of things, but _not_. Zabuza tried to kill Yagura, after all, before fleeing Kiri—one of the first to truly strike a blow at Tobi, even if he hadn’t known it at the time. And Kurama has always respected the man’s loyalty to Kiri, his attempts to better it by overthrowing Tobi’s cat’s-paw. Haku, too, with his incredible devotion to the man who saved him. They’re not great men, perhaps—not even good men—but they have more facets to them than flaws, enough virtues that Kurama can admire them.

For them, for himself, for a Team 7 that’s finally becoming what it always should have been—that’s who this is for.

From Konoha to Wave is almost two days walking, or a little under a day on a flying fox. Momiji insists on leaving shortly after dawn, and Kurama doesn’t protest, even though the fox still looks faintly weary. Momiji is just as stubborn as his sister, after all, and both he and Kurama know why they’re pushing themselves. They fly, swifter than the wind that blows towards the ocean, and the ache of his broken ribs is almost gone, almost completely healed by the time the sun rises. The stab wound, too, is much better, close to ignorable now that his healing ability has returned, but he’s still tired. The night felt endless, his deep and dreamless sleep like an indulgence there was no time for, but at least now he feels nearly human again.
Once Kurama was used to this kind of pace, back in his own time, but here he’s become softer. It’s not a bad thing, because the hardness of war is terrible and cruel, but it’s…inconvenient. A year and some-odd months here and he’s far more like a normal shinobi again, more than he ever was. Not for anything would he wish himself back, in no way would he want to leave what he’s found here with Naruto and Sasuke and Sakura and Kakashi, but—

There was a sacrifice made, a part of his edge taken in return for peace and joy, and while Kurama can’t regret it—

“Kyuubi-sama left you a gift, Kurama,” Momiji says as they soar across the familiar trees of Fire Country. Far in the distance, just edging onto the horizon, is a thin ribbon of blue—the ocean, and Wave beyond it. “One beyond the name you carry. Perhaps, since there’s a moment to prepare, now is the time to use it?”

Kurama keeps his eyes fixed on the approaching shoreline. He doesn’t remember what time it was that Zabuza attacked the bridge before, can’t recall the position of the sun or the length of the shadows, but he hasn’t yet felt the flare of chakra to announce a shinobi battle. Haku’s ice mirrors would definitely be noticed.

Momiji is right. They have a moment, however brief, and Kurama learned long ago to take advantage of whatever sparse bit of time the world granted.

The seal on his wrist flares with chakra not his own, a subtle reminder from Obito, as well, that he actually has a few moments to prepare since he isn’t neck-deep in battle yet, and he murmurs his thanks to both of them. Obito is right, as is usual when tactics are involved, and Kurama takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. The wind tugs and teases at him, pulls at his hair and whispers across his ears with the speed of Momiji’s flight, but Kurama pushes the sensation out of his mind and focuses on the Kyuubi’s final gift.

There’s a reason that spy’s ability affected him—the gift has become far closer to something like a bloodline, even if that’s not quite all it is. Violet chakra flickers around him as he releases it, and he can feel the change. It’s been a while since he used it, has kept it held in and tamped down since Kakashi came to him in that border town because it’s not a neat and normal thing. Not hardly, and coming from the Kyuubi he wouldn’t expect it to be.

The chakra flares once more before it settles, humming under his skin, and Kurama opens his eyes and lifts a hand to study it. His fingernails have become longer, tipped with sharp claws—the same ones he used to draw blood for the time manipulation seal, back when all of this was starting. Violet eyes and streaks of darker purple like clan markings twining up his jaw, sharp teeth and sharper senses and a touch more speed and strength—this is the Kyuubi’s gift to him, a bittersweet blessing.

Foreign chakra building up ahead of him draws his attention, makes him lean forward and urge Momiji just a little bit faster yet as his heart begins to pound. That was Kakashi, certainly, a flickering spark becoming a flame as he uncovered his Sharingan. A moment later and he feels Naruto and Sasuke together, just as a burst of fire breaks over the treetops, enhanced and fed by wind—trying to clear Zabuza’s fog, most likely. Kurama hadn’t expected them to take the same role as last time—Sasuke against Haku, Naruto late, Sakura no assistance beyond guarding Tazuna—but to already be fighting back—

They burst over the water just as the barely-remembered feel of Haku’s Hyotan surges, and Kurama swears. Momiji growls in answer and the foxfire around his paws doubles and then redoubles, sending them racing forward over the waves. The bridge is there, barely at the edge of sight and already covered in thick, clinging mist, and Kurama sets his teeth, trying in vain to think of some sort of plan. Save Zabuza and Haku, obviously, maybe send them on to Terumi Mei afterwards, since
she must be nearly ready to stage her coup, but beyond that—

One opening, Kurama realizes with a sudden start. There will be one opportunity when he can save both men, should everything go as he remembers—and between Zabuza and Kakashi, at least, there shouldn’t be too much change. Kakashi will use Chidori, doubtless, because it’s a definite kill if he does. Haku will most certainly abandon whatever fight he’s in to save his master, and then…it’s a slim chance, but maybe.

“Up,” he tells Momiji. “And circle. Let’s not go in blind.”

The fox rumbles his agreement, twisting higher into the sky just as another flash of chakra comes from the bridge, followed by another, and another, and then—

A flare of chakra so achingly familiar it nearly makes Kurama tremble. Sasuke, he thinks, closing his eyes to feel it just a little more clearly. The Sharingan. It’s not his Sasuke’s Mangekyo, not nearly, but it’s…a start. A step.

He can’t see through the mist or across the distance left between them, but it seems like things are mostly playing out as they did last time. It makes sense—Haku’s bloodline is still strong, still a trump card that the simple jutsus the genin know won’t be capable of breaking. The only one with a hope to break it—

There. Kurama opens his eyes again as the intimately familiar red chakra rises like a fiery shroud, corrosive and furious and achingly, terribly lonely underneath all of that. His own chakra flares in response, recognizing what gave birth to it, its source.

_The Kyuubi._

“Kyuubi-sama,” Momiji murmurs, ears folding back flat against his skull. “He is…angry.”

Kurama manages a faint, halfhearted smile. “He’s always angry. It’s one of his more endearing traits. But he’ll get a bit better soon, once Naruto learns how to talk to him. But we need to hurry. It will be ending soon.”

“Down to the bridge?”

“Remember Kakashi? The smell of his dogs? Find them.”

The mist is dissipating, thinning. The Kyuubi’s chakra is fading again, and Sasuke’s is incredibly weak, but present. Kurama can still sense Haku and Zabuza, Sakura and Kakashi and Tazuna. They're all alive. He’s made it in time.

Then, through the vanishing haze, there comes a sound like the chirping of a thousand birds.
Value

Chapter Notes

There's going to be a bit of a delay in posting, since I have to attend an out-of-country conference for work this week. My presentation is the day after tomorrow, though, so hopefully after that my schedule will calm down a bit and things will return to normal. So no Monday update—it'll likely get pushed back to either Tuesday or Wednesday. (But I'm not leaving you with a cliffhanger this time, at least! :D)

The sound of Kakashi's Chidori is unmistakable. Kurama knows it the same way he knows that Zabuza and Haku have seconds left, if that.

There's no time even to curse. Kurama rips a square of paper from his weapons pouch, swings his leg over Momiji's back, and orders, “Intercept the boy!” He doesn't wait for a response, but leaps, even as he calls up his wind chakra. No time to shape it, no room for error, and lightning flashes before his eyes, just a second to his left.

But Kurama was trained for this, taught how to negate it by the Kakashi in his own time. There's no consideration of the circumstances, only reaction and instinct. He hits the ground on the balls of his feet right in front of Zabuza, then rises, ignoring the sudden agony of the impact. Kakashi's directly in front of him, eyes wide and uncomprehending with horror in their depths, but Kurama simply lashes out with every bit of speed he possesses. His hand, coated with wind chakra, knocks Kakashi's arm away, redirects the Chidori into the empty air beside them. Its energy crackles against his skin as it passes, but he ignores it, turning in a single smooth movement and slapping the seal paper against Zabuza’s chest.

It’s the same seal he used on his courier mission with Genma and Raidou, and even against one of the Seven Swordsmen it works perfectly, coming to life with a fizz of violet chakra. Zabuza cries out, startled and pained, and then drops like a stone. He’s unconscious before he even hits the ground. Half a heartbeat later the Chidori strikes stone, chips and shards exploding out and showering everyone nearby, but beyond the soft clatter of them falling, no noise follows.

Kurama steps back, letting the twist of wind around his hand fade to nothing, and looks over the battleground. Sasuke is in the same state he was in Kurama's time, pierced with needles but still alive, even if it’s hard to tell. Naruto looks a little more battered, and surprisingly—or perhaps not—he’s standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Sakura, who looks just as rough. Haku is sprawled out on the ground halfway between the genin and Zabuza, Momiji’s paws planted on his shoulders as the fox looks over him. Tazuna is half-cowered behind one of Naruto's clones, but looks unhurt.

“Kurama?” Kakashi hisses, and the expression on his face is somewhere between disbelief, fury, and terror. The redhead winces, because he knows the story of what happened with Rin, but he hadn’t stopped to consider that before he’d acted. There hadn’t been time, and two lives had hung in the balance. Those aren’t the kinds of odds that Kurama can ever overlook.

“Kakashi,” he returns with a faintly apologetic smile. “Sorry, but I think Kiri will be better off in the long run with him alive.” He looks at where Naruto is staring at him, wide-eyed, and smiles. “Naruto. Are you okay?” A step forward, and of course that’s the moment his knees choose to give out, carrying him to the ground as the ache in his chest redoubles. He gasps for breath, wondering if
he’s cracked his ribs again, wraps his arms around his torso in the vague hope of making it better, but the breath won’t come and stars spin in front of his eyes.

Kurama has been injured before, and gravely. He’s had to heal slowly on other occasions, much as he hates it, but he’s never been able to keep from pushing himself when others are on the line. It used to drive his Sakura insane. More than once she’d threatened to tie him to a hospital bed.

“-nii! Kurama-nii!” There are hands on his shoulders and a mop of blond hair is bobbing in front of his eyes, a silver one just behind it. Kurama chokes on a cough, finally feeling his breathing even out, and reaches out to catch Naruto's wrist in a gentle grip.

“Fine, I'm fine,” he reassures the boy, managing a faint smile. Nothing’s bleeding, at least, and for a shinobi, that counts. “I've just done a little too much, that’s all.” He squeezes Naruto's hand, then lets go and allows himself to settle back on his knees with a weary sigh. “I can feel Sasuke's chakra from here. Why don’t you make sure he doesn’t wake up alone?”

Naruto's eyes go wide, and the look on his face is one of heartbreaking relief. He scrambles to his feet, then hesitates, clearly torn between going to his teammate and staying with his cousin.

Kakashi waves him off, crouching next to Kurama and laying a hand on his shoulder. “Go on, Naruto, I’ll keep an eye on him.”

In a flash, Naruto is gone, racing towards the other two genin. Sakura is bent over Sasuke, expression stubbornly set, her hands glowing a weak green. The blond crouches next to her, somewhere between worried and ecstatic, mouth moving quickly but voice too low to carry. Kurama watches him with relief bubbling in his chest, because he

“Better off with him alive?” Kakashi murmurs at his shoulder, sounding faintly amused. If his grip is still the slightest bit too tight, Kurama isn’t about to mention it.

Kurama offers him a quiet, strained smile, then pushes to his feet. “Yagura won’t be Mizukage much longer. Zabuza has already tried to assassinate him once, and nearly succeeded; can you imagine how valuable he’d be in another coup? One of the last loyal members of the Seven Swordsmen, an open advocate for change, who protected and raised a boy with a bloodline—they’ll welcome him with open arms.”

Kakashi snorts softly, looping a casual arm around Kurama's waist to support him, being careful of his ribs. “Even Kiri isn't safe from you, I see,” he says in dry amusement. “Now where are you going?”

“Momiji, let him up,” Kurama says instead of answering, and in a silver blur the fox is on his feet and next to the redhead, offering himself as a crutch.

Slowly, warily, Haku sits up, dark brown eyes never leaving the jounin. “I know you,” he says softly, meeting Kurama's gaze steadily. There’s bewilderment buried deep in his expression, only just noticeable. “Zabuza-san has spoken of you before. Uzumaki Kurama, the Red Maelstrom of lost Uzushio, and the one to take Hoshigaki Kisame’s head. You're a bounty hunter.”

With a quick smile, Kurama tilts his head forward and reaches up, tapping a clawed finger against his hitai-ate. “A Konoha jounin now,” he corrects. “And you, going by that fascinating bloodline, are of Kiri’s old Yuki clan. I had thought they all died out.”

“I could say the same of Uzushio’s shinobi.” Haku glances down at the tall silver fox, then across the battle-scarred bridge, to where Sasuke is finally sitting up, his teammates packed closely in around
him. When he turns back, his gaze has softened slightly. “You…saved Zabuza-san. Thank you.”

Purely on impulse, Kurama reaches forward, ignoring the slight flinch it earns him, and lays a hand on Haku’s head. “I’ve always thought,” he says gently, “that shinobi are human before they are anything else. Whether we’re tools or not, it’s just something extra, an addition, not what defines us. And I know, in our line of work, that there are far worse things to have than a heart.”

Haku ducks his head, looking away, but Kurama doesn’t push. He winds his fingers in Momiji’s ruff, leans into Kakashi’s warm, lean strength, and lets the Copy-Nin lead him over to where Sasuke is just rising to his feet.

The Uchiha’s dark eyes snap to them as they near, settling on Kurama. The Sharingan is dormant again, but Kurama smiles at him, reaching out. “Sasuke. You’re all right. And you used the Sharingan—that’s amazing.”

“Kurama,” Sasuke says, and it sounds faintly choked, thick with something Kurama can’t name. A heartbeat later Sasuke is pressed against him, arms wrapped tightly around his waist, and Kurama wavers for a moment in surprise before steadying, smiling, though he’s still not entirely sure which of them moved first. Him, probably, because for all Sasuke's changed he’s still Sasuke. He weaves his fingers into Sasuke's dark hair, cups the back of his head and hugs him carefully, but tightly.

“It’s something to be proud of,” he murmurs. “You were very brave. I'm proud of you.” He raises his head, looks at the other two, battered but standing, and feels something in his chest ease and warm. “All three of you. You somehow turned into powerful, courageous shinobi while I wasn’t looking. You're incredible.”

Naruto's face is screwed up like he’s trying not to cry, and a moment later he’s hugging the redhead as well, face pressed into his side just above the mostly-healed stab wound. “But I was scared,” he admits, like it’s a shameful secret.

“We all were,” Sakura whispers, inching closer until Kurama wraps an arm around her shoulders and pulls her in.

“Well, that’s why you're brave,” Kurama informs them gently. “You can't have courage unless you're scared; otherwise it’s meaningless.”

Their eyes have aged, Kurama thinks, looking between the three. They're older in their hearts now, changed by a fight that was nearly the death of one of their own, and it was likely far more harrowing for these three, bound together as they are, than it was for Kurama's own team. But instead of breaking them, as it very well could have, it’s only made them stronger. There’s steel in them now, more than there ever was before, and it’s shared equally between the three. Sakura, Naruto, and Sasuke might cling to him, might look at Haku and Zabuza with wary, wounded eyes, but their resolve is even stronger now, tempered.

“Never again,” Sakura whispers into the curve of Kurama's shoulder, as though answering that thought.

“Never,” Naruto agrees, and there's something very close to anger in his voice—anger at himself, rather than anyone else. “We're not going to let that kind of thing happen again.”

Sasuke makes a wordless sound of agreement, but for half a heartbeat his eyes flicker crimson.

Kurama wraps his arms as far around the three as they’ll go, and knows that soon he’ll have to step back, let them walk forward on their own. But these three are different people than his Team 7,
friends and comrades in the very closest ways, and somehow, Kurama thinks that they’ll be fine.

They’ll survive, they’ll grow strong, and someday they’ll be great enough to shake the very foundations of this world.

He can't wait to see it.

Kurama is hurt but won't say anything about it, changing the subject whenever it comes up and brushing off pointed comments as though he’s too thick to understand them. It’s a technique Kakashi is intimately familiar with—after all, that’s what he himself does—but he’s never before realized just how aggravating it is.

They’ve made camp on the far side of the nearly-completed bridge, where Haku and Zabuza’s presence won’t upset the villagers, while clones and one of Kurama's summons watch Tazuna and his family. At the moment, both missing-nin are skulking around the outer edges of the camp, looking out of place and fairly awkward, while the genin are clustered around Kurama and his soup pot. Zabuza, at least, is still fuming over Gatou’s (rather poorly executed) attempted betrayal, but Haku is already inching towards the fire, drawn to Kurama's smile the same way a magnet is to true north. Kakashi sympathizes, feeling that same pull himself and also entirely unable to resist it.

But his desire to go to the redhead is tempered by the memory of a Chidori aimed right at his heart. Half an instant slower and Kurama would have suffered the same fate as Rin, which is—

Kakashi can't even think about it without his blood running cold and a fine tremor taking hold of his muscles. It seems as though he’s destined, doomed to lose all those he loves at his own hand, or in circumstances of his own making. Only Minato breaks that pattern, and Kakashi is certain he’s the exception that proves the rule.

“Stop brooding and eat,” Kurama says, right next to his ear, and only decades of experience as a shinobi keeps Kakashi from flinching. With a faintly narrow look, he accepts the bowl of miso soup, brimming with whatever vegetables the villagers were willing to sell. There’s even eggplant, which makes Kakashi brighten a little.

“I'm not brooding,” he says belatedly, trying to sound offended. Judging by the arch look Kurama levels him with, he falls a fair bit short.

“You are,” the redhead counters swiftly, settling on Kakashi’s left without waiting for an invitation. Though, granted, it’s open ground in a forest and all. There’s a long pause while Kakashi picks at his soup and Kurama watches him, and then Kurama murmurs softly, “I'm sorry I took a risk like that, but there wasn’t time for anything more elaborate, and I needed to save them.”

Kurama has a way, Kakashi reflects somewhat wryly, of somehow managing to rip a wound open and get right to the heart of it without wasting any time. Not even on niceties, which considering his disposition is a little strange.

But then, of course, Kurama's hardly a saint, though he’s certainly saintly. Kakashi has seen him tease and push and goad, snark and trick and use cunning wherever a straight line won't get him quick enough results. He’s not shy about using violence, either, from what Genma has said. He’s also not the type to come at something sideways when head-on will suffice.

Kakashi manages a soft chuckle, rubbing a hand through his flyaway hair. “Just…don’t do it again,” he says, as much an acceptance of that halfway-apology as he’s willing to give. “Chidori isn’t…a
nice way to die.” He’ll still be seeing Rin in his dreams, after that, or maybe Kurama in her place. But…he hadn’t wanted to kill Zabuza either, honestly. Beat him up for refusing to acknowledge the collateral damage he was causing, maybe, but…death is permanent.

Shinobi training or not, Kakashi’s never quite managed to forget that fact.

“Few ways are, I believe.” Kurama seems to know what he’s thinking, because he gives Kakashi a quick smile before glancing across the camp to where Zabuza is seated by a tree. Kubikiribōchō lies on the ground beside him, just within arm’s reach, and although he doesn’t appear to be, Kakashi can tell he’s keeping most of his attention on Haku, ready to spring to his defense if anything happens.

They're all a little jumpy, after the bridge.

Kurama gives a soft sigh, leaning back on his hands with a faint wince. “The Hokage isn’t going to be pleased with me,” he murmurs.

Entirely unsympathetic, Kakashi slaps him on the shoulder and beams. “You have my deepest condolences. After all, what are a few ignored stab wounds and broken ribs between friends, hm?”

That gets him a dry sideways look from amused purple eyes. “And if you hadn’t had one relatively fresh ninja and an intimidating summons to scare off Gatou’s men after Zabuza killed him?”

“I’d have made do,” Kakashi insists stubbornly. “Clones would have worked.”

Kurama’s smile is almost startlingly bittersweet. “I’m sure they would have,” he whispers, then lets himself drop to lie flat on the ground with a sigh. His eyes flutter shut, and even though Kakashi knows he isn’t asleep yet, he still can’t bring himself to disturb the redhead. Instead, he picks up his bowl and heads over to pass it off to the genin, who have gotten stuck with the washing up. Then, with only a moment’s hesitation, he heads over to join Zabuza under the spreading oak.

“Pretty-boy’s a fool,” the missing-nin says at length, folding his arms over his chest. “Optimistic, and willing to take a chance on people,” Kakashi counters.

Zabuza just gives him a flat look. “Like I said: a fool.” But there’s no bite to the words, and he’s watching Haku, who has somehow been dragged into helping do the dishes, with an expression that’s distinctly fond. He hasn’t tried to leave yet, either.

Kakashi takes a moment to marshal his thoughts, then says, entirely offhand, “I heard that Terumi Mei was going to be traveling to Kumo in a week or so, looking for political support. She’s supposed to be a great diplomat.”

With a huff, Zabuza rolls his eyes. “Save it. Uzumaki already gave me the whole song and dance about why I should give her a chance.”

“Two bloodlines” Kakashi adds casually, as though he didn’t say anything. “That pretty much guarantees she won’t have a problem with Haku.”

“You’re lucky Konoha nin aren’t renowned for their subtlety, Hatake. Otherwise you’d be the farthest thing from a genius.”

“Maa, maa, I’m just making conversation. It’s up to you whether or not you take anything away from it.”

Zabuza rolls his eyes again, then rises briskly to his feet, pulling Kubikiribōchō along with him.
“Bounty hunter,” he says. “You're looking rather more…bestial than your Bingo Book entry would have one think.”

From his position stretched out on the ground, Kurama opens one violet eye. “Didn’t you ever learn not to believe everything you read?” He sits up, casually flicking his clawed fingers and raking them through his hair, and then offers Zabuza his most charming smile. “You know, I feel like I’ve been getting rusty lately, settling down in Konoha and all. Perhaps I should take your head as well, for practice?”

“Heh.” Kakashi can just make out the missing-nin’s bloodthirsty grin from underneath the bandages. “Pretty thing like you is more than welcome to try, but you should know that I didn’t get my nickname as the Demon of the Mist just from sitting around.” He surveys the assembled shinobi for a long moment, eyes narrowing, and then jerks his chin and turns away. “Come on, Haku. We’re leaving.”

“Yes, Zabuza-san.” The boy rises obediently and hurries to fall into step with him. He doesn’t question their sudden departure.

Naruto does, though. “Hey!” he cries, squaring his shoulders like the words are a challenge. And, given his strange attachment to Haku, they might very well be. “Where are you going?”

Zabuza doesn’t pause, just raises a hand in farewell without looking back. “North. I heard Lightning Country’s nice this time of year. And who knows? Maybe we’ll meet someone interesting on the way.”

Kurama laughs, and on anyone else it would sound like triumphant victory. But on him, it’s simply amused. Hopeful, too. “Best of luck,” he calls after the retreating pair. “Haku, don’t let him do anything stupid, please.”

Haku glances back over his shoulder with a swift, secretive smile and nods, then hurries to catch up with his guardian. They vanish soundlessly into the trees, and soon even the hum of their chakra fades away to nothing.

But Kakashi’s satisfied. For a mission that was a disaster from the very start, that didn’t end so badly.

“You, Uzumaki, are a ridiculous, reckless idiot,” Genma growls, crossing his arms over his chest and leveling a glare at the redhead. Beside him, Raidou is painfully amused.

“Your turn,” he says without an ounce of sympathy, sliding past Kurama to go and lurk behind Kakashi. “I had to listen to him bitch the whole way here. Just take it like a man, all right?”

Kurama flinches. Ah, Raidou thinks, settling back to watch the fireworks. So he hasn’t told them.

“Two days?” Naruto demands, sounding aghast. Raidou glances down to take in his expression, and has to bite back a grin at the pint-sized glare being leveled at the former bounty hunter’s back. “Kurama-nii! You said you were fine!”
“I am!” Kurama raises his hands as though to fend off the boy. The claws are definitely new, Raidou notes, raising an eyebrow. He’s assuming they and the markings come from some sort of bloodline that Kurama simply hasn’t turned off yet. “Really, it’s nothing.”

Kakashi is also glaring at the redhead. “Stab wounds are nothing?”

“A kunai,” Genma elaborates helpfully. “To go with the broken ribs, punctured lung, multiple contusions and lacerations, and four-inch gash in his arm.”

The Uchiha boy twitches, looking half a second away from marching up to his teammate’s cousin and wrapping him up in cotton.

“Punctured lung?” the pink-haired kunoichi sounds incredulous. “Kurama-san! You could do severe damage—”

“Hey,” Kurama interrupts the flurry of concern, his expression faintly irritated. “Why do you think I look like this right now? I’m using my bloodline for healing. I’m fine. Honestly.”

“We talked to Tazuna already,” Genma says, voice sharp. “With Gatou dead, the threat to the bridge is gone. He paid us, so we’re heading back to Konoha tonight. Kurama-kun, the Hokage is very interested in discussing the consequences of nearly giving us both heart attacks when we came back and found you gone. That note was singularly unhelpful.”

Kurama winces. “I…sorry? In my defense I wasn’t thinking clearly at the time.”

“Yes, we’re well aware. Painkillers and vast amounts of physical agony tend to do that.”

“Kurama-nii! I thought you said it was only an A-rank mission!”

“It was! And it wouldn’t have been a problem, except that I got ambushed on my way back. Really, though, stop fussing. I’m fine.”

“You’re not. Back to Konoha. March.”

“Genma-san—”

“No. And Raidou, if you start with the mother hen noises again you will be sleeping in the guest room with Kotetsu and Izumo until next year. Kurama, start walking. Everyone else, fall in.”

“I thought you were supposed to be the team leader,” Kakashi mutters as they’re all herded and bullied into position.

Raidou almost snorts at that idea. “You want to try giving him an order when he’s like this? I’d prefer to keep my balls attached, thanks.”

A shadow falls over them, and Raidou wonders vaguely, through the sheer terror that bolts down his spine, how Genma manages to loom over him even when he’s a good four inches shorter.

“Raidou.”

“Yes, dear,” one of Konoha’s most feared ANBU captains answers meekly, and obeys.
Salute

Chapter Notes

From now on, updates will be Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. My work schedule’s been switched all around, but I should still have time to write. Fingers crossed, and all that. :)

The shinobi bar is well-lit and moderately full, the corners with their defensive positions already filled. Kakashi doesn’t waver, though, heading for one of the tables along the wall, with a clear view of all the exits. He’s found that having your back to a corner is often an overestimated advantage—personally, he’d rather have a clear path out. Kurama doesn’t seem to have any objections to the seating arrangements, either, dropping into an open chair with a sigh.

“Tired?” Kakashi asks cheekily, even as he waves a waitress over.

The redhead rolls his eyes at him. “No, but I’m wondering how the hell you managed to convince the Hokage that my ‘punishment’ should be helping Team 7 as assistant instructor.”

“Well, you’re not getting paid for it,” Kakashi points out. “I’d say that’s the main part of your sentence.” He beams in response to the sour look he’s given, then turns his attention to the waitress as she approaches. “A bottle of your best sake, please.”

“And a bottle of plum wine,” Kurama adds with a smile.

The harried-looking woman nods, then turns, ducks a kunai, and heads for the bar without so much as a flinch.

Kakashi really loves living in a shinobi village.

With a sigh, he stretches his legs out under the table and leans back in his chair, allowing himself to relax. They’re home from Wave, mission reports submitted and lectures received, genin safely tucked away in Kurama’s apartment with takeout and the high of returning home safely from a dangerous mission. Kakashi’s proud of the little monsters; their teamwork during the disaster was mindboggling, and they’re so far removed from the snot-nosed brats he took on three months ago that they’re hardly even the same species.

“They’ll do well,” he says, almost to himself. “More than just surviving…I think they might even have a chance.”

“In the exams?” Kurama looks up from his study of his hands, and he’s smiling, almost grinning. “I think so. They managed to survive both Zabuza and Haku, so that’s certainly a point in their favor.”

Kakashi remembers the sight of Sasuke, sprawled out so still on the half-finished bridge, the Kyuubi’s murderous chakra rising and Sakura so pale and shaken, and says nothing. The three of them were brilliant, really, stepping up in a way no genin should have had to, but it was close. Too close, and even now Kakashi can feel the faint tremor of fear down his spine. What if he’d lost them, been a little bit slower or a touch more careless?

The waitress deposits their drinks as she passes, and Kakashi wastes no time filling a cup and
knocking it back. Some things truly don’t bear thinking about.

When he raises his head, Kurama is watching him, blue eyes both sympathetic and concerned. There’s a cup of plum wine in his hand, but he’s not drinking, looks more contemplative than anything.

“They will be fine,” he says firmly. “I think this…helped them. They’ve seen what can happen, what can go wrong. It’s made them into a better team. They have resolve now, enough not to let it happen again. I’m sure of that.”

Again Kakashi thinks of Sasuke, so close to death. But then he thinks of Obito, actually dead, of the fear that he felt that day and the desperation that clawed at his chest like some great beast, and what would have happened had Obito managed to survive. Of the kind of team he and Obito and Rin could have made, were Kakashi less of a bastard. Too late to consider it, but...maybe they would have been like Sasuke, Naruto, and Sakura are now.

It’s…a nice thought.

Before he can respond, though, a shadow falls over their table, and a moment later Asuma throws himself into an empty chair. He’s already carrying a bottle of sake—not the good stuff, either—and a cup, and there are lines of exhaustion carved into his face. Without a word to either of the other jounin, he measures out a cupful, knocks it back with a muttered oath, and pours himself another.

“That bad?” Kakashi asks with amusement and absolutely no sympathy. “Didn’t you get the Ino-Shika-Cho trio?”

“Try the laziest genius in Fire Country, the loudest harpy-girl I’ve ever met, and a bottomless pit.” Asuma pinches the bridge of his nose, looking long-suffering. “And Ino is driving me insane. Two weeks ago, all she could talk about was Sasuke-kun. Now she’s turned into this training-obsessed monster who is practically browbeating all of us into practicing for ten hours a day. Pretty soon I think Shikamaru is going to drop into a coma out of sheer self-preservation, and Choza hunted me down yesterday to ask me why his son was eating three times his normal amount and getting thinner.”

“Hence why you’re hiding in the one place genin can’t go.” Kurama sips his wine, though it does little to hide his grin.

Asuma raises his cup in grim toast. “Hear, hear.” He downs it, then offers a nod. “I don’t think we’ve been introduced. I’m Sarutobi Asuma, of Team 10.”

“Uzumaki Kurama, currently assistant jounin instructor of Team 7,” the redhead returns, dipping his head in greeting.


Kurama snorts, and Kakashi knows him well enough by now to hear the bitterness in the sound. “Sasori was a pathetic bastard,” he says, and his eyes are dark as he pours himself more plum wine. “He was so scared of death and change that he made himself into a puppet. There was nothing human left by the time I got there. I just…finished what he’d already started.”

Kakashi wonders if he should butt in, change the subject, but ultimately decides against it. Jounin are nosey bastards, mostly, and Kurama likely knows this as well as Kakashi does. He’ll change the subject if it gets too uncomfortable.
Thankfully, Asuma seems to recognize that he’s stepped on sensitive ground, because he settles back in his chair with a weary sigh and empties his cup again. Kurama shakes off his mood with a faint smile and turns his attention back to Kakashi. “You're still going to go ahead with—?”

Kakashi knows what he’s asking without him needing to finish it, and nods. “I don’t think they’ll ever be readier than they are now, even with another six months. Wave was a good push. We’ll see how far they can make it carry them.”

Asuma looks between them, one brow faintly arched. “The Chuunin Exams?” he asks, and there’s a faint undertone of surprise to his words. “You're going to enter your team?”

Kakashi nods, swirling his cup and watching the clear liquid shimmer before he tosses it back. “Yeah.”

“As training?”

Kurama laughs softly, but the glitter in his ocean eyes is pure challenge. “Oh, no. Team 7 is ready,” he answers. “They’re going to make it at least as far as the final round, and I’ll honestly be surprised if they don’t win it, either one of them alone or all three together.”

“What he said,” Kakashi chimes in, stealing a cupful of Kurama’s plum wine. The redhead makes a face at him, helping himself to some of Kakashi’s sake in retribution. They toast each other, then down the contents.

Asuma looks between them in disbelief. “Graduation was three months ago,” he points out. “Do you honestly expect them to—?”

“You haven’t seen them in action,” a mellow voice cuts in, and Kurenai pauses by the last empty chair, glancing at Kakashi in question. He happily waves her into the seat, nudging Kurama’s wine towards her with a beaming smile. Kurama rolls his eyes at him, but smiles in welcome. Kurenai smiles back, settling down and helping herself, then adding, “Really, Asuma. I only saw the two boys, but if the kunoichi is anywhere near their level, I think they’ll do just fine.”

“What about you?” Asuma challenges her. “Are you going to nominate your team?”

Kurenai looks down at her drink, contemplative. “Hm. I’d like to think they’d at least do fairly well, but…” Her smile is wry. “I don’t know. Mine aren’t that bad at…” She trails off, and then sighs. “No, never mind. I’ve got the braggart dog boy, the reserved bug boy, and the Hyuuga who’s scared of her own shadow. Don’t get me wrong—in a few years they’re going to be amazing, but…right now they all need to think about why they’re becoming shinobi, beyond the fact that it’s what their families expect of them.”

“I think all genin need that,” Asuma mutters, rolling his eyes.

Kakashi exchanges an amused glance with Kurama, who looks like he’s fighting back a laugh. “Ah,” the Copy-Nin says lazily, though he also wants to grin. “I think my team has got yours beat there was well. They’re already aiming to become the next Sannin.”

Asuma chokes on his sake, and Kurenai almost drops her cup. “What?” the kunoichi demands. “But didn’t you get—?”

“The avenger, the fangirl, and the class’s dead-last?” Kakashi knows his smile is entirely smug, but doesn’t try to fight it. “I did, but I also got a taijutsu genius with a head for tactics, an exceedingly clever girl with perfect chakra control and plenty of physical strength, and a kid with the chakra reserves of any ten jonin and a knack for seals.”
“It runs in the family,” Kurama adds with a sly smile. “And in this, Naruto is definitely an Uzumaki.”

“Right,” Kurenai says thoughtfully, eyeing him with interest. “You're from Uzushiogakure, right? I’d heard the village is famous for its sealing arts.”

“Was,” Kurama corrects, and that faint edge of bitterness is back, though Kakashi doesn’t think any of the others hear it. “There's not exactly a lot of Uzushio left at the moment.”

“Dad says it was beautiful, once,” Asuma offers, apparently trying to move them off another sensitive subject.

But the bitterness only grows, touched with a wistful sort of sorrow. Kurama hums in agreement, taking a gulp of wine, and then murmurs, “Once. But now, whenever I think of it, just about all I can see is rubble and ruins, from one side of the island to the other, and the sunset turning the air to blood.” He takes a long, slow breath, then lets it out in a shuddering sigh and opens his eyes, offering the other two jounin a weary smile. “I haven’t been back in a long time, though. Maybe by now nature has reclaimed everything. It would be…better then.”

Kakashi nudges his ankle underneath the table, a small gesture of comfort that’s all he can offer, and Kurama shoots him a swift, grateful glance. “Enough with the gloom,” the redhead says, and his voice has lightened, his eyes growing brighter. It’s…satisfying, that even Kakashi's small gestures can ease his mood. “Are you going to enter your teams?”

Asuma strokes his goatee thoughtfully. “Hmm. It’s a good opportunity for them to see what the Exams are like, even if they don’t advance that far. And it’s not often Konoha is host to them, after all. It’s one of those might-as-well situations. If they fail, we’ll have to travel for the next ones, and rather than toss them into an unknown situation in a foreign country, it’s better to give them experience now, at home.”

“And maybe, if they make it a few rounds in, it will give them some confidence,” Kurenai offers optimistically, then adds with a mutter, “Heaven knows my three need all they can get.”

Kurama chuckles, raising his cup. “To the Rookie Nine, then?” he suggests.

“To succeeding,” Kakashi says, raising his own.

Kurenai smiles and does the same. “To realizing their goals.”

Asuma looks between the three for a moment, then gives up with a huff of amusement and a slight grin. “To Konoha's future jounin,” he says, and the four of them clink their cups and down their drinks.

In the warm, peaceful half-light, the burn of alcohol feels like the thrill of victory.

“That makes nine Fuuton, seven Katon, seven Suiton, six Doton, and four Raiton,” Naruto says, eyeing the piles of papers in front of him. “And I’ve made up fifty basic explosive tags, forty-five smoke bomb tags, thirty flash-bang tags, twelve sealing scrolls with the capacity to hold up to a hundred pounds each, eight barrier seals, and a perception seal for each of us.”

“Perception seal?” Sasuke asks, looking up from where he’s sharpening all of their kunai and shuriken.

Naruto waves a hand, trying to remember what he’s most likely forgotten to include that they’ll need.
“Kurama-nii showed me how to do it. It’s like a minor genjutsu that lasts until you pull your chakra out of the seal. Most people don’t even notice it, so they can’t break it, because it’s just subtle enough that your attention kind of…passes the user over.”

“Oooh.” Sakura looks bright-eyed and enthusiastic where she’s assembling medical kits for each of them, and a larger one for herself. “And you made one for each of us?”

“Yep! Just place the paper over your skin, add some chakra, and it’s like you’re invisible.” Naruto grins at her. “I managed to sneak into Kakashi-sensei’s apartment with one yesterday, and he didn’t even notice me.”

The kunoichi holds out her hand imperiously, a spark of laughter in her face. With a flourish bow, Naruto hands it over, and then passes Sasuke his. They share a grin.

“We’ve got one full set of kunai and shuriken each,” Sasuke says, continuing their inventory. “Six fuuma shuriken, two bundles of senbon, one poisoned and one not, and an extra bottle of the special paralytic that tokubetsu jounin gave us. My sword—” His fingers twitch towards the brand new blade Kurama had presented him with yesterday, sized for him and with a seal for absorbing chakra attacks on the hilt “—and…Sakura’s gloves. I think that’s everything.”

Sakura casts a disturbingly besotted look at the fingerless gloves Kakashi had given her, reinforced with steel and perfect for punching people’s lights out. Naruto is a little terrified of her now, to be honest. She’s always been strong—as he knows firsthand—but ever since their return from Wave she’s been focusing pretty much all her attention on medical techniques and strength training, and it’s certainly paid off.

“I’ve got our supplies,” she offers, patting a pair of sealing scrolls. “Enough food and water for four days, if we stretch it, and medical supplies to deal with everything short of a brain surgery.”

Naruto considers the arsenal laid out between them, and scratches his head. “I…think that’s enough? I mean, the first part of the exam is written, and since Kakashi-sensei and Kurama-nii haven’t told us when the second part is, we kind of have to assume it will be right afterwards, but…do you think this is overkill?”

“No,” Sasuke answers immediately. “Dobe, if we fail because we weren’t prepared for everything and have to go through this again in six months, I’ll kill someone. Possibly myself, but neither of you are out of the running.”

Sakura snorts. “Oh, like you could,” she scoffs. “We’d stop you, of course.” Her smile is so blindingly innocent that it manages to come right around on the other side of devious.

Sasuke eyes her for a moment, then gives in and smiles faintly, dropping a kunai into the ‘sharpened’ pile and picking up another from the ‘dull’ stack. “Hn,” he grunts, but Naruto’s learned to speak Uchiha by now, and that particular inflection meant something along the lines of ‘I adore my strong and wonderful teammates and would never dream of harming them, so I suppose you’re safe.’

Or, well, that’s how Naruto’s choosing to paraphrase it. Really, there’s some room for interpretation.

A comfortable silence lingers as they continue packing meticulously. Then, out of the blue, Sakura says, “Final round is one-on-one matches, chosen at random. There’s a chance we’ll be facing each other, when we get there.”

There’s no question that they will, of course.

Sasuke pauses in his sharpening, eyes thoughtful, and then glances between Naruto and Sakura. “I
won't hold back,” he says, and one could read that tone as a clear warning, but…Naruto can hear the inflection in it, and promise that he won't let anything get in the way of their dreams.

Naruto straightens a stack of flash-bang seals, just to give his hands something to do and his eyes a place to linger, because…he doesn’t like the thought of having to fight Sakura or Sasuke in earnest. Sparring, sure, and they’re definitely still at least slightly rivals, but…

“So we give them a good show,” he offers suddenly, as the idea comes to him. “We treat it like a spar, show off jutsus and tactics and stuff, try to end it in a draw. That way they’ll have to advance both of us.”

“It’s not just the winners that get promoted,” Sakura reminds them, stubborn and steadfast. “The entire point of the Exams is showing the watching kages that you have the knowledge, maturity, and skills to make chuunin in the first place.” She hesitates, and then smiles a little sheepishly. “I still like the idea of a draw, though. Fighting seriously…it just seems like we should save that for our enemies. We don’t need to beat each other unconscious, because we already know we’re all strong. We’re just stronger as a team, and that’s what matters.”

Sasuke nods seriously, then sets down his whetstone and shuriken and reaches his hand out into the center of their circle. “To a draw, then?”

Naruto adds his own hand without hesitation, and grins when Sasuke presses their fingertips together lightly. “To a draw,” he agrees.

Sakura lays her hand over theirs and meets their eyes, and it’s as though they’re swearing their oath to become the next Sannin all over again, with that resolve in her green gaze. “To a draw,” she echoes, and then breaks the serious mood to offer up a sly grin that says she’s been spending too much time with Kurama's fox summons. “But if it’s Ino or Kiba, I reserve the right to pound them into the ground without mercy.”

There's a pause as both boys exchange looks, and then Naruto pouts. “But I wanted Kiba!”

“He still insults you every time he sees you, even though I've told him to stop,” Sasuke mutters, looking aggravated. “I call dibs.”

“Hopefully we’ll all get foreign ninja,” Sakura offers. “Then we won't have to show any mercy at all.”

They contemplate that, and then Naruto shrugs, crossing his arms behind his head. “Ah, I don’t care. As long as it’s not…I don’t know, Hinata-chan or Shikamaru. Hinata-chan seems too shy to hit, and Shikamaru would just be…”

“Troublesome?” Sasuke offers, straight-faced.

Naruto laughs. “Way too troublesome, believe it!”

They all exchange glances, thoughtfully, and then Naruto huffs and drops to the ground, stretching out on his back. “Ah, I'm so excited! We’re gonna be chuunin!”

Sakura slides over and sprawls out beside him, crossing her arms on top of his chest and resting her chin on them. “Right? I feel like we should be really nervous and everything, but…after Zabuza and Haku, after all the training we’ve done so far, I just…can't be.”

“Because we’re going to win, obviously,” Sasuke points out, settling next to them and leaning back on his hands. But he’s smiling, dark eyes bright with anticipation and certainty. “There's no reason to
be nervous.”

“Yeah!” Naruto cheers, beaming up at the ceiling. “We’re gonna beat all the records set for this exam, believe it!”

“Believe it,” Sakura agrees with a cheeky grin.

“Believe it.” Sasuke hesitates for half a moment, then drops down next to Sakura, his head comfortably cushioned on Naruto's stomach.

They don’t say anything else, but they don’t have to.

Kurama gets home well after midnight, the taste of plum wine lingering in his mouth, though he’s still well away from buzzed, given his metabolism. Kakashi has been deposited safely at home, to sleep off the aftereffects of the night. He and Asuma had attempted—foolishly, and despite Kurama's many warnings—to drink the redhead under the table while Kurenai cheered all three of them on.

Given that even Tsunade herself couldn’t manage ‘mildly tipsy’, let alone ‘under the table’, Kurama isn’t surprised they failed, and he’s the faintest bit gleeful to see Kakashi tomorrow and rub his complete lack of a hangover in the Copy-Nin’s face. Revenge for the training trip, if asked. With a quiet chuckle, he toes off his sandals and pads barefoot into the living room, not bothering to turn on any lights.

A good decision, given the puppy-pile of genin asleep on the floor.

Kurama pauses in the doorway, smiling softly. Sasuke, Naruto, and Sakura are all tangled up together, in such a way that Kurama can barely distinguish whose limbs are whose. Scattered around them is an arsenal that would make most jounin weep with envy, halfway packed. He hesitates, debating whether to finish it for them, and then decides not to. Clearly they’re doing inventory, and he won’t disturb that.

The night is warm, so Kurama doesn’t bother waking them up and dragging them to bed, just pulls the blanket off the couch and drapes it over them as best he can. Naruto mumbles and curls up into Sasuke's side a little more, even as Sakura groans and splays herself out on top of them. Smothering his laughter, Kurama retreats, slipping over to the window and hopping up on the sill to look out over the village.

It’s quiet. Peaceful. A waxing moon floats overhead and the stars are bright, the breeze warm but not humid or overwhelmingly hot. In the darkness, faint flickering shadows are the only signs of shinobi passing on the rooftops, the streets almost entirely empty of civilians. Shinobi villages never really sleep. They just look like they do, given their inhabitants. But still, the night is calm.

It won’t be for long.

There's just over a week to the Exams, and Kurama is on edge, though he’s doing his best to conceal it. After all, for all that he and his Sasuke tried, they were never able to reconstruct a timeline of Orochimaru’s actions. He’s not even using the base that Sasuke remembered, and though Kurama looked when he first arrived in this time, he couldn’t find so much as a trace of the Snake Sannin. As far as the replacement of the Kazekage goes, that too is a complete mystery, so Kurama is left with no choice but to wait and strike when and where he knows Orochimaru will be present—when he goes after Sasuke in the middle of the second exam.

It’s a risk, one that cuts far too close for Kurama’s comfort, but he has little choice. His status as a
bounty hunter should help as far as explanations of his actions go, since the Hokage already believes he has a web of informants, and presenting him with Orochimaru’s head will hopefully smooth over any rough edges that remain. But…

Well. He worries. Naruto and Sasuke and Sakura are still children, for all that they’ve advanced. Orochimaru is the first real threat they’ll face, Zabuza aside. The Snake Sannin is a much bigger danger than a mercenary missing-nin, after all, and should something go wrong—

Tobi is still out there, too, and that worries Kurama even more, because the man has absolutely awful timing, at least from his enemies’ point of view. Kurama lays a hand over Obito’s seal, freshly altered by a tattoo artist with experience in recreating seals. A small change, just a few lines here and there to make it simpler to copy and transfer, but…

Obito has explained his plan, and it’s risky for both of them. It’s too much like something they would have come up with back in the war, and Kurama hates that, hates that they weren’t able to leave the desperation behind them when they changed timelines. But it’s a part of being a shinobi, he supposes.

A soft breath of breeze whirls through the open window, catching in his hair and carrying the scent of green and growth along with it. Kurama raises his head and breathes it in, forcing his thoughts to the side for now.

There will be time enough for that tomorrow, and in the coming week.

*One week*, he thinks, and lifts a hand as though to touch the waxing moon. *One week. Orochimaru’s days are numbered.*

Orochimaru and then Tobi, and what he came here for will finally be done.
Family

Returning to consciousness is only slightly less painful than that time he got run over by a stampede of crazed women aiming to castrate Jiraiya-sama. Kakashi—wisely—doesn’t make any attempt to open his eyes, curling deeper into his blankets with a tiny, pathetic whimper. Even that makes his head threaten to split at the seams, and he stays perfectly still to keep it from doing so, barely even daring to breathe.

There’s a soft huff of laughter, and it’s only then that Kakashi’s finely honed ninja senses kick in to tell him there’s an intruder in his apartment. Honestly, Kakashi is hoping they’re an enemy here to release him from this torment.

“Kakashi.” That’s definitely Kurama’s aggravated sigh, and Kakashi distinctly remembers his presence at the bar last night. In fact, he remembers Kurama knocking back at least three times the amount that he and Asuma managed. And yet the redhead sounds entirely normal, not even a quaver in his voice to mark the presence of the hangover he must have. “Kakashi, if you can't hold your liquor, or deal with the aftereffects, why the hell did you challenge me to a drinking contest?”

That’s close enough to slander that Kakashi forces himself to pick up the wet noodle that is apparently his arm and level a finger in the direction he assumes Kurama is in. It’s possible that the gesture would be more threatening if he were able to open his eyes, but Kakashi’s experienced enough hangovers to know that’s a Bad Idea. “Hey. I can hold my liquor. I can hold lots of liquor. Lots.”

“As I'm sure your bar tab will reflect,” Kurama says, the amusement clear in his voice, and a moment later a cool glass is being pressed into his hand, his fingers firmly wrapped around it as a hand fondly brushes his hair out of his face. “Drink. You're worse than useless like this.”

“Coffee?” Kakashi asks hopefully, even though he has a sinking, sneaking suspicion that it’s not. Unless Kurama is feeling cruel enough to give him cold coffee, which—well, the man has fox summons and is related to Naruto. He wouldn’t put it past him.

A snort makes his head throb. “Hardly. Alcohol make you dehydrated, and so does coffee. It’s probably the absolute worst thing to have after drinking. This is juice, to raise your blood sugar and replace the water you lost. Drink.”

“Spoken like someone who hasn’t had a hangover recently,” Kakashi grumbles, but chugs the juice in the hopes it will settle his gently rolling stomach. He has a vague memory of hunching over the toilet at some point last night, so he assumes there's nothing left to come back up.

“Try never. I told you last night, I can't get drunk. Hardcore binge-drinking barely even leaves me tipsy.” The glass is plucked from his hand and whisked away to parts that will remain unknown, since Kakashi still refuses to open his eyes.

Kakashi’s mind makes a valiant attempt to grasp this concept of no hangovers, ever, and then gives up with a pathetic squelch and drops back into hibernation. Kakashi agreeably follows it, laying back down and dragging his blankets up over his face. “Argh. Hate you so much.”

Kurama laughs, and when Kakashi cracks an eye open just the barest fraction, he’s wearing that Kurama-trademark smile that’s unrepentantly wicked in the same moment that it’s as innocent as a summer sky. The Copy-Nin eyes it for a moment, then tugs the blankets up a little higher in self-defense and mutters, “I'm surprised you didn’t march in here banging pots, Kurama. Getting mellow
“in your old age?”

A part of his nearly liquefied brain reminds him that it might not be smart to taunt a known prankster—or at very least the relative of not one, but two—while he’s practically defenseless, but, as is ever the case with his common sense, Kakashi shuts it out and ignores it.

“I thought about it,” Kurama admits shamelessly, flitting around Kakashi’s room with inhuman grace as he straightens it, and making Kakashi’s hangover ten times worse through mere proximity to his cheer and energy. “But then the Hokage told me that since he’s shorthanded with the Chuunin Exams so close, I’m being sent to pick up reports from the southwestern border patrols. Meaning that you have a team meeting to get to in, oh, forty-five minutes.”

That beaming smile is made entirely of concentrated evil, Kakashi is sure of it.

When Ino comes downstairs for breakfast, there’s an unfamiliar jounin standing with her father, a scroll open between them. She pauses on the stairs, studying the red-haired man with interest, because he’s certainly handsome. Scarred, but then again most shinobi are, and his wealth of deep, coal-red hair, like garnets in the sun, is more than enough to draw the eye. It’s back in a loose braid that trails over his shoulder, strands of it caught underneath the strap of a blue-wrapped sword strapped across his back. His jounin vest is open, showing off a leanly muscled torso just barely concealed by a tight black tank top, and tattoos in muted colors run up his arms and over his shoulders.

Ino carefully checks herself for drool, then bounces down the last few steps and calls, “Morning!”

“Ino,” her father says, glancing up with a smile.

The other jounin looks up as well, and of course he has blue eyes. He smiles too, flashing a hint of dimples, and while Sasuke is still definitely handsome, this man is…

Ugh. The phrase ‘unfairly attractive’ comes to mind.

“Hello,” the redhead offers, meeting her eyes before dipping into a slight bow. “I’m Uzumaki Kurama. You must be Inoichi-san’s lovely and talented daughter. I’ve heard much about you from Asuma-san.”

Charming, too. Ino beams back, knowing exactly who’s going to be second on her list of potential husbands from now on. “I’m Ino. It’s nice to meet you, Uzumaki-san.” It’s only then that the name strikes her, and she blinks. “Are you…related to Naruto?”

The man nods. “Yes, he’s my cousin. I only moved to Konoha recently, but he lives with me now.”

Kurama is a jounin, and from the easy, courteous air around her father Ino can assume that he’s a good one. A month ago, Ino would have wondered how in the world a dead-last loser like Naruto could have been related to such a successful shinobi, but now she thinks of last week. Of Team 7, no longer the ragtag trio of entirely separate and dissimilar individuals, but an actual team. Of a Sakura who stands tall but calm, of a Sasuke who smiles and jokes, of a Naruto who still laughs and grins but moves like a dancer, in complete control of every limb.

And, all right, maybe she can see the resemblance to this man in front of her.

“Don’t you have training, Ino?” her father asks sternly. “Normally you’ve left by now.”
Ino rolls her eyes in exasperation. “We should,” she replies, “but Asuma-sensei sent a message saying that we’ve got the morning off. By now, Shikamaru can’t complain that I didn’t let him sleep in, so I’m going to go and drag him out of bed to do some sparring.”

Inoichi chuckles, shaking his head. “I believe you and Shikamaru-kun have different ideas of what ‘sleeping in’ amounts to, Ino. Shikaku and I certainly did.”

With an amused huff, Ino tosses her ponytail over her shoulder. “Well, he’d better get used to it. After all, Sakura’s already gotten a head start pulling her team together, and I’m hardly about to let her beat me.”

She still remembers, with a faint pang, the way Sakura’s eyes settled on her that day, focused on her for a brief moment and in that space of time dismissed her as nothing more or less than an old childhood friend. They were rivals in love for years before Sakura suddenly decided to do away with all of that, and…

Well, it sticks in Ino’s craw, to be set aside so easily. This new Sakura is different from the old one, in the way that a polished gemstone is different from the rough rock it originated from. She’s sharp and strong and while she was never a cute girl, she’s beautiful now, honed and tempered.

Ino is many things, but stupid isn’t one of them. If she doesn’t act now, she’ll be left behind, and that’s the exact last thing she wants. This Sakura—this Sakura she’ll fight to keep up with, and if she has to drag her team along kicking and screaming—Asuma-sensei included—that’s just fine with her.

When she looks back, Kurama is watching her with eyes the color of the ocean beneath the sun, vivid and almost unsettlingly blue. But there’s a tilt to one corner of his mouth, like he’s fighting a smile, and his expression is warm.

“If you don’t want to bother your team quite yet,” he suggests, “I think Sakura was going to head to Training Ground Nine a bit early to get some katas in. She might be up for a spar.”

Ino doesn’t even have to debate the matter. She heads for her sandals at a near bolt, waving over her shoulder as she tugs them on. “Thanks, Kurama-san! Have a good day, Tou-san!”

“Good luck, Ino,” her father answers, while Kurama just waves in return.

Then she’s out the door and running. Sakura isn’t going to wait around for her forever, after all.

“Is that all of them?” Momiji asks, circling above Squad 27 as Kurama stows their reports in a sealing scroll.

“Yeah,” Kurama answers, counting the reports he’s already picked up. “This is the River Country border, which is mostly friendly towards Konoha, so only five patrol squads out here. We can head back now. Thanks, Momiji.”

The fox snorts, banking right and setting off at a fast clip. “Believe me, it’s my pleasure. Anything to get away from Ume’s dirty looks. I wouldn’t have complained no matter what you had summoned me for.”

“Even—?”

“Well, no, maybe not that,” Momiji admits, ears flattening against his skull. “I’m a fox, damn it, not a
Summoning us to take care of that rat infestation was just demeaning.”

Kurama raises one politely disbelieving brow. “Oh? As I recall, Kaede had a lot of fun. Fuji, too.”

“They’re children,” Momiji grumbles. “Fuji only just gained her third tail, and Kaede hasn’t had his for more than a decade yet. You can’t hold the rest of us to their standards, Kurama.” He glides across the treetops, then lets them drop, feet skimming over the surface of a river. There’s a large boulder in the center of the water, and he uses it as a springboard, soaring back up into the open air with his foxfire burning brightly.

Kurama chuckles softly, raising his face to the whipping wind. “Sorry, sorry. You have to admit, though, watching them was fun.”

There’s a momentary pause, and then a reluctant huff of laughter. “I suppose. My sister can be quite cute, when she’s not being a complete terror.”

“Spoken like a true brother, Momiji.”

But Momiji doesn’t answer. His attention is turned towards the north, ears pricked, and he circles tightly in the air, tails flaring behind him as he scents the wind.

“Momiji?” Kurama asks softly, closing his fingers around Ginkaze’s hilt. “What do you sense?”

Momiji hesitates, circling once more before he answers, “I…think it’s the Slug Sannin. She’s on the North road, headed towards—”

“Tanzaku-Gai,” Kurama finishes for him, feeling something that’s a mix of longing and pain, heartache and joy twist through his chest. He presses a hand over it, closing his eyes. This…is something he hasn’t considered, an option he’d never even conceived of, but… “That’s where Ero-Sennin and I met her the first time. I…”

He hesitates, considering the different paths from here, and bites his lip. His first instinct is to rush in, urge Momiji forward so he can get even a glimpse of the only major female role model in his life, the woman who was mother and grandmother and big sister to him. But as tempting as that course is, he’s not an immature and reckless brat anymore. Perhaps some could argue, but Kurama started thinking things through around the time his Sakura was killed.

But—

Kurama lifts his head, feeling his heart thump in his chest and his breath hitch in his lungs, and orders, “Momiji, go.”

The fox doesn’t question him, body gathering in a leap that carries them northward, and Kurama is glad for it. He’s got precious little justification for this, because it’s a risk, and it’s most certainly rash, a whim with little thought behind it. But Kurama, Kyuubi dye job aside, is still the reckless blond with a need to save people from everything, including themselves, and Tsunade is—

Well, Tsunade was his only real, living blood relative for so long, his Hokage and his mentor and his shoulder to cry on and his reason to be strong. She gave so much for him, for Konoha, and somehow the village without her has seemed ever so slightly dimmer, sadder.

So Kurama won’t overthink this. He has no plan, no carefully plotted speech. But still he remembers that day when he and Jiraiya were searching for the Slug Sannin, that street in Otafuku-Gai. There had been a father and his son, sharing an ice cream, and Kurama, back when he had truly been Naruto, had watched them with an aching sort of emptiness inside of him.
Tsunade, whether she meant to or not, had filled that space.

She was never mushy, more apt to hit him than kiss his cheek, but she had been his baa-chan.

Whether or not Kurama can ever be close to her again, Naruto deserves to have that, and Kurama isn’t about to let a lack of planning stand in his way.

They’re close enough now that he can see two figures on the road, the familiar green coat and blond head, and Shizune with Tonton in her arms. Momiji pauses, hesitates ever so briefly, but when Kurama says nothing to call him off he lets them drop. The ground rises in a rush and he lands in a crouch, skidding slightly to keep his footing, and then stills.

Kurama raises his head, meets a startled brown gaze set in an ageless face, and slides off the fox’s back with a last, thankful touch to Momiji’s shoulder. He rises slowly to his feet, feeling off balance and uncertain, but at the same time steady. Tsunade is across from him, less than twenty paces away, and the last time Kurama saw her she was a pale and bloodless corpse, her life surrendered in order to give the people of Konoha one last chance at escape. It hurts more than it rightly should to look at her and see a complete lack of recognition in her features, more than it has with anyone else, but—that’s just how it is now, isn’t it? He’ll adjust.

“Tsunade-sama,” he says softly. “Please forgive me if I startled you.”

She eyes him warily, and Shizune tenses slightly and takes a step closer. Tsunade glances at her and waves her back, expression becoming slightly irritated. “What do you want, shinobi?” she demands.

Kurama raises his hands, palm up to show they're empty. “Is it so wrong to want to speak to some of my last living family?”

There's a long, heavy pause. Tsunade studies him, eyes narrowing faintly, and then she says, “Well, with that hair you can’t be anything but an Uzumaki. Even the Uzumaki painted on that ugly fountain in Uzushio’s eastern market had red hair.”

About to agree, Kurama blinks and stops. He thinks back, then raises a brow at the Slug Sannin and says politely, “It's been a very long time since I left Uzushio, Tsunade-sama, so forgive me if I'm wrong, but I could have sworn that the market was in the south of the city. Though I'll grant you that the fountain was exceedingly ugly.”

That makes Tsunade smile, at least. She cocks her head, looking him over. “Your name, Red?”

“Uzumaki Kurama.” He takes a breath and lets it out, steeling himself for a conversation that’s going to consist almost entirely of misdirection and half-truths. Tsunade, unlike most shinobi, actually visited Uzushio in its prime. She met its shinobi and knew its leaders, and won't take kindly to being deceived.

“I can't recall an Uzumaki by that name,” Tsunade says with a frown.

Kurama dips his head in acknowledgement. “My father was from outside the clan, and I never knew my mother. My village was destroyed while I was still a genin.”

Tsunade’s face softens slightly. “Uzushio was a beautiful city,” she murmurs, and then smiles. “Ah, what the hell. I’d recognize that bone structure and coloring anywhere. Related to Kushina and Mito-sama, right? That’s just about their shade of red, if a little darker.”

Returning the smile, Kurama touches a lock of hair, remembering his mother. She was so beautiful, that one time he saw her, and to think he looks like her is…a comfort. A kindness. “My mother was
related to Mito-sama, yes. I saw a...an image of Kaa-san once, and she was...gorgeous.” He pauses, hastily arranging his thoughts, and then adds carefully, “But I've also met a blond Uzumaki.”

Tsunade scoffs. “I think not. The whole clan was full of redheaded spitfires. Blond would be—”

“Your great-nephew, Naruto, is blond,” Kurama cuts in, voice soft. “He’s an Uzumaki, too.”

The expression on the Sannin’s face makes his heart hurt—wistful and fearful and tight with something that hovers between anger and grief. She crosses her arms under her breasts and fixes him with a sharp, steady glare. “If you’re here to try and convince me to go back—”

“I'm here to convince you to be his family!” Kurama snaps, and maybe it’s too soon to lose his temper, maybe it will just do more harm than good, but the woman who always believed in him is looking at him like he’s a stranger, even when he was the one to bury her, to care for Konoha’s people once she was gone and follow in her footsteps as best he could. “Tsunade-sama, you're his great-aunt, practically his godmother. Naruto is a child who has been raised without anything. I kissed his forehead once, and I thought he was going to cry because of it! No one has ever been a family to him beyond the most nebulous meaning of the word. Until I got to Konoha he was living alone in an apartment, surviving on ramen and almost nothing else. He needs people, and I can't be everything to him.”

“I left Konoha for a reason,” Tsunade snaps right back. “The whole damn place is cursed. If the brat knows what’s good for him, he’ll get out before it kills him, too, the same way it killed his mother.”

Kurama takes a breath, trying to rein in his emotions. “I know what you lost, Tsunade-sama, and you have my sympathies, but other people have lost just as much and they didn’t abandon their villages. Very soon, Orochimaru is going to attack Konoha, and if no one there is able to stop him he’s going to kill the Sandaime. People will fight him and they’ll die. He’s one of the Sannin. How can you possibly expect the average chunin or jounin to face him? But they will, because Konoha is their home. Naruto will face him, I know he will, because that’s the kind of person that he is. And I can't lose him, Tsunade-sama. I can't lose another village. Not to Orochimaru. Not when your presence could stop him.”

“How dare you? I gave everything—”

“And Konoha is still standing because of it! So isn't it better to make sure that your sacrifices weren’t in vain? Shouldn’t you protect it all the more because of what you’ve given? Tsunade-sama, please. Naruto is just a boy. He needs family, and Konoha needs your strength. Please, I know you've been living in the wake of a tragedy for a long time now, but can't you see that Konoha is worth more than that? You brother and your lover both gave everything for it, so that those living there could have a home. So preserve their dream. Preserve the village they worked so hard to save.”

Tsunade makes a wordless sound of grief and rage, turning away and pressing a hand over her eyes. She’s silent, and Kurama, still struggling to regain control of his temper, lets her have the moment as he steps back and takes a breath.

Silence lingers, and then breaks as Tsunade laughs, bitter and rough. “You’ve got a silver tongue, Red,” she says, and the resignation in her tone is truly a surprise. “And a hard head.”

“I've been told it runs in the family,” Kurama answers, slightly wary as she turns back to him. She’s still one of the Sannin, after all, and cunning on top of that.

Tsunade steps closer, and there’s a deep, weary grief in her eyes that makes Kurama hold his ground until she’s right in front of him, barely a pace away. She considers him for a long moment,
inscrutable, and then reaches up and rests a hand on top of his head, gently curling her fingers in his long hair. “Naruto's not the only one who needs a family, is he?” she asks, and it's amused and tired and kind. Kurama stiffens, caught entirely off guard, and—

He ducks his head, trying to hide the burning in his eyes, because he never knew Kushina at all, and Tsunade has always been the very closest thing to a mother he's had. His hands clench into fists as he closes his eyes and attempts to pull away, but Tsunade's strength is every bit as ridiculous as it's always been, and she tugs him closer with an unimpressed arch of her brow. “Kid, you're a hundred years too early to be hiding everything away like that. Come here.”

What is there to say, really? Kurama lets her pull him into a loose hug, and tries to pretend that he's not desperate for it. He hasn't let himself think about Tsunade in so long, hasn't let himself consider going to find her, because of this. Because she sees right through him and gets to the heart of things without any effort at all, and it's...she's the only one who's ever really been able to. Even Sasuke wasn't nearly as good at it as she was.

From above his bowed head, he hears her sign, and then a murmured, “Fine, Red, you got me. Orochimaru’s going to be in the village?”

“For the Chuunin Exams, in a week,” Kurama manages, clinging to his composure by his fingertips. “It’s...likely he’s going after Naruto's teammate, the last Uchiha, for his Sharingan. He'll destroy Konoha in the process, too.”

Tsunade sighs, carding her fingers through his hair before stepping back and letting him go. Kurama tries not to feel bereft at the loss of the touch. “That sounds like Orochimaru.” She shakes her head, frowning, and then rolls her eyes. “You know the second I set foot in the village they're going to have me wearing that stupid hat,” she mutters. “Damn it. Why the hell am I doing this?”

“A steady supply of sake?” Kurama suggests, retreating another few steps to lean against Momiji’s side. The fox leans into him in return, curling his tails around Kurama's hip in silent comfort.

With a snort, Tsunade gives in and smiles. “That’s as good a reason as any. Go on, brat, you look like you’re on a mission, and there's no way I'm climbing aboard that flying rat. We’ll be in Konoha soon enough.”

Momiji gives a yelp of indignant protest, but Kurama just laughs and swings onto his back. “When you get there, come find me,” he offers. “I’ll buy you a whole case of the best Rice Country sake.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Tsunade answers, and takes three steps closer to ruffle his hair before turning on her heel and marching off down the road. Shizune wavers, then gives Kurama a quick bow and a sweet smile before following her teacher.

Kurama watches them go, heart light and expression fondly wistful, his hair mussed and a smile on his lips.

“Thanks, baa-chan,” he whispers.
Tempest

Chapter Notes

People have asked if the last chapter was meant as Ino/Sakura. Um. Oops I think my pairing’s showing? [Yes, I am a ridiculous person and SHIP EVERYTHING.] But, as always, subtext is half the fun, and if it’s not your cup of tea feel free to read them as friends.

Mother is whispering to him again, demanding blood, but it’s quiet enough that Gaara can shut it out for the moment, lock it away. It’s easier at night, when there are few people around to become targets, few creature nearby that he can feed to Mother. She calms then, if only just, but that’s dangerous too. It lulls Gaara, soothes him with an entirely false sense of peace, brings sleep just that little bit closer.

He hates it. Hates everyone, because they all hate him too. They all fear him, even—perhaps especially—Temari and Kankuro, and it grates at his nerves like metal scraping over rock.

Walking keeps him awake, for the most part. Konoha is far different than Suna, which is mildly interesting. There’s so much green here, and just the other day it rained. Gaara had heard of rain before, but that was his very first encounter with it, and it was…unnerving. His sand does poorly with so much water around. But it was…less unnerving than it might otherwise have been, because Konoha is strange. The people here don’t glare or cower away from him. They welcome him, smile at him, and Gaara has never encountered such a thing before. He can’t decide whether he likes it or not. On the one hand, it will give him easy targets, simple to catch unawares should Mother demand blood in such a way that she cannot be ignored.

On the other, they…don’t fear him.

The path Gaara is on leads out of the village proper, up an incline that loops away and around and then past the great stone faces of the Hokages past and present. The air is cool against his skin, though nowhere near the freezing temperatures of a Wind Country night, and it smells of green. Before coming here, Gaara hadn’t thought that green could have a smell. But it does, and it surrounds Gaara, slides into his lungs and banishes the arid dustiness he’s carried within him since his very first breath.

The ground before him levels out suddenly, almost causing him to miss a step, and he finds himself on top of the Yondaime Hokage’s head, staring down on the rooftops of Konoha. Though most of the streets Gaara traversed on his way here were empty, from this height he can see that his solitude was an illusion. There are still people about, shinobi and civilians alike, and a multitude of lights give the village a warm glow. Gaara pauses at the very edge of the stone, simply looking at the teeming life below him. There are so many people. Surely, that many deaths would prove his existence without a doubt. Surely that number would be enough.

A soft scuff makes him snap his attention back to his surroundings, instantly on guard as he half turns to find that he’s not as alone as he had imagined.

Blood, is his first thought, but a second look shows that assumption false. It’s hair, even redder than his own, and long. The color is uncanny, brilliant even in the weak light of the stars and moon and
the secondhand glow from the city. It makes Mother stir, but just as quickly she goes still, stiff and frozen and radiating a sort of horrified confusion. Gaara frowns before he can stop himself, because Mother has never done that before.

_Mother?_ he asks silently.

*Like us but not,* she hisses. *Strange, different. I don’t like it. Kill him!*

Gaara would obey, but he’s been given strict instructions not to kill until the invasion happens, so he reins himself in. That hitai-ate is most certainly from Konoha, after all, and Gaara is aware enough to know that a jounin’s death won’t go unremarked. Especially not at his hands.

He blinks, and the red-haired man is suddenly only a handful of feet in front of him, watching him with his head tipped to one side. Gaara tenses, if only faintly, because he hadn’t seen the man move, hadn’t sensed him either in motion or in stillness, and that’s even more irritating and unnerving than the villagers’ smiles.

“That,” the man says softly, so softly that the words are nearly stolen away by the wind, “is a very nasty seal you have there. Badly done, as well.”

His sand stirs restlessly around him, hungry for a target, but Gaara chokes back both it and his uneasiness, keeping his expression neutral. “You speak as if you know such things,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest.

The redheaded man smiles, soft and gentle and the kind of expression Gaara hasn’t seen since—

No. Stop there.

The memories obediently halt, but Gaara can't bring himself to treat their rise as anything less than an ill omen. With Mother’s enthusiastic approval, he calculates their distance from the village, the location of the nearest patrol, and the odds that he can kill this man before anyone becomes aware of it.

The odds are good.

He lets out a trickle of sand, barely any, and certainly not enough to be noticed as it creeps along the ground towards the man with blood-colored hair. Who doesn’t see it, and instead takes another half-step forward, that kind expression—façade, façade, because it must be—never faltering.

“Because _I do_ know such things,” he says softly. “The very first jinchuuriki was from my clan.” One hand rises, slowly enough that it’s not a threat, and violet chakra flickers over it. The nails lengthen, sharpen, even as his eyes shift to the color of his chakra and marks twist their way up the line of this jaw. And the feel of him—

Suddenly, he feels like that blond boy from earlier, the one who faced down Kankuro with his team at his back. He feels like Gaara himself, but slightly…different. One step sideways from a jinchuuriki, and what does that make him? What is he?

Gaara’s eyes narrow. Mother is entirely silent, which is almost alarming, and Gaara reacts the only way he ever has. He calls his sand up, feels it surge around the red-haired jounin’s feet, and goes to crush and kill and take his blood for Mother, take his life as one more little bit of validation that he has the right to exist.

But the man is gone, too fast to catch, slipping away just before the sand closes around his ankles. Gaara falters, because _no one_ can dodge his sand when he’s had time to prepare, and the redhead is
suddenly there, right in front of him, and a hand darts out to glance over his bare skin as chakra flares.

And it’s gone. The bloodlust that Mother wears like a cloak, the madness, the fear, even her voice—they’re all gone as though they never existed at all.

Gaara staggers, and it’s small comfort that his sand still answers him, because it’s not as much as normal and not enough and when two firm but gentle hands catch him by the shoulders he doesn’t have any idea what to do. People don’t touch him, people don’t care if he falls on his face in the dirt. People certainly don’t pull him upright, careful and delicate, or wrap an arm around his shoulder and pull him close.

But the man is warm. He’s warm and soft and firm and his hair falls over Gaara’s face like the very softest silk that’s too good for shinobi to wear. The scent of rain clings to him, rain and wind and a touch of fire, a storm to change everything Gaara has ever known.

He wants to kill this man. He wants to wrap him in his sand and hide him away. He wants to push him back and run, get as far away as possible before he breaks entirely.

But he doesn’t, because the arms around him are warmer than he remembered a human could be, blood-warm but without the taste of copper in the back of his throat, without the feel of something in the back of his head that sounds like his uncle and no no no no no Gaara don’t. So he stands there, and the man keeps holding him, and if Gaara presses his face into his shoulder to get just a little more of that warmth—

Well. No one’s ever cared to tell him what was wrong or right before, and he’s never cared to listen. He’s not about to start now.

When Kakashi was a genin, he hadn’t feared the Chuunin Exams. Now, though, with the first section looming mere hours away and Konoha’s night closing in around him, he’s the next best thing to panicked.

Sasuke, Naruto, and Sakura don’t seem to share his anxiety. They’re currently passed out in the room that has somehow become theirs, sprawled out over the bed in a jumbled tangle of limbs, and Kakashi would very much like to know when that became a thing. Oh, he’s seen them do it before, and gotten pictures. But blackmail doesn’t hold any weight when they have no shame in it, so the pictures are useless and the genin seem to have adopted the puppy pile as their preferred method of relaxation and comfort.

Really, Kakashi wants to be a fly on the wall the first time a significant other walks in on that scene. Truly with all his heart he does. It will be amazing. He can already picture the romantic partner’s horrified disbelief and the genin’s collective cluelessness.

Regardless, though, the three genin are passed out and dreaming in the sleep of the well-prepared and entirely confident. He’d berate them for being too confident, except he doesn’t really think they are. There are still nerves, certainly, and they’re still only genin, but at the same time they’re likely the most well-trained rookie team in Konoha. Maybe even better than Gai’s, and he’s had an entire year extra.

Granted, Sasuke has only had a week to learn to use his Sharingan, and Naruto only knows a handful of seals and jutsus, and Sakura still needs to work on her speed and stamina. But they’re all smart and able to think on their feet, with an uncanny awareness of each other and a shared
protective streak a mile deep. The first test focuses on team strength, and in that they couldn’t be better. Hell, Kakashi knows ANBU teams that aren’t as smooth as Team 7.

But he’s still nervous, still on edge. He’s never had a team before, never had to do this, practically let them go when there’s a just about even chance that they could be killed. Like a cat on hot coals, he can’t stand still, even though Kurama’s cozy apartment—especially cozy when housing five instead of the two it was meant for—is peaceful and calm, soothing in its new familiarity. Kakashi paces, careful to keep his steps absolutely silent as he wanders from one end to the other, every so often pausing at the children’s door to check that their breathing is still soft and even.

There’s no reason to be nervous, not really. He’s prepared them as best he can, and in the last week he and Kurama have been working overtime, drilling every last bit of knowledge that they can into those small heads.

But they could still fail.

They could still die.

Kakashi isn’t entirely certain that he’ll survive it, if they do.

Another lap down the hallway, another quick check to make sure nothing’s changed, and Kakashi continues towards the kitchen, slips through to the living room. This time, though, there’s another presence, and Kakashi has a kunai in hand before he can register the sight of Kurama standing by the window.

A moment to get his heartbeat back under control, and Kakashi says softly, “You should be in bed.”

“So should you,” the redhead returns easily, his mouth slanting into a wry smile as he turns to meet Kakashi’s gaze. The moon is almost full, and spills through the window to fall over Kurama’s lean form like a tattered silver veil, pooling in the arch of his cheekbones, gilding his long hair, and lingering in his large eyes. Kakashi’s breath catches in his throat, freezes in his chest, because sometimes he forgets that Kurama is absolutely stunning, and then a moment like this steals all thought from his mind in an instant.

Kurama looks at him for a long moment, and Kakashi has to wonder what he sees. What he’s always seen, that let him trust a complete stranger who showed up at his door without warning. Wonders what he could possibly keep seeing that he comes back again and again, with a smile and a laugh and a helping hand.

Four times this week he’s woken Kakashi from his nightmares with a soft touch. Five times he’s made dinner and packed lunches and cooked breakfast, enough for all of them and without ever being asked, all of Kakashi’s favorites that he somehow knows and prepares just because. Six times he’s come to training with Team 7, even though he has no real reason to—most relatives never bother, and surely Naruto’s presence alone isn’t the sole reason.

So many countless times this week he’s gazed at Kakashi with that particular look in his eyes, the one that says Kakashi is precious and valued and not the broken wreck of a man he knows he is.

Like gravity, like the pull of the tides, like the drawn of true north on a magnet, Kakashi is moved forward. He crosses the living room in six long strides and reaches out, and Kurama doesn’t flinch away. Instead, he leans into Kakashi’s hand as it curves around his cheek, and smiles.

There’s eternity in that smile. Eternity and wonder and every precious moment Kakashi has ever been witness to, compressed into a simple curve of the lips and crinkling of the eyes, and it’s so
goddamn beautiful that it *aches* all the way straight down to his core.

The decision is easily made, because Kurama is lovely in the moonlight and even more so when he smiles, never so beautiful as when he simply *is*, calm and vivid and completely breathtaking. Kakashi cups his cheek in one hand, reaches up with the other to tug down his mask without a single care. Kurama is watching him, but there's no surprise, no astonishment at the sudden revelation. Just a softening of his features and a hand raised in return, delicately threading fingers through Kakashi's messy hair and carefully, slowly pulling him down.

Soft lips like a firebrand and a whisper of sweet breath and silken strands of flame across their faces, and Kurama kisses like a thunderstorm, like the sea that lends its color to his eyes. All calm surface and raging depths, gentleness with the wild of a typhoon beneath. Kakashi is undone, unmade before the onslaught of his kindness, his sweetness, broken apart by lips and tongue and the very faintest edge of teeth.

Helplessly he fists his free hand in crimson hair, slides his other hand from cheek to throat to wrap desperately around Kurama's waist, pull him close until their bodies are aligned and all Kakashi can think of is that time on his couch with Anko lurking outside. How for just a heartbeat there was nothing but the two of them, regardless of anything else, and still Kurama fits against him. Not like two pieces of a puzzle, not like he was made to do so, but like he's a piece of Kakashi that broke off long ago and has only now been found. So intrinsic and so very much a part of him that Kakashi's not entirely sure he'll survive their separation.

A gasp, a breath against his lips, and Kurama takes more, leans in and kisses him with hunger and drive and an aching sort of wonder, and Kakashi understands. This is something special, something rare, and he answers it with everything inside of him. Two storms meeting, loneliness and grief and pasts all left suspended for the time it takes their lips to touch again.

Even when the need for air is too much to resist, Kakashi doesn’t let go, and neither does Kurama. Somehow they're clinging to each other, wrapped up together in limbs and panting breaths and greedy hands that can't be convinced to let go just yet. Not now, because separation of any sort seems unbearable, and Kakashi leans in, rests their foreheads together and allows himself to simply breathe, deep and steady despite his racing heart. Kurama is loose and boneless against him, chest heaving and eyes closed, and the slight, breathless smile on his face is so peaceful and wonderfully brilliant that Kakashi feels it like a wound deep down in his very core, grave and irremediable.

“Kakashi,” Kurama whispers, and calloused, careful fingertips trace his cheek like he’s something dear.

Kakashi laughs, low and hoarse and *real* for the first time in what feels like a damned age. “Kurama,” he returns, and he feels like light and hope and all good things, like—

It’s a kiss, but there's nothing mere about it. A kiss, and that's enough to realize just how much he’s invested in this, how much of himself he’s laid out in offering to this man, battered but unbroken and so very, very good right down to his soul.

He breathes out all of his insecurities, all of his doubts, all of his fears, and inhales the scent of rain and citrus and green tea, with the faintest hint of sword-sharp steel beneath. Breathes in all of his courage and hopes for the future, which have somehow come to include this amazing, astounding man who makes so many lives better just by existing.

*Breathe, and breathe. One last touch of courage, and then the truth.*

“You told me you couldn’t promise anything beyond ‘not casual’,” he murmurs, a bare bit of sound
into what little air there is between them. “But I think I'm well past that point already, Kurama.”

Kurama laughs softly, low and sweet, like silk across Kakashi's skin. “Oh, Kakashi,” he murmurs in return. “I think I passed ‘not casual’ a long time ago.”

And really, that’s enough. There’s no need for I love you when they both leave it unsaid but understood. Safer this way, because out loud it’s a jinx until it settles a bit more. Love is reckless and will have to wait just a little bit longer to be voiced, just a handful of days until they’ve both managed to fit it into their lives again after shutting it out for so very long already.

But it’s enough.

It’s so much more than enough.

“Bets! Bets! Place your bets right here!” Anko calls with barely contained glee, wavering her scroll in the air. “Odds? Anyone?”

Asuma snorts, slumping back against the wall of the Konoha observation room. The lines of stress in his face have only gotten deeper since Kurama saw him last. “Fifty on Ino attempting to strangle Shikamaru before the day is over,” he says with weary amusement. “And twenty on her actually succeeding.”

On the other side of the room, Shikaku snorts and glances over at the tall blond standing beside him. “You mean the same way Inoichi tried to strangle me halfway through our second exam?” he drawls.

Inoichi gives him a placid smile in return. “Well, if you weren’t such a lazy bastard, I wouldn’t have had to.”

Shikaku rolls his eyes, expression long-suffering. “Gods help us, it’s genetic.”

“I could say the same. And really, Shikaku, were you expecting anything different from my daughter?”

“One hundred on my students’ youthfulness carrying them all the way to the third exam!” Gai cries excitedly, offering Anko a beaming grin and a double thumbs up. “All of Konoha’s genin have embraced the springtime of their youth, but my dear students especially so!”

“A hundred that all three of his get knocked out before the third exam,” Kakashi immediately counters from where he’s seated on the ground, leaning back against Kurama's legs with his Icha Icha in hand.

It doesn’t seem to faze Gai, though. He clasps his hands together, looking about ready to burst into manly, youthful tears. “Oh, my eternal rival! What a hip and cool idea! We shall make this another challenge between us, to see whose genin are more youthful in the face of this exam!”

Kurama glances between them, Gai all but vibrating with enthusiasm and Kakashi playing bored, and rolls his eyes. “Anko,” he says, raising his voice just enough to be heard. “Could you put me down for five hundred on all three members of Team 7 making it to the third round?”

Anko grins at him, equal parts terrifying and excited. “Of course, Kura-chan,” she purrs, but thankfully Kakashi's presence—and the lazily warning glares he sends anyone who tries to take the other seat on the couch—is apparently deterrent enough, and she keeps her distance. There was a bad moment earlier when she’d attempted to tackle him as they walked in, but Kakashi has otherwise
kept her at bay so far.

“Two hundred on the same thing,” Genma puts in from where he’s lounging against the arm of the couch. “And fifty on Team 8 getting knocked out before the finals.”

“Genma!” Kurenai huffs, crossing her arms over her chest and leveling a glare at the tokujo, who grins cheekily back. “Fine. A hundred on at least one of my team making it to the third exam.”

There's more bickering, a few more bets, but Kurama tunes them out, focusing on the screen showing the disguised Izumo and Kotetsu. Several foreign teams are milling around, but he only has eyes for the approaching Team 7, because this is where it starts.

This is where the changes will become most apparent.

And, indeed, the first change is already clear. Sasuke tugs his teammates to a halt, and instead of announcing to everyone around them that it’s a genjutsu, murmurs something Kurama can't make out. Naruto looks confused for a moment before his eyes widen, and Sakura elbows him in the ribs as he opens his mouth. He yelps and sidesteps, but stays silent, fixing her with a wounded look.

There's a short, unheard discussion, and then all three slip around the hidden chuunin to make their way to the next floor.

Kurama closes his eyes and smiles, even as he glides his fingers through Kakashi's silvery hair. One test down.

His nerves are strung tight, though, stomach a knot of anxiety and anticipation, because this is all unknown territory, and they're so close to the end, so close to a world that will be better. Already Gaara has been dealt with, another, more efficient seal laid over his current one that will keep Shukaku in check. He won't be able to release the Ichibi this time, and while Kurama had been tempted not to meddle there—because he knows the effect his words had on his Gaara—he'd decided that the destruction of so much of Konoha took precedence. Besides, there's no saying what might happen now that Shukaku is better sealed; at the very least it will be easier to get through to him, if Naruto does end up facing him.

A spark of chakra along his spine makes him close his eyes and concentrate on Kaede, who's just located Hayate, and is now shadowing him. For all Momiji’s accusations that the three-tailed fox is just a child, he’s the best of Kurama's summons at remaining unseen and undetected, and he can be quite vicious in a pinch. Hopefully, if Baki tries to kill the kenjutsu expert again, Kaede’s presence will be enough to change the outcome.

At the same time, Ume and Oka are concealing themselves in the Forest of Death, and Fuji and Ran are patrolling the borders. Momiji is waiting in reserve, since he and Ran together are the best to deal with Manda, should the snake be summoned. Kurama isn't going to take any more chances than he has to with this, not for anything. Should worst come to worst, he’s fairly certain he can reverse Orochimaru’s cursed seal, but he’d much rather stop the Snake Sannin before he has a chance to place it.

Kakashi makes a soft sound, and Kurama glances back at the screen, to where the first exam has started. A moment of searching reveals what’s amused the Copy-Nin: Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura are somehow not present.

Or, Kurama, thinks, narrowing his eyes as he studies the screen, simply not noticeable.

“One of your tricks?” Kakashi asks dryly, as they watch Ibiki onscreen start to get twitchy and annoyed. The interrogator keeps glancing around the room, shoulders tense and eyes sharp.
Kurama chuckles, weaving his fingers into Kakashi's hair, which is addictively soft and touchable. “Mm. That would be the perception seal. Subtle, but strong. No one’s going to see them until they deactivate it. I hadn’t realized Naruto had made one, let alone three.”

“You say that like he’d leave Sakura and Sasuke without,” Kakashi points out, amused. “Honestly, I don’t think I’ve seen them apart for more than an hour in the past two weeks. Maybe even longer than that.”

With the memory of his old team so close, Kurama's smile is bittersweet. “It’s good, isn’t it? It will give them a better chance of getting through in once piece.”

Kakashi’s hand curls around his ankle, warm and firm, and his eye crinkles in a secret smile. “Good,” he agrees softly.

And… it really, truly is.
Arrival

Chapter Notes

I didn’t mean to have almost the entire chapter in Tsunade’s point of view, but I started writing and she just…took over. Pushy broad that she is, I let her.

Also, yay! We’re headed for the climax of the story now! Best guesstimate is…3-4 more chapters. Maybe five or six… Or seven. Anyway! Less than forty, which is a relief to me. (And on that note: 120000K WORDS IN TWO MONTHS OMFG CAN I GO DIE NOW PLEASE?) Not that this story isn’t the closest you can probably get to a chunk of my soul, but I’ve had the ending (with [hopefully exciting] plot twists!) planned out since…oh, chapter three.

It’s been a very long time since Kurama kissed someone for the sheer fun of it.

The last few years with Sasuke were so tense and tightly strung that any moment they had together was stolen, a second of softness when they had other, more important things to do and never enough time to do them. Each time they touched out of anything but necessity was a chance for Madara to take them by surprise and doom the entire world.

They still touched, of course, but the situation made such things a guilty pleasure, one they could never indulge in enough to even begin to satisfy.

But here and now, Konoha exists, is at peace, and so Kurama has no reason to resist when Kakashi catches his wrist in the hallway outside the observation room. Nothing to make him push the man away when Kakashi lets the others pass them and then presses him up against the wall without a word. Kurama's breath hitches in his lungs at the look on Kakashi's face as he tugs his mask down, the sheer want that still somehow manages not to feel dirty. His expression is intense, but also gentle, hungry, but at the same time so very, very sweet.

With a soft breath, the closest to a word he can manage, Kurama lets Kakashi pin him against the stone, drapes his arms over Kakashi's shoulders and loops them loosely around his neck, and raises his head when Kakashi leans down across the two inches of height that separate them and takes his mouth gently, teasingly.

It’s an exploration, the way Kakashi kisses him. A discovery. Tongue and teeth and huffs of breath, a smile against his lips that Kurama can't help but answer as a slow, sultry heat curls through him with each press and slide and playful nip. Lips against his cheek and a glancing kiss to the tip of his nose, a soft chuckle when Kurama wrinkles it at him and tugs him back down. Eyelashes against his skin, feathery and soft. Fingers on the line of his jawbone and over the curve of his ear, following the upsweep of hair where it’s pulled into a high tail.

Kakashi is fully pressed against him, hands all over him, thighs between Kurama's legs and body undeniably interested, and yet they're still laughing, soft and close, bare flickering flashes of sound whenever they can bear to breathe. Kurama tilts his head back against the cold stone, glorying in it, in this moment of them with nothing else to get in the way, and of course he still loves Sasuke. He always will, with as much of himself as he can possibly spare.
But…

But there's less of that now, fewer bits to linger, empty and forlorn in separation. Far less, and Kurama knows himself well, knows how he falls and the way he can never quite catch himself in time, never quite wants to, and this is certainly the same.

A kiss against the line of his throat, another against the scar there, another over his pulse and then lower, where his tank top leaves his collarbones bare. Kakashi lingers for a moment, breath warm and soft against Kurama's skin, and Kurama takes advantage of it to twist his fingers in the Copy-Nin's hair and hold him just that little bit more securely.

Because joy has always been fleeting, for Kurama, and this is too sweet to relinquish so easily.

“I must say, Tsunade, this is truly a surprise.”

Tsunade glances up with a faintly wry smile, accepting the cup of tea Sarutobi passes across the desk. It’s not sake, but maybe for the moment a clear head is better. “Believe me, sensei, you’re not nearly as surprised as I am.”

It’s still a mystery why she’s even here when nothing has really changed. She’s still cursed, those wishing to become Hokage are still fools, and her fear of blood hasn’t abated in the slightest. But…

But she remembers looking into blue eyes framed by brilliant red hair, eyes with a bottomless sort of sorrow to them that was hidden well but not thoroughly enough. Remembers how he needs a family just barely managed to cover I need a family in his heart. Certainly the brat meant what he said, meant that Kushina’s son needs someone female and vaguely admirable in his life, but…but it’s likely Kurama does, too.

Like any shinobi, Tsunade has read the Bingo Book. She knows that Uzumaki Kurama is a bounty hunter who only really appeared a year ago. So if he only started recently, only just a few months ago joined Konoha, it’s likely he’s been all but alone since Uzushio fell.

Tsunade knows loneliness. She knows it intimately, knows the look and feel and weight of it, that certain strain of solitude that only comes when surrounded by others and aching right down to your soul. Kurama shows all the signs, and the thought that maybe, just maybe she can fix it is enough to tempt Tsunade back to the village she abandoned. She’s always been a medic, after all, always wanted to mend and help and heal above all else, and this is no different.

Mito was her grandmother, Kushina the daughter of one of Mito’s great-nieces and practically Tsunade's niece as well. Kurama looks like both of them in the shape of his face and the slant of his eyes, the way a brief glance from him seems to peel away layers and dig right to the heart of things. After Kushina’s death, which was practically the end of the Uzumaki clan, Tsunade had stopped keeping track of Uzushio’s remnants. Perhaps it was a mistake, if it led her to miss someone like Kurama.

With a sigh, she swallows a mouthful of the bitter-sharp green tea, letting it clear her muddled thoughts. Her old sensei makes awful tea, and she’s never been able to tell whether it was on purpose or not. “Uzumaki Kurama,” she says abruptly. “You know him?”

Sarutobi gives her a sharp look, dark eyes narrowing faintly, and Tsunade assumes that Kurama made no mention of her in whatever mission report he submitted. The brat probably didn’t want to get up the old man’s hopes, in case she chose not to return. That seems like the kind of reasoning
he’d use.

“Kurama-kun? Yes, I know him. Not well, admittedly, but he’s a strong shinobi and a dependable man.” The Hokage considers her for a moment. “He is the reason you returned?”

Tsunade sighs softly, reaching up to curl her fingers around her necklace. “He…reminded me,” she says reluctantly. “Of the fact that just because I keep running, it doesn’t mean no one will get left behind. And he’s…”

“Sad,” Sarutobi finishes for her, smiling faintly, and of course he’d be able to see it. “Yes. He hides it well, but such a thing is to be expected, given his situation. Caring for Naruto has helped, I believe, especially since he’s managed to adopt the rest of Naruto’s genin team and even his jounin sensei as well, but he still has moments of melancholy.”

He was tense and bewildered in her arms, when she had hugged him. Uncertain and lost and so very, very grateful that it made her want to cry for him. Kurama is still so young, youthful Uzumaki appearance or not, and the weight in his eyes is one that most veteran shinobi wouldn’t be able to bear. Tsunade wants to help him with it, at least a little.

“You know, Tsunade,” Sarutobi says carefully, and Tsunade is tempted to roll her eyes. Here it comes, just as she expected. “The council is still hounding me to choose a successor. After all, the only other likely candidates are either dead or…well, Jiraiya.”

“Danzo’s dead?” That’s a surprise, at least. Tsunade had half-thought the old bastard would live forever, if only to spite his numerous enemies.

Sarutobi nods. “A heart attack, the examiners tell me.”

She doesn’t need to be a Yamanaka to read the thought behind that. “But you think differently.”

That earns her a wry smile. “I am old, Tsunade, not a fool. It was a heart attack, of that I’m sure, but the cause is what I would debate. Danzo was old as well, but he was as healthy as a horse and hardly at risk for such a thing. Add to that the fact that with his death we’ve uncovered several dozen entirely traumatized and brainwashed Root operatives, and, well… I think foul play is far more likely a scenario.”

Tsunade mulls this over for a moment, thoughtfully tapping her fingers against the ceramic of the cup. She remembers, again, Kurama’s words to her in the middle of that lonely road.

Konoha needs your strength. Please, I know you’ve been living in the wake of a tragedy for a long time now, but can’t you see that Konoha is worth more than that? You brother and your lover both gave everything for it, so that those living there could have a home. So preserve their dream. Preserve the village they worked so hard to save.

She’d given both of them her blessing, her support for their dreams. She’d kissed them both on the forehead and told them to work hard. And they had, so very much so. Nawaki and Dan both chased their dreams until the very end, wholehearted and unwavering no matter the odds. For years now Tsunade has dismissed that goal they shared as a fool’s dream, useless and suicidal, but now—

Blue eyes unwavering, red hair like a tempered flame, an expression of cool, steely resolve only just buried beneath a veneer of respect. Tsunade closes her eyes and smiles to herself, just a little. She thinks of Nawaki and then she thinks of Dan, both beautiful and dear.

Isn’t it better to make sure that your sacrifices weren’t in vain? Shouldn’t you protect Konoha all the more because of what you’ve given?
“Stop your hinting, old man,” she says, opening her eyes and meeting Sarutobi’s startled gaze resolutely. “I’ll take the hat.”

Some of the deep, carved lines in Sarutobi’s face ease as he slumps back into his chair, and it’s only then that Tsunade really realizes just how old and worn he really is. It’s to be expected—after all, he’s over seventy—but it’s still a shock. He’s always been her grand-uncle’s favorite student, one of the bare handful of men to hold the title God of Shinobi, their wise and untouchable sensei, and the revered Sandaime. But he’s also just a man, for all of his strength, and an aged one. Once already he’s handed off the hat, slipped happily into retirement until a tragedy called him back into service. He’s been an active shinobi longer than almost anyone else in the village, and it’s more than taken its toll.

“Thank you, Tsunade,” he says softly. “That eases my mind greatly. After the Chuunin Exams have ended, I’ll start preparations.”

“I’d forgotten about the Exams.” Tsunade glances out the window towards the Academy proper, where she can just make out the tail end of a group of students. A gaggle of jounin are gathered around a corner from the genin, grouped in twos and threes, and bright red catches her attention immediately. She hesitates, wondering, wanting—

“Go,” Sarutobi says fondly, plucking the cup from her grasp. She gives him a wry smile, because he’s always been able to read her better than anyone except perhaps Dan, but willingly rises to her feet.

“You said Naruto is a genin now?”

Sarutobi nods. “Yes, and his team is taking part in the Exam. Their jounin sensei is Hatake Kakashi. I believe he and Kurama are…close.”

Tsunade arches a brow at that, lips tightening. “Oh are they now?”

“Tsunade…”

She waves him off with a huff. “Stop it, sensei. You’ll still have a jounin when I’m through with him. But no matter how good a shinobi Kurama is, he has a fragile heart. That much was clear just looking at him. I only want to make sure the white-haired brat remembers that.”

“Yes,” Sarutobi answers drolly. “That would be what I’m afraid of, Tsunade.” But he doesn’t try to stop her as she rises and heads for the door, only pausing to give the old man a polite nod before she sweeps out.

Shizune is waiting outside the office, Tonton in her arms. She falls into step with the ease of long practice, and asks softly, “Does this mean we’re going to be staying, Tsunade-sama?”

Tsunade pauses mid-step, then turns on her heel to face her apprentice. “Do you mind?” she asks, because this is something she’d failed to consider. If Shizune, her last remaining piece of Dan, wants to leave—

“No, Tsunade-sama,” Shizune says with a quiet but bright smile. “I’ve never resented Konoha for what happened to my uncle. I’m very happy that we’re back.”

With a soft breath of relief, Tsunade returns her smile. “Good. Yes, Shizune, we’ll be staying. I told Sarutobi-sensei that I’d accept the position of Hokage.”

Shizune’s beaming smile is clear enough answer as to her feeling in the matter.
The sound of voices draws Tsunade's attention away, and she turns to see a group of jounin troop into the hall, laughing and talking. There's a general air of relief to them, and she assumes that the jounin sensei for this round of genin teams must be among them. Half a moment’s study is all it takes to pinpoint the head of crimson hair, and she heads for it without hesitation.

“Uzumaki Kurama! Where’s my case of sake?”

Kurama jerks away from his murmured conversation with Kakashi to stare at her, and just for a moment a flicker of heartbreaking joy crosses his features. Then it’s covered by a bright smile, buried under simple happiness at the arrival of a friend, but Tsunade knows what she saw.

“Tsunade-sama! You came!” The redhead slips out of the group and joins her, dipping into a quick bow.

Tsunade rolls her eyes, grabs him by his ponytail, and hauls him up into a hug. “Red. What did I tell you about hiding things?”

He’s stiff in her hold for a long, endless heartbeat, and then careful, tentative arms come up to wrap around her in return. Kurama relaxes against her with a soft sound that might be pain or gratitude, bows his head and hugs her back. Tsunade closes her eyes and smiles softly to herself, remembering Nawaki and his enthusiastic tackle-hugs, Dan and his warm strength. Kurama feels a little like both of them, lean and strong and cheerful, but with an undertone of sorrow that reminds Tsunade, more than anything, of herself.

Maybe this can help both of them.

When she lets go it’s reluctant, but she makes herself take a step back regardless, because she’s the future Hokage and people are starting to stare. Kurama smiles at her like he understands, though she doesn’t know how he could, and chuckles, raking a hand through his brilliant hair and pulling it out of its tail. It tumbles down around his face, three shades darker than Kushina’s and two brighter than Mito’s, and his blue eyes are so very, very warm.

“You’ll get your sake, you drunkard,” he promises, humor glinting bright and joyful within the blue. “After the second exam, though. I'll use my winnings to buy you the very best.”

Tsunade remembers very well the betting that goes on amongst Konoha's finest during the Exams, and shakes her head fondly. “You're that confident, Red?” But she matches his steps as he returns to his group, and nods a silent greeting to the handful of shinobi she knows. Shikaku already looks calculating, and Choza and Inoichi are clearly amused at their friend’s preoccupation as they nod back.

“Of course,” Kurama answers blithely, grinning at her sharp and foxlike. He looks entertainingly like that summons he tracked her down on. “Team 7 will win the whole thing, I've no doubt.”

He doesn’t, truly, Tsunade reflects. Just as certain as Nawaki always was, like an immovable object in the face of human doubts and fears. She smiles and, unable to resist, reaches out to scuff at his hair. “I take it this is the team with my little great-nephew on it?”

“Who else?” Kurama laughs, enduring her affection with what dignity he can. “His teammates are Uchiha Sasuke, the last loyal Uchiha, and Haruno Sakura, who’s training as a frontline medic-nin. They're all strong, and a good team.” He glances at her sideways, eyes slanting with cheerful mischief, and adds, “A very good team. Their goal is to become the next Sannin.”

Tsunade can't quite decide whether to smile or frown at that, and instead just narrows her eyes at the
redhead. “Do they know—?”

“What happened to the last Sannin? Yes, I’m sure that they do. But I don’t think they’re about to let anything tear them apart, Tsunade-sama. Not power or ambition or fear, or anything else. They’re…a good team.”

“Hmph.” Tsunade shakes her head, then gestures her apprentice up beside her. “Kurama, my apprentice, Shizune. Shizune, my brat of a relative, distant though he might be.”

Shizune stifles a chuckle, bowing politely. “Hello, Uzumaki-san.”

“Kurama, please,” the redhead returns with a sweet smile. He’s good at those kinds of expressions, Tsunade thinks with amusement. She’ll be surprised if the brat doesn’t have a fanclub already. “Uzumaki-san makes me feel as old as Tsunade-sama.”

“Brat!” Tsunade snaps, reaching out to flick him in the side of the head. Unlike most people, though, he sees it coming and smoothly ducks aside, expression never wavering from his relentless good cheer.

“That’s not nice, Tsunade-sama. I’d say you don’t know your own strength, but I think the problem is that you know it too well.” He gives her a cheeky grin and slips behind Kakashi.

“As if that’s going to stop her.”

Tsunade stalks forward, eyes narrowing, and then lunges. Kurama dances out of the way with a graceful sidestep and two hops back, and instead of closing around his collar, her hand lands firmly in the center of Kakashi’s jounin vest.

The man’s eye widens in sudden, horrified realization.

Tsunade smirks evilly and hauls him forward, hisses, “Hurt him and you’ll see just how much I know about the human body, Hatake,” into his ear, and then casually tosses him over her shoulder, ignoring his startled yelp. Another lunge, and this time Kurama is too busy laughing at his friend to dodge her successfully, so Tsunade ends up with an armful of giggling redhead and boxes his ears ruthlessly.

“Care to say that again, Red?” she remands.

“Ow, ow, ow!” Kurama yelps, batting ineffectually at her hands.

Then, suddenly, he goes suspiciously still. Tsunade watches his eyes narrow and knows in an instant that it has nothing to do with her, or their current circumstances.

“Kurama?” she asks softly.

Kurama blinks, then looks up at her, as though surprised she’s still there. His eyes go wide, then narrow again, and he murmurs, “In Training Ground 44, where they're holding the second exam—someone just summoned Manda.”

There’s only one possible culprit. Tsunade has to consciously keep her hands from clenching into fists. “He’s after—?”

“Sasuke, as a possible body,” Kurama confirms. He glances towards the forest, then back at the Hokage’s office. “Did you tell Hokage-sama?”
Tsunade snorts, releasing Kurama, though she doesn’t step back. This conversation is better kept private, after all, and there are already eyes on them—one of the downsides of a shinobi village, where the inhabitants are generally all nosy bastards. “Hardly. Orochimaru was always Sarutobi-sensei’s favorite. It’s best to leave him out of this until the bastard is dead.” She considers for a moment, eyeing the man in front of her. “You have a plan?”

Kurama smiles at her, the expression smaller than it was a few moments ago, and ruthlessly cunning rather than joyful. “I do.”

“Then go and deal with him. I’ll stay with Sarutobi-sensei in case he gets past you,” she orders, and raises her voice to a more conversational level. “Come on, brat, we both need to talk to the Hokage. March. Shizune, entertain yourself. This might take a while.”

Obligingly, Kurama lets her drag him away, calling a quick, “Sorry, Kakashi, I’ll see you later,” as they go. The Copy-Nin looks slightly wary, and is staying well out of Tsunade's reach, but he raises a hand in acknowledgement and moves to fend off the freak in the bright green spandex bodysuit.

As soon as they're out of sight around the corner, Tsunade lets go and turns to face Kurama squarely. “Red,” she says seriously. “Are you sure about doing this?”

Kurama glances at her, then out the nearest window, and nods, his face equally grave. “Yes,” he answers simply. “I have…wanted to kill Orochimaru for a very long time now. Even if my first plan fails, I have…many.”

Because she understands fantasies about revenge very well, Tsunade lets that go. “If you get into trouble, send a summons for me.”

This time, Kurama’s smile is more genuine, deeper and brighter, and he offers her a quick salute. “As you wish, Hokage-sama,” he murmurs, and then with a flicker of chakra and the barest hint of a mischievous wink, is out the window and blurring away.

Tsunade watches him go, then spins sharply on her heel and heads for the Hokage's office, throwing open the doors with a single push. “Old man, if I'm going to be Hokage, you're going to have to put up with me looking over your shoulder all day unless you want someone who's crappy at the job.”

“Tsunade-chan,” Sarutobi sighs from where he’s surrounded by ANBU captains awaiting orders.

Tsunade just smiles beatifically and settles beside him in such a way that it practically dares him to try and move her.

She’s not going to lose anyone else. Not if there’s any way at all she can stop it.

They're a good ways into the Forest of Death, having decided to focus on speed rather than stealth or eliminating other teams. Naruto has dropped a couple of seals that will act like traps next time someone with chakra passes them, but Team 7 is aiming to beat records, not take out all opposition.

“Anyone?” Sasuke asks as they run, voice barely loud enough to be heard above the faint rustle of their footsteps.

“Not that I can sense,” Sakura reports, and Naruto's glad to see that she’s keeping pace with them well, despite her lack of stamina. She makes up for it with the way she can punch a six-inch-deep crater into solid wood, though, so it all evens out in the end.
“If they’d triggered one of my traps, we’d know,” Naruto agrees, hopping a fallen log and landing smoothly on the surface of a small river. Sakura and Sasuke land beside him, and they pause for breath. This area is a little more open than the rest of the forest, a safe enough place to take a rest as long as they keep it brief.

A moment of silence, and then Sasuke sighs and straightens, Sharingan eyes warily scanning their surroundings, but his voice is even when he says, “There are four other Konoha teams in the exam, which means there are twenty-one from other countries. We already know basic information about the other Konoha teams.”

Sakura immediately grasps what he’s saying, even as Naruto is still trying to puzzle out the implication. “Sasuke! We can’t go after teams from our own village!”

Immediately, Naruto voices his agreement. “Teme, that’s just stupid! Even if we don’t win, we want Konoha to look strong, so that means we have to let as many of our teams pass as possible.” When that earns him two startled glances, Naruto just rolls his eyes. “What?” he demands grumpily, crossing his arms over his chest. “I still wanna be Hokage someday, as long as we can become the next Sannin first. And the Hokage has to think about the village before everything else.”

Sakura giggles, but nods. “Of course. The team at the next gate over was from…Taki?”

“Three gates down was that team from Kusa,” Sasuke points out. “They won’t be used to fighting in forests, so we’ll have the advantage of familiar terrain.”

“That kunoichi with the tongue was really creepy,” Naruto objects. “Next.”

“Hm.” Sakura closes her eyes, trying to remember. “The examiner called out the gates. We were twelve, a Taki team was thirteen, a Kumo team was fourteen, the Kusa team was fifteen, Hinata’s team was sixteen… But I don’t remember more than that.”

Naruto rolls his eyes. “Sakura-chan, don’t be stupid. That’s amazing! So…which one?”

Sasuke considers carefully, red-and-black eyes narrowing as they fade back to plain black. “Kumo. They won’t have had much experience fighting in Fire Country forests, even if their country does have trees. And the Forest of Death is…definitely a Fire Country standard, if more concentrated than normal.”

“Like the leeches?” Sakura makes a face.

“Like the leeches!” Naruto agrees with a laugh.

“Can’t we just knock out Team 8?” Sasuke complains. “It would be easier. And it has Kiba.”

For a second, Naruto is definitely tempted, but he makes himself shake his head. “No,” he says firmly. “And I think you’re forgetting about Hinata-chan. Or do you want to be the one to beat her up and take their scroll?”

Sasuke grimaces. “Not particularly. But we don’t even know if the Kumo team has the scroll we need.”

A simple shrug is the only answer he gets from the blond. Sakura just smiles. “Well, if they don’t, we’ll apologize for the mistake and move on.”

“And keep the scroll?”
Her expression is unfailingly innocent. “Well, if we forget to give it back to them, that’s one more team knocked out, and we can pass it on to another Konoha team if they need it, right?”

Sasuke studies her for a long moment, then trades glances with Naruto. “I’m glad we’re on the same team. Have I mentioned that recently?”

Sakura beams and throws her arms around the boys’ shoulders, pulling them into a fond—if tight—half-hug. “Aww! I love you guys too! Now let’s go, we’ve got Kumo nin to catch.”

Naruto grins back, even though his nose is being smashed into Sasuke’s cheek and he’s breathing in pink hair. “Go with Plan E?”

Sasuke pulls back, face slightly flushed—Naruto assumes he’s out of breath from the hug. But his eyes are glittering with a savage sort of anticipation. “For Kumo nin? Our villages are practically enemies. Why not…Plan H?”

“For that…marry me, Sasuke. I’ll make a better husband than Kurama-nii could ever dream of,” Naruto answers with a wide, devious grin, and heads for the riverbank at a run. Sakura falls in on his left, Sasuke on his right, and Naruto is absolutely certain that the Kumo team will never know what hit them.

(Sasuke’s cheeks are still flushed even a good ten minutes later. Naruto’s not entirely sure why, but shoves the thought away to be considered later.)
I know it’s short, but that was the best place to leave it, I swear. *cough* No I'm not overly fond of cliffhangers what the hell are you talking about?

The Kumo team, as it turns out, is carrying an Earth scroll.

Sasuke is entirely satisfied with life right now.

Sakura makes a cheerful, contented noise as she watches Naruto seal their newly acquired scroll away, arms crossed over her chest and expression smug. “Hm. Easier than I thought it would be,” she offers, arching a superior brow at the three Kumo genin on the ground, two out cold and the last groaning faintly.

Sasuke surveys the one he took out, obviously their taijutsu specialist and no match at all for someone with the Sharingan, and then switches his gaze to Naruto’s, buried up to his chin in the ground, and then Sakura’s, the groaner, who’s sporting a black eye the size of a grapefruit and a lump on his head the size of a fist. Sakura's fist, to be precise.

“Now we head for the tower,” Sasuke says, feeling a faint thrill of satisfaction at the thought that they might actually win this, might actually manage to break records and show people that they have potential. Because he knows it, Sakura and Naruto know it, their teachers know it, but to everyone else they're still the team they were those first few weeks after graduation.

“Think we’ll be the first ones there?” Naruto asks with a grin, looking just as smug as their kunoichi teammate.

It takes great effort to keep from rolling his eyes. “Not if we don’t go,” he points out.

“We’re going, we’re going,” Sakura says exasperatedly, tugging her metal-plated gloves into place a little more firmly. “From here…west, right?”

Naruto nods, opening his mouth to add something else, but before he can something crashes in the underbrush and all three genin go stiff, spinning with their hands on their weapons. Sasuke's katana is in his grip and he’s ready to activate his Sharingan at any moment, while Sakura has dropped into her best taijutsu stance and Naruto has palmed a handful of kunai with explosive tags. They step back a little, falling into the defensive formation they’ve practiced so many times.

Another rustle, a strange hiss, and there's a flicker of white through the bushes half an instant before two fox-shapes, one massive and black and the other tall and silver, streak past the three genin with a vicious snarl and hurl themselves at the thing. A wordless roar is the response, and out of the undergrowth rises a vast white snake, too large to be anything but a summons, even in the Forest of Death.

_Summons_, Sasuke thinks, even as he falls back, drags his teammates along with him and right out of the clearing. _That means someone summoned it. Most genin can't do that, so who? And why are Kurama's summonses getting involved?_
And then the killing intent hits.

It’s like being killed, like watching his team be slaughtered around him and not being able to move. Like that night of the massacre all over again, but then it’s over, gone completely, and Sasuke finds himself shaking and sweaty and half supporting, half being supported by Naruto as Sakura clings to his other arm.

That kunoichi from Kusa is in front of them, smiling lightly, but it’s nothing like the warm expression Kurama sports when he’s distracted. This is malicious and sadistic and a promise of a painful death.

“Oh,” she says, and Sasuke’s never seen eyes that cold before. Not even Itachi’s, that night. “And here I was going to propose a battle to the death for our scrolls. But it seems as though you’ve already both of those you need. Shame.”

But something’s strange. This is a team test, but there’s no team around her. For that matter, Sasuke can’t sense any chakra nearby beyond the summonses behind them. So what is this? What’s—

“Uchiha Sasuke,” the kunoichi murmurs, and what should sound like a feminine purr is instead the low rasp of a snake sliding across dry ground. “The last loyal Uchiha. But how loyal are you really? If I tell you that I can give you the power to kill your brother, what will you do?”

Sasuke goes entirely stiff and still, breath frozen in his lungs and heart suddenly pounding in his chest. Revenge is all he’s wanted for years now, revenge and power and to slaughter the man he once loved most, but—

_Aren't you a ninja, Uchiha? Hasn't anyone ever told you to look underneath the underneath? Or do you really think that the same brother who gave you piggyback rides when you were too tired to walk suddenly snapped and killed everyone for no reason?_

No. He doesn’t think that at all. So many nights since Kurama said that to him he’s lain awake, turning the matter over and over in his mind, and he doesn’t believe that of Itachi in the least. Maybe, _maybe_ Itachi did it to test his strength, but for all the stock put in the Sharingan it was far from universal even in pure-blooded Uchiha. There weren’t _that_ many. Surely, for such a test of strength, Itachi could have killed the Hyuuga, with their handful of geniuses and strong clan heads. Or gone after the Hokage, the God of Shinobi. Or even the Sannin, scattered as they were.

But instead, he’d chosen the Uchiha clan. It’s possible Sasuke is simply grasping at the slim bit of hope Kurama offered him with those words, but…what if he’s not? What if he’s _right_?

Revenge is a base and mindless thing, and Sasuke won’t let it rule him. He’ll keep a clear head, a steady hand, and even if he’s right, even if he can't ever forgive his brother for his actions but still understands a _reason_ for them, he won’t lose sight of that.

He takes a step back, another, until his shoulders are pressed right up against Naruto’s, until Sakura's soft pink braid is brushing his arm, and meets the Kusa kunoichi’s gaze with grim and steady determination.

“I’ll tell you to get the hell out of our way,” he says with a bravado he doesn’t feel. “We have an exam record to beat.”

“Huh.” If anything, the woman looks more amused, lips pulling into a smirk that manages to look alien and eerie. “You really are brothers, aren’t you? I sense a power in your eyes, Sasuke-kun, that will surpass even Itachi’s.”

That’s enough to put Sasuke's hackles up: subtly flattering, calculated to unnerve, and delivered with
just the right amount of admiration and condescension in equal measure to make him seethe. The vast majority of shinobi are good at psychological warfare, but that—

That was the work of a master, and were he not already on guard against such things, Sasuke might have been swayed.

“Who the hell are you?” he barks out, grip tightening around his sword’s hilt even as Naruto leans in, presses against him just a little more firmly.

The woman smiles more widely, raising her hands and twisting them into a strange seal. “My name is Orochimaru—”

It’s obvious she—he means to go on, but Sasuke's heard enough. Orochimaru is a missing-nin, S-rank and incredibly dangerous, the former student of the Hokage and considered a true genius of the kind born once a generation. He leaps back, trying to put space between them, feels Naruto and Sakura flank him and sees the Snake Sannin’s eyes narrow sharply. In a rush, his head shoots forward, neck suddenly as extendable and flexible as rubber, and he’s too fast. They're too slow, only genin for all they’ve trained, all the preparation they’ve put into this exam. Sasuke watches Orochimaru’s face come closer and closer, dread in his chest because whatever this infamous missing-nin wants it likely won't be in his best interest, but—

And then Orochimaru jerks out of the way, twists to the side as his body snaps back to normal and a handful of shuriken embed themselves in the ground where he had been standing. A sudden flash of red hair and Kurama lands in front of them, crouched and ready, eyes fixed on the missing-nin and Ginkaze already in hand.

There’s a long beat of silence as Kurama rises smoothly to his feet, twisting and settling into a kenjutsu stance, katana raised in one hand and a scrap of white paper in the other. Orochimaru’s eyes narrow further, and he takes a slow, deliberate step forward.

“You,” he hisses.

From this angle, Sasuke can just make out Kurama's small, chilly smile and burning blue eyes. “Me,” he agrees, and his light tone belies the tension in his frame. “Uzumaki Kurama, bounty hunter. And I think, Orochimaru of Oto, that it’s well past time I take your head.”

Kurama, Sasuke reflects with a breathless sort of wonder that’s caught between relief and awe, is very, very good at dramatic entrances.

Laughter, high and mocking and derisive. “Boy, you would think to challenge the strongest of the Sannin? I am the very closest to immortal that anyone can come.”

Kurama’s soft snort somehow sounds very loud in the vastness of the Forest. “I’ve killed those who claimed to be immortal before,” he says flatly. “Tell me, when you were in Akatsuki, had Hidan joined? Shall I tell you all the things he spat at me as I removed his head?” His next smile is absolutely chilling. “He probably took a while to starve to death. You see, Snake, that’s the problem with people who want to be more than human. They never seem to notice just how less than human they become in the process. If you’re of the same mind, I’ll take great pleasure in showing you just how wrong you are.”

Orochimaru hisses, sharp with fury, and leaps forward, fingers flying in a jutsu that explodes away in a vast gout of flame. But Kurama is already moving, gone from that spot even as three more perfect copies of himself split away. He whirls, right in front of the Snake Sannin and fast, blindingly so, air like blades ripping away from his fingers. The seals on his arms are glowing, just faintly, bits of
Indigo and glittering black falling away as he swings around in a scything kick that trails water, liquid that spins out in a thundering vortex. It slams full-force into an earthen wall that springs up at Orochimaru’s gesture, but both shinobi are already on the other side of the clearing.

Ginkaze flashes, brilliant in the half-light, again and again, a silver streak that Orochimaru only just manages to avoid as he flicks jutsus at the redhead, who dodges like they’re merely dancing. There's wind coating the blade, a bare edge of it visible, but when Orochimaru dodges at the last moment and the katana glances over the trunk of a tree, it leaves a gouge behind it that Sasuke could likely fit his whole arm into.

They fly up into the branches, Orochimaru seeking the higher ground and Kurama pursuing relentlessly, and Kurama is just the faintest bit faster than his opponent, a touch quicker and more agile for all that Orochimaru can bend like his bones have vanished. He catches the Snake Sannin in the gap between branches, presses him back with his sword and another angry rush of water and then spins in through the dancing droplets, eyes blazing blue and hair glowing like embers, death carved into the tight lines of his expression. Ginkaze strikes, and Orochimaru blocks with a kunai, and just for an instant they’re face to face with maybe three inches between them.

Kurama smiles.

Faster than Sasuke has ever seen him move, so fast that it blurs into nothing but a streak of black inked seals and golden skin, Kurama lashes out with his left hand and the scrap of paper that’s still there. Too fast to dodge, again, and Orochimaru screams when the seal there sears into his flesh with a crackle of angry violet chakra. He falls back, clutching his shoulder, but Sasuke's attention is only on Kurama and the vicious, painful satisfaction carved into his face.

“That,” he says, so low and fierce it’s more like distant thunder than the voice of a man, “was for the man I loved, who you took away from me.”

Sasuke's breath catches, because that wild look is grief, but aged and tempered and built upon, the kind that smolders rather than festers, outlasts ages and enemies and other loves. It’s…terrifying.

Orochimaru is breathing raggedly, hand pressed over the seal, but he snarls, “Boy! What have you done?”

Kurama bares his teeth at him, savagely satisfied. “Bound your soul to that body,” he replies, his tone deceptively light and sweet. “I hope you're fond of it, Orochimaru, because you'll never get another one. No more switching bodies, no more hopping from one to another. Do you know how long it took me to design a seal like that? To make something that you'll never be able to counter? And yet, every moment I spent on that thing is worth it.”

A wordless scream of rage is his answer, and Orochimaru explodes forward, jutsus flying from his fingers too fast to see, let alone counter, and Kurama falls back. He’s smiling even as fire scorches his skin, as wind cuts deep into his arm and lightning makes his whole body shake. The Snake Sannin is twice as vicious now, twice as deadly, and Kurama is holding his own but Sasuke can see blood in the air. For every three blocked hits, one lands, and there's little the redhead can do beyond defend.

And then, out of nowhere, a black-and-red shape streaks across the clearing and collides directly with Kurama, knocking him away. Kurama's eyes widen sharply, and a single choked sound is all he manages before the unfamiliar nin disappears into the trees.

Run, Sasuke thinks he was trying to say, and feels a chill settle into his bones.
Something rumbles through the air, getting louder and louder, until Orochimaru throws his head back, laughter ringing bright and contemptuous through the forest. “Ah, little boy, it’s always best to keep track of all your enemies,” he gloats, and turns to favor the three genin with a nasty grin. “Now. Where were we, Sasuke-kun?”

There’s an S-class fight taking place in the Forest of Death.

Kakashi feels the chakra in the air, feels it explode like a bomb from within the testing grounds, and knows in an instant that this is no fight between genin. Not unless someone snuck a couple of kage in under some damned good henges.

He tenses, freezes in place halfway between the Academy and Konoha proper, and then spins, eyes darting towards the Forest, just in time to see a surge of violet light rise above the treetops and then retreat.

At his side, Genma makes a noise like a wounded tiger. “What,” the tokujo says darkly, “are the odds that he’s safe with Tsunade-sama and there's just some other S-class shinobi with purple chakra?”

Kakashi gives him the look that deserves, even as Raidou mutters, “Sucker bet. Pass.”

“Go,” he orders the two tokujo. “Get to the Hokage and make sure he’s safe.”

“And you?” Raidou asks, though the look in his eyes says he already knows.

With a grim smile, Kakashi turns on his heel and calls up his chakra. “My team’s in there,” he says simply. “And Kurama. Where do you think I’m going?”

A shunshin takes him almost to the edge of Training Ground 44, and then another takes him into it. The scent is clear, Team 7 making no attempt to hide, and regardless the fight ahead is like a beacon, putting out enough chakra to kill most shinobi twice over. Pulse beating a relentless tattoo underneath his skin, heart a too-large lump of lead pounding futilely in his chest, Kakashi runs. He passes a genin team, a boy with hair as read as Kurama's who's watching with wide, flat eyes, but pays them no mind.

All he can think about is Naruto, with his father’s heart and his mother’s vivacity and a shining brilliance all his own; Sasuke, so strong and usually solemn but with flashes of humor and hope like quicksilver and heat lightning; Sakura and her immense strength and steady heart, her common sense and grounding personality.

Kurama, with his big heart and warm smiles and quiet, unwavering power, the grief in his eyes that only rarely wins out against the brightness. So much brightness, too, so very much that it spills over like water from a fountain, sweeping over all those nearby in a warm and comforting flood to sweep away worries and troubles.

He can't lose them.

Won't lose them.

(It will break him utterly, if he does.)

Something explodes ahead of him, hot and dry like fire, and Kakashi redoubles his pace. He bursts into the fight just in time to see Kurama go flying back, slamming into a thick tree hard enough to
leave a dent in the wood, and doesn’t hesitate. Chidori crackles to life like a thousand crying birds, and Kakashi lunges towards the figure in the middle of the clearing, a man in a black cloak with red clouds and an orange mask.

It should be impossible to dodge. Chidori is an assassination technique, deadly and so very, very swift, perfected over years of missions in and out of ANBU, the only technique Kakashi has that he invented himself. It’s a good one, practically flawless outside of the amount of chakra that it requires, but that’s fine, it doesn’t matter. He’s never, ever needed to use it twice in a row before.

But the man turns, and in the bare half-heartbeat before he strikes Kakashi can make out the glitter of a red-and-black eye in the dimness.

The man steps aside, as only a Sharingan-user could, and instead of his chest the Chidori plows into a tree and shatters it with a scream of wood and chakra.

His back is open, unprotected, and Kakashi can hear the rush of approaching footsteps even if he can’t turn in time to meet them. He tries regardless, twists around with a kunai in hand and a snarl on his lips, and is just in time to get a face-full of red hair as Kurama throws himself in between him and the oncoming shinobi. Blades sing as they meet, kunai and katana, and the masked man makes a wordless noise of rage.

“Hi, honey,” Kakashi says lazily, eying their opponent carefully and then reaching up to pull his hitai-ate out of the way. “How’s your day going?”

Kurama makes a sound that’s a little too breathless to be laughter, but that tries regardless. “Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura,” is what he says, though. “They’ve been cornered—Orochimaru—I don’t think he’ll kill them but he wants Sasuke and—”

There’s no choice in the matter; Kurama looks battered and weary and he’s brought out something that looks suspiciously like Sage Mode, but he’s also a trained shinobi and an S-class fighter, and the genin are facing one of the Sannin alone.

“Right,” he says, and makes to leap away.

But before he can, another figure is there, a man in an ANBU uniform and crow mask that Kakashi knows belongs to a kunoichi named Mio, with long black hair pulled into a loose tail. He’s carrying a katana as well, and one streaking blow from it has the orange-masked man leaping backwards.

“I will see to my brother,” the false ANBU says. “Orochimaru has been weakened, and will be easy to handle.”

Kakashi stiffens because he knows that voice. He makes to move, but a gentle hand on his chest stops him in his tracks. Kurama flicks him a quick-darting glance, and then inclines his head to the brunet. “Thank you, Itachi-san,” he says. “Please, go quickly.”

The traitor, the murderer of his entire clan, inclines his head and blurs away.

“Kurama?” Kakashi asks sharply, because he knows Kurama wouldn’t put Naruto or Sakura or Sasuke in danger, but Itachi slaughter his own family, and—

“There’s more to what happened that night than people have been told,” Kurama answers softly, and then raises his voice. “Isn’t that right, Tobi? Or should I call you Madara right now?”

A low, rough chuckle is his response, and the man disappears completely. Kakashi spins, all senses open, but he’s gone as if he never existed at all, not even a trace of chakra, and it’s—
He brings his kunai up just in time to block, but a second later something grabs his ankles. Before he can so much as shout he’s overwhelmed, buried by a sudden rush of roots and branches that bear him to the ground, snarling and fighting as he goes. Kurama cries out his name, and then yelps, and the coppery scent of blood leaks into the air as metal meets metal again. Two jutsus crash together, water and fire meeting with a steaming, searing hiss, and then chakra flickers again and the man is gone.

Kakashi tears at the roots holding him, winding around his neck and squeezing every last bit of breath from him, his heart in his throat when he realizes that even the two-to-one odds mean absolutely nothing when they can never land a hit. And Kurama is still out there, still fighting while Kakashi is trapped. If he dies, then it will be the end of so very much, and all of it good.

That chakra flicker, strangely familiar but at the same time nothing Kakashi has felt before, and a rush of footsteps. A cry, all bravado and challenge, and a clang of sword on kunai, another rush of fire, and then—

The sickening, unmistakable sound of tearing flesh, the metallic reek of spilling blood, so much, too much for anything less than a grave wound, and then a breathless sort of pained noise.

Kurama, Kakashi thinks as the world darkens and begins to swim. Kurama.

Then everything is gone, and only blackness remains.
Reminiscence

Kurama remembers, with an aching sort of clarity, how the whole idea came about.

It was a joke. A bad one, muttered without thought—by Kurama-who-was-still-Naruto, of course, because there are some things he has outgrown and others he never will—in a moment of frustration. He’d been studying his father’s Hiraishin seal, trying to dissect all the ridiculously and needlessly complicated layers the man had added. The Hiraishin went beyond a simple transportation seal; it was anchored in time and space, designed to be instantaneous, and Naruto had been beating his head against it for weeks now.

“Argh,” he’d muttered, tossing the papers down on the ground next to him and dragging his hands over his face. “Freaking hell, by the time I'm done with this I'll know enough about space-time fuinjutsu to pretty much rewind time. Gah, my father was a genius, but he was also an idiot.”

But rather than the dry comeback he expected, there was only silence from Sasuke. Naruto had blinked in surprise and dropped his hands, because normally Sasuke never missed an opportunity to make fun of him, and looked across the small fire to where his partner was sitting.

Sasuke looked rather like he’d been struck by lightning.

“Teme?” he had asked, almost tentatively, because that was the expression Sasuke wore when he’d just worked out a new application for the Sharingan or understood the enemy’s movements.

Sasuke had stayed silent for a long moment, the fire casting flickering shadows across his face. They’d been alone, traveling between resistance camps, because Konoha had only fallen that year and they still thought there was hope of winning, of things going back to the way they’d once been. Tsunade and Sakura were newly dead, and Obito and Kakashi were still alive, and of the Konoha Twelve only Sasuke, Naruto, Hinata, Lee, and Shikamaru had remained.

And then, as soft as a whisper, Sasuke had asked, “Can you?”

“Huh?”

Dark eyes had met his, steely and steady and with a touch of incredulity to them, as though Sasuke couldn’t believe he was the one asking this. “Rewind time,” he said slowly. “Do you… Could you?”

Naruto's kneejerk reaction had been to scoff and say no. But at the very last moment, he had sealed his lips around the words and taken a breath, forcing himself to consider it.

“…Maybe?” he had allowed at last, dragging his fingers through hair that had still been blond, and only remembering when a piece or ribbon slithered down his fingers that it had been tied back. “I—the seal itself would have to be huge. Like, the size of a pond, to get enough detail in. And—just the sheer amount of chakra it would require makes it next to impossible. I’d have to pull from natural chakra, and even normal natural chakra wouldn’t be enough. But…maybe if I tied it in with…star movements, or something? I don’t know, Sasuke! It’s insane.”

Sasuke hadn’t denied that, and he had subsided. But his eyes had stayed thoughtful, and Naruto had known the subject wasn’t dropped.

And Sasuke had convinced him, in the end. After years of fighting and even more losses, after Kakashi being tortured to death and Obito sacrificing his chance at being reunited with his team, being sealed away so he could keep fighting against Madara, after Sasuke's encounter with one of
Madara’s engineered soldiers left him with a faint cough that turned deadly, after the Kyuubi’s final sacrifice—

Well. Naruto had been fairly easy to convince, at that point.

There’s no time to think, no time to plan, only instinct and the edge of finely honed terror giving clarity to his senses. Naruto has been told not to be reckless, has been reminded of it so many times since he was born, but sometimes recklessness is the only way to move forward. If he thinks about it, about their situation and Kurama being dragged away and no one coming, he’ll freeze.

So Naruto does the reckless thing, calls up his chakra—vast, vaster in his fear and ferocity, edged with something angry but he doesn’t have time to think about that now—and charges forward.

Sakura cries out, but to her credit—to their credit as a team—she’s following half a second later, Sasuke at her elbow and her gloved hands glowing faintly green. Sasuke has put away his sword in favor of a handful of shuriken—smart, because Orochimaru’s kenjutsu is far above the level of a genin, even one that fights like a chuunin—and a faint glitter that Naruto suspects is ninja wire. It’s the next best thing to suicidal, what they’re doing, but Naruto can’t see any other way. If they run, Orochimaru will chase them, and more than likely outpace them. If they try to hide, he’ll find them. So fighting, loud and large and messy enough to hopefully gain the attention of someone with the brains to notice that this isn’t just a genin match, is their only hope. All they have to do is last.

A lot easier, Naruto thinks grimly, even as he feels his determination settle like steel in his soul, to say than do.

“Raiton: Sparking Needle!” he cries, and the jutsu crackles as it leaves his fingers. Not Fuuton, which is still his best, but misdirection and underestimation will give them their chance. Let Orochimaru think they’re all weaker than they actually are and he might get sloppy and overconfident, might give them an opening that they can use it.

Orochimaru bats the electricity away with a wave of his hand and a ripple of wind. His mouth opens, like he’s going to gloat, like he can’t resist. Naruto knows then that this will work, knows that the Snake Sannin is thinking of them as a simple genin team, not a threat at all to anything beyond his patience.

But they’re going to be the next Sannin, a real team of Sannin that won’t ever break apart to treachery and time.

Naruto ducks under a sword-hand strike, leaps back, and raises his fingers to his lips. “Katon: Great Fireball!”

This time, Orochimaru actually steps back, the very faintest retreat, but it’s victory enough to make Naruto’s heart pound. And, just as they’ve practiced, out of the wake of the fire Sasuke emerges, a shuriken flying from his fingertips with startling speed. He leaps to the side, hurling a kunai to follow just as Sakura whirls in, lashing out with hands that are aimed to sever muscles and tendons. Orochimaru evades her easily, clearly practiced in fighting a medic-nin, and slips around Sasuke’s kunai.

Right into another face-full of fire as Naruto cries, “Katon: Mist Waltz!” and blows out a stream of explosive mist.

Orochimaru’s eyes widen faintly and he leaps back again, three more steps, another, and—
Sasuke skids to a halt on the tree branch above, plants his feet, and yanks hard on the ninja wire in his hands and clenched between his teeth.

A handful of long black locks float to the ground, drifting lazily. A dodge, but only just.

“**Brats**,” Orochimaru growls around the shuriken in his mouth, dark eyes narrow and angry, but Sasuke just smirks at him in response, hands coming up in a quick sign.

“**Katon: Dragon Fire**.”

Flames race over the wire, burning bright and hot, even as delicate hands close around Orochimaru’s ankles and pull him down. Not far, not fast, but just enough to be a distraction as Naruto brings his hands up and calls, “**Fuuton: Wind Cutter!**”

Blood splatters over the ground, crimson and shocking, and Naruto wastes no time falling back, eyes on the Snake Sannin and hands ready to form another jutsu but feet carrying him back and away as fast as possible. Sasuke leaps down from the trees to join him, catching Sakura's hand as she rises from the ground and pulling her along as well. It’s still a long way to the tower, with far too many opportunities to get caught, but there’s always a chance that if they head in that direction someone will notice, or Kurama will have time to defeat his opponent and come back for them.

Naruto doesn’t fool himself into thinking they can win this, but as genin facing down one of the Sannin, survival is more than victory enough.

And then the earth rumbles, walls rising to block their path, and behind them a thousand white snakes hiss and writhe, carpeting the ground as they surge forward.

**No, Naruto thinks, half-desperate and half-furious. Not now. Not like this.**

But there's no time for a jutsu, no time to evade. The snakes are less than five yards away and Orochimaru is behind them, face a mask of fury and one arm severed at the elbow. Instead of the greed that was in his gaze before, now there's only a dark sort of retribution, and Naruto is absolutely certain that look means death. But he won't give up—never, ever, ever—so he throws himself in front of his teammates, the same way Sasuke did for him in Wave, ready to take whatever blows will give them time to escape or counter.

But just before the first snake reaches him, a wave of fire gouges into the ground in front of them, deep and hot, and a figure in an ANBU uniform lands beyond it, facing Orochimaru. Vaguely through the heat haze Naruto can make out a man’s broad shoulders, a tail of black hair just about as long as Kurama's and loosely tied back. The ANBU only pauses for a moment, surveying the scene and meeting Orochimaru’s startled gaze, and then his fingers flicker into a sign obscured by his body.

“**Mangekyo**,” he murmurs, and behind him Naruto can feel Sasuke go stiff and still. “**Amaterasu.**”

Orochimaru screams.

He’s in the shadows, so it takes Naruto a moment to pick out what’s happening, but when he does it’s—

**Well. Horrifying.**

Sasuke's hand closes around his arm, and Naruto is more than relieved to turn away from the black flames melting Orochimaru’s flesh right off his bones. He faces his friend, his best friend, to find that Sasuke's face is even paler than normal. His grip is impossibly tight, bruising, and there's an edge of horrified indecision mixed with rage and terror to his expression. Naruto goes stiff, grabbing Sasuke's
hand in return and stepping closer, and somehow this feels more terrifying than sacrificing himself to buy them time. Because it’s Sasuke and if anyone has ever been a pillar in Naruto’s life, it’s this boy, enemies or friends or—or anything else, Sasuke’s pretty much always been there, and this expression—

It’s new. It’s strange, and Naruto hates with an almost startling passion that anyone can make Sasuke look like this.

“Sasuke?” Sakura asks softly, stepping up beside them with her green eyes full of worry. Naruto glances at her, trying to share his confusion, and then back at the Uchiha between them. He’s shaking, just the finest tremor in his muscles, but it’s enough to throw Naruto entirely off balance. Sasuke is their competence, their confidence. In the same way that Naruto is their recklessness and bravado, Sakura their common sense and practicality, Sasuke is always steady and in control.

The fires in front of them die down, both the normal flames and the black ones, leaving behind only ash and the stomach-churning scent of charred meat. Half-turning to keep one eye on the ANBU, Naruto is startled to find him looking at them.

No. Looking at Sasuke.

With a faint growl that comes from deeper inside of him than simply his instincts, Naruto shifts to block the man’s line of sight, and meets the stare of that crow mask with a defiant sort of confidence when he really just feels shaken.

Sannin. We faced down the Snake Sannin and survived.

But this here and now is more important, and Naruto shoves that thought down for later celebration. He lifts his chin, squares his shoulders, and is just about to speak when—

“So this is your team, otouto.”

Sasuke makes a noise that’s somewhere between a snarl and sound of pain. “Don’t call me that,” he hisses, gripping Naruto’s elbow even more tightly. “You have no right.” At that, Sakura’s mouth tightens in the way Naruto has come to learn means she’s getting ready to punch holes in trees, and she takes another step forward.

Because this is Uchiha Itachi, and Naruto might not be great at history, but he knows that name. He’s heard it spoken in whispers, in warning tones sharp with dread and horror, in the darkest corners of the village. Murderer, it means, kin-slayer, genius, prodigy, psychopath, killer. Brother, to Sasuke. Betrayer.

There’s a long, tense moment of silence, and then Itachi inclines his head and takes a step back, another, another still. His sandals crunch lightly in the ashes, and Naruto can’t restrain a wince. “Very well,” the man says evenly. “I believe the three of you have an exam to complete and a record to surpass. I will report what has happened here to the Hokage. He will doubtless wish to know your version of events once you reach the tower.”

Sakura sucks in a sharp breath, and Sasuke makes a low, wounded sound. Naruto blinks and tries to parse that last statement, tries to understand what they’re seeing that he missed. Itachi saved them, and now he’s reporting back. He’s a missing-nin, but he’s planning to go to the Hokage directly, which means…

Which means that the Hokage already knows about him.

Which means that he’s either no longer a missing-nin—and surely Sasuke would have been told
about such a thing—or…

Or the Hokage knows about him, in that he knows something about the massacre that no one else does.

Conspiracy, Naruto thinks with dawning understanding, matched only by the rising nausea at the concept. Something here is a conspiracy, but…what?

Silence again, this time faintly satisfied as black-and-red eyes regard them through the narrow eye-holes, and then Itachi inclines his head and steps away, vanishing in a whirl of leaves and dust.

The moment he’s gone, Sasuke crumples to his knees, breathing hard, and drags Naruto down with him. He’s still shaking, but right now Naruto can't tell if it’s from fear or horror or even holding himself back from attacking the brother who slaughtered his clan. Sakura kneels with them, one hand on Sasuke's shoulder, the other on Naruto’s, and if her grip is a little too tight as well—

Naruto's hardly about to say anything. Not when he can feel himself shaking, clinging, desperate for their connection just like his teammates.

Too close, he thinks, and swallows. It feels like choking down a ball of iron lodged in his throat, but when it settles in his stomach it feels like stubborn, unyielding conviction. I'm never letting it get that close again. No matter who our opponent is. We'll be better. We will.

The last time they had faced Madara head-on, it had been clear and beautiful and the sun had been high, warming a dead and barren landscape. Kurama-who-had-still-been-Naruto and Obito had led Madara back through Fire Country, right back into the ruins of what had once been Konoha. It wasn’t on purpose so much as them taking a chance, creating a distraction so that Sasuke, Yamato, and Shikamaru could take out a large portion of Madara's supply route in one blow. They had simply been bait, tempting enough that Madara had bitten and taken it even though it was obvious what they were.

Obito had Kamui, after all, and Naruto had Kurama.

They had played the game of cat and mouse across mountains and through forests, letting themselves be herded and harried, secure in their conviction that Obito could spirit them away from the fight at any moment. Naruto had (stupidly, stupidly) not remembered the date. He’d thought nothing of it, because every day there was a loss to overcome, a comrade to be remembered. But some days were worse than others, and when Madara had finally cornered them amidst the ruins of their former home, it had been with a mocking laugh and a sly smile and a cruel, cruel taunt.

“Come to join the Hatake brat, Obito-kun? And on the anniversary of his departure, too. How sweet of you. Almost as sweet as the way he screamed and begged for you to save him, that day. One year now, isn't it?”

Naruto had growled and clenched his fists and held himself back, recognizing the goad for what it was. Kurama had stirred inside him, and his chakra had flared red around the edges, but he had contained himself.

But Obito, Obito had always had a terrifying edge of fragility to his sanity, a flaw in the delicate glasswork structure of his reason. He’d been broken too many times, haphazardly patched back together with whatever was at hand—first by Madara and Zetsu, then by Madara again, and then by Kakashi when the first war against Madara was done. But like a ceramic figurine absentmindedly
repaired with patchy glue, the weaknesses were all too evident, too easy to find and twist apart again. And no one was better at breaking him than Madara.

Obito had rushed his ancestor, screaming his fury, his shakujo’s rings chiming wildly as he swung it without control. Naruto had leapt for him, tried to haul him back only to be knocked away.

And Madara had killed him underneath that blue, blue sky, driven a kunai right through Obito’s spine and severed it. Even if Sakura had been alive, she would have been hard-pressed to fix such a thing, and she was years dead by then. Their best medic-nin was a poor imitation, second-rate but their only choice, and Naruto had hauled Obito away too late, tried to get him to activate Kamui and take them back to her, back to help.

Instead of the resistance camp, they’d landed in a stream many miles from Konoha’s ruins, underneath a heavy overhang of trees unmarred by fire or ash. Obito had cried out when they hit, breathless and in agony, and Naruto had known then that it was far too late for any help at all.

“No,” he had whispered anyway, Obito sprawled out across his legs and turning the slow-moving water to cloudy red as he bled out. “No, no, no. Obito, don’t do this. You can’t. You’re our best chance of defeating Madara, come on, come on, wake up.”

A single red-and-black pinwheel eye had opened lazily, stared up at him cloudy with pain but still lucid, and Obito had smiled. It was a terrible thing, bloodstained and broken and so very, very resigned. “Then keep me with you,” he had rasped, barely words at all but still understandable in the eerie hush, pressing his hand against Naruto’s stomach. “Keep—”

His voice had failed, but Naruto had understood, had taken that last request and obeyed it even though he knew it was a terrible fate. He’d written the seal in blood over his wrist, burned it into place with chakra and will, and then he’d drawn the same one on Obito even as the Uchiha’s heartbeat dwindled into nothingness.

One last beat, then silence, and then a light as blue as the sky above.

When it faded, the body was nothing but an empty shell, and yet another friend had been imprisoned inside Naruto’s body. No passing on, no way to rejoin his old team, but he’d made the choice himself to stay and fight.

Naruto tried—still tries, a different person in a different time and a different place—not to be too grateful for the avoidance of yet another loss, but in that at least he’s always failed.

(Obito never speaks of it, and Kurama has never been brave enough to bring it up.)

The seal on his wrist throbs and burns like an open wound, black and violet chakra dancing across the lines as he circles Tobi, tries to keep him in sight and get to Kakashi at the same time. Natural chakra thrums around him, heavy and uplifting at the same moment, carried on the web of power that connects Kurama to his summons. Ren and Yuri are the Elders, the Sages for the fox summons, and he knows they’re watching, ready to come to his aid if he has even half an instant to call them, but Kurama knows that if Tobi truly wishes to end this they won’t be in time.

His ears, as sharp in this form as any fox’s, can pick up the choked breath coming from beneath Tobi’s root trap, the sudden dwindling of struggles that means Kakashi is fighting for any air at all. His jaw clenches, and he tightens his grip on Ginkaze, surreptitiously resettling his feet. Tobi’s last slash caught him across the chest, deep and oozing blood, and Kurama knows it will become a
problem if this fight goes on any longer. They’ll have a lot of problems if this fight keeps going, because Tobi is absolutely overwhelming to clash with at the best of times, but now?

He’ll eat them both for breakfast.

Another spark from the seal on his wrist, a sudden rush of careful/wariness/maybeachance?/payattentionidiot/winwinwinwinwinwin. Kurama presses his fingertips against it, feeling the rush and blaze of power contained within the sleek curves and narrow lines, and breathes out in a long, slow stream.

Tobi has Kamui, and there's only one way Kurama is going to be able to get close enough to end this.

It’s a chance, a reckless risk, but it’s one he’ll have to take.

Another half a heartbeat and Tobi is gone, vanished in the familiar flicker. Kurama has sparred with Obito, though, knows in a vague way how his mind works, and spins. Tobi is on the other side of the clearing, undoubtedly readying a jutsu, but Kurama doesn’t give him time to use it.

He runs, hurls himself forward as fast as Sage Mode lets him move, and barely hears the cry —distraction, distraction, startle him and he won't move as fast—that tears from his lips as Ginkaze collides with a kunai and sends up sparks. Tobi leaps back, further, further, and a warping spiral of flames spins forward. Kurama twists through it, calling up a wave of water around him and filling the clearing with thick white steam. Through it he catches half a glimpse of a red and black cloak, the edge of a familiar figure, and lunges.

Tobi turns, kunai flashing, and at the very last moment Kurama sees it coming and drops Ginkaze to his side. The small blade catches him in the stomach, tearing through flesh with a sharp punch and a rush of blood and an explosion of agony that leaves him heaving, shaking, and dizzy as he all but collapses over Tobi’s shoulder.

There's a sound of vicious satisfaction against his ear, but Kurama ignores it.

He smiles, just faintly, and presses his blood-wet fingertips against the bare skin at Tobi’s nape.

A flicker of light, a crackle of violet chakra as a seal writes itself over his skin, and Kurama lets his eyes close as he falls away.

Done, he thinks, and then nothing else.
Obito is not a good man. Regardless of what some people—like Naruto, or Kurama, or whatever the hell he’s calling himself in this time—might think, he’s not. Really truly. Maybe once, a very long time ago, when he was just a child—but now? Here?

He’s ruined far too many dreams, stolen far too many lives for that belief to be anything but blatant falsehood.

But still. He’s better now than he has been in well over a decade. And maybe if repentant isn’t enough to redeem him, better can be.

The seal that holds him, holds the very last remnants of his soul and will and memories, is the kind that likely only Kurama could manage to create with no warning in the middle of nowhere with a dying man on his lap. It’s complex and carefully wrought, delicate and devastating in its breadth of comprehension, allowing Obito far more freedom than other seals would and some fair measure of autonomy.

So he knows the moment Kurama feeds his chakra into it, the moment that the world he’s created for himself begins to bleed and warp and change. He feels it like silk sliding against his skin, the transfer, the change in bodies he inhabits.

Tobi is an entirely different creature than Obito, mad and merciless and truly dark, but at the same time, they’re one soul. Regardless of personalities, the only real difference between them is time and memories, and those are bound up in the seal that houses Obito, tied to his soul so that he can never lose himself. They’re the same soul, the same person, and Kurama’s seal recognizes that.

It’s not so much overwriting that happens, really, as adding. There’s a rush of chakra, a flicker of reality warping and bending, and then Obito is alone in his body, the two separate souls seamlessly merged into one. No struggle for dominance because he’s alone in his body, with memories that Tobi didn’t have a moment ago and a form that Obito didn’t have until this second.

Being given a form again is—

Obito takes his first breath in almost six years, or three seconds depending on one’s point of view. The very first thing to hit his nose is the copper-rich reek of freshly spilling blood, and as soon as that registers he becomes aware of the slumped weight in his arms, the silken curtain of garnet hair spilling over his shoulder and matching the color of the blood seeping from a gut wound.

“Oh damn it all to fucking hell,” Obito sighs, rolling his eyes and hefting Kurama up a little more. “You’re a fucking moron, brat. Really, this was your grand plan? I thought we talked about your self-sacrificing streak. Idiot.”

There’s no answer, of course, unless Obito’s willing to count severe bleeding. He restrains another eye-roll—and fuck but it’s weird to have two eyes again, when he hasn’t since Madara reclaimed his in the first war—because they just tend to amuse the red-headed brat, and lowers himself and his burden to the ground.

“Ohka!” he calls, knowing that if they’re close enough her sharp ears will pick it up, and if they’re not, one of the other summons doubtless can and will relay the message. “Ohka! Come save your idiot master before he bleeds out completely, please!”

Barely thirty seconds later, a grey form crashes through the bushes, and the five-tailed vixen skids to
a halt beside them, flickers of silver light already gathering around her tails. Not for the first time, Obito thanks whatever vaguely merciful higher power there is that Kurama contracted with the foxes. They are, on the whole, far more useful than the toads, who are largely fighters and nothing else. The kitsune and youko are creatures of chakra first and foremost, warriors second, and the brat needs all the help he can get to curb that stupidly reckless streak he’s always had.

“The others?” he asks Oka when he deems it safe to interrupt her concentration. The gut wound has stopped oozing, at least, and from what Obito can see through Kurama's tank top, it’s already starting to close. The vixen will likely be exhausted afterwards, and it’s the kind of thing that Kurama would never ask her to do for him, but Obito understands her sentiments more than Kurama's. Better to push oneself to the very brink and over, rather than risk losing someone precious.

“My sister is following the genin, now that Orochimaru is most emphatically dead,” Oka murmurs, deep green eyes unwavering as silver sparks crawl over her fur. “She won’t interfere unless they run into another outside force, but we thought it best to play things safe. Ran and Momiji are recovering from dealing with Manda, and Fuji is following Itachi back to the Hokage. Kaede is still with the swordsman. Everything is working out as you planned.”

This time Obito really does roll his eyes. “Except for Kurama getting a kunai to the stomach,” he mutters, wanting to smack the unconscious redhead but settling for stroking his fingers through his hair instead. “Fucking idiot.”

Oka snorts in amusement. “Likely he was worried about finishing quickly,” she says, eyes flickering briefly towards the cocoon of roots and branches that are covering Obito's old teammate. He’s leaving them in place for now, just in case Kakashi wakes up before he and Kurama can concoct a fairly convincing cover story.

Studying her patient wearily, the fox shifts away, and says, “That’s the best I can do, Obito-san. Unfortunately, I’m not very familiar with human anatomy, so it’s barely a patch job, just enough to keep his blood inside him until we can get him to a medic.”

“Yeah, good enough,” Obito mutters wryly, running a hand over his face. It’s a surprise to feel the orange mask, and he tears it off with a grimace, resenting everything that it represents. How many years did he play Madara with this thing?

Too many, regardless of the actual number.

With a savage snarl, he hurls it away, and watches with grim satisfaction as it strikes the bole of a tree and shatters into pieces. All he can remember, when he looks at it, is a mocking voice and taunting eyes, a body sprawled motionless on the rocky floor of a deep ravine. An orange book that no longer exists, a man who no longer exists, a thousand and one atrocities committed with his own hands and under the influence of his madman of an ancestor.

“Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fucking shit,” he growls, raking his fingers through his hair, because god damn it, didn’t he go through this once already?

“Your mouth is absolutely ridiculous,” a dry voice puts in, humor just covering the pained rasp to it. “Stop it, or my ears might start bleeding too.”

Obito drops his eyes to the shinobi laying with his head in Obito's lap. “Shut up,” he orders with a glower. “You are an absolute fucking idiot, and if I have grey hairs after this I am going to kill you.”

Kurama snorts and pushes himself up on one elbow, arching an expressive brow. “And you say you’re not a megalomaniacal mass-murdering psychopath anymore.”
“Not mass-murdering. Just you. Then I can die happy, you reckless, brain-dead brat. And I'm reformed, thanks.” Obito rolls his eyes before he can stop himself, checks surreptitiously to make sure that Kurama isn't about to keel over—again—and slides to his feet. The damned cloak is stifling, choking, like it’s made of the very thickest wool rather than light cotton, and he tears it off without remorse. He’s halfway tempted to toss it up in the air and hit it with a fireball jutsu, but before he can, a hand on his arm stops him.

Kurama is watching him with amusement and faint sympathy, on his feet with one hand twisted into Oka’s ruff. She’s leaning against him just as much as he is against her, though, so with a put-upon sigh and a muttered “What the hell do you think you're doing, brat?” Obito wraps an arm around Kurama's waist for support.

“Such a sap,” the redhead mutters fondly, thumping a friendly fist against his shoulder and raising his right arm. The storage seal there is glowing light violet, and as Obito watches, Kurama pulls a set of all-black shinobi clothes out of it and hands them over.

“Go,” he orders, sinking back to the ground. Oka gives a relieved huff and flops down next to him, propping her jaw up on his knee. “We’re about the same size, so those should fit. Change, some back, and we’ll set everything up.”

Slightly wary, Obito eyes Kurama for a moment. “Everything?”

That gets him a beaming smile in response. “For your return to life, of course.”

Obito should have learned long ago; with Naruto—or Kurama, or whatever the hell he wants to call himself—most of the time he’s really better off not knowing.

Sarutobi is already on edge well before his two tokujo guards burst into the office, and has been for a while. Tsunade, for all her words about learning a Hokage’s job, hasn’t paid more than passing attention to anything that’s happened, her gaze more often than not fixed out the window, in the direction of the Forest of Death. Her mere presence is suspect, too, because Sarutobi has known her since she was little girl, and he remembers very, very clearly just how hard it always was to get her to do mission reports and paperwork of any sort.

Therefore, he’s not really that surprised when a sudden surge of chakra rises from Training Ground 44, though it’s quite a bit stronger than he had expected. After all, that’s where the Chuunin Exams are taking place, and Sarutobi has witnessed—and participated in—enough S-class fights to recognize one easily. Maybe if the participants had stuck to common, low-ranked jutsus, he could have dismissed it as two very powerful genin, especially given that this batch contains the Yondaime Kazekage’s children, the Yondaime Hokage's son and Kyuubi jinchuuriki, and the genius youngest son of the Uchiha clan head. But this—

This is far beyond any genin, and moreover, both of these chakra signatures feel…familiar.

One more so than the other.

He’s on his feet the moment the shinobi’s identity registers in his mind, is just trying to decide whether he should head for the door when Tsunade takes a step in front of him, her expression equal parts grim and weary and sad.

“Sensei,” she says softly.

He meets those soft brown eyes and understands, in half a heartbeat, both why she’s here and why
she came. Orochimaru was always his pride, his genius pupil, right up until the moment he betrayed Konoha. And ever since, Orochimaru’s actions have been an ache, a wound that doesn’t heal carved deep into his heart, because he’s always wondered where he went wrong, what he did or overlooked that led to this situation.

He is the Sandaime Hokage, the God of Shinobi, but where Orochimaru is concerned, he is simply a failed mentor, and can never keep a clear head.

So he stops. Forces his feet to stillness and takes a slow, deep breath, even as Genma and Raidou burst into the room and immediately separate, Genma taking up position by the window, Raidou by the door. They don’t say anything, and as he wrestles his thoughts back under control he’s glad for it.

“The children,” he says at length, glancing into the shadows where he knows his ANBU guard team is watching. With his regular guards here, he’s free to deploy them, and silently thanks the tokujo team for being so sensible. “Create a perimeter and try to get all examinees out of range, then close in. Pull ANBU patrols if you have to, take anyone you need, but move quickly.”

But even as he speaks, a new chakra signal appears, equally strong, moving erratically and with a truly blinding speed—faster, even, than Minato's Hiraishin, Sarutobi thinks. It crashes into the battle, and then is gone a split second later, taking Kurama with it. Tsunade gasps, spinning around to face the window like she’s about to leap out and go to help, and Sarutobi is tempted to let her—because he has watched Team 7 practice, recognizes the comparatively weak flickers of chakra that rise up against Orochimaru’s sun-brilliance like fireflies in the face of a bonfire, and

Black flames, visible even from this distance as they flare over the treetops and then recede, and Sarutobi closes his eyes as Orochimaru’s chakra disappears completely.

Oh, my boy. What a crooked, misguided path you walked, to lead you here to this.

“Go,” he orders the ANBU still tense and wary behind him. “Make sure the incident is contained and that Team 7 is uninjured.”

Five black blurs, too fast to follow, and they're gone.

“Kurama,” Tsunade murmurs, eyes fixed on another section of forest, well away from Orochimaru’s fight. Chakra is still flaring, but not as powerfully, as though the two combatants are testing the waters rather than diving headfirst into a battle. Another flare, this time familiar as Kakashi joins the battle, and then—

Tsunade's breath catches in her throat, and Sarutobi can see her eyes go wide, her face drain of blood as that violet chakra flickers and then dwindles, like water running down a drain.

“No,” she whispers, and when she leaves the office at a run, Sarutobi doesn’t try to stop her. He doesn’t quite understand the connection those two have, so soon after their first meeting, but he knows that expression on Tsunade’s face, knows that when she commits herself to something she does so wholeheartedly and without hesitation, and this shows all the signs.

“Good luck,” he murmurs, to an office empty of all but himself and his two stalwart guards, but then suddenly there's another presence slipping in through the window, and Sarutobi is entirely resigned to unexpected appearances today. This one, at least, is both welcome and not an enemy.

“Team 7 won't need it, Hokage-sama,” the crow-masked ANBU says, faint amusement in his tone. “I believe they are relying on skill and teamwork, instead.”
Because Itachi would hardly be looking so levelheaded if his little brother was in danger, Sarutobi allows himself to relax faintly. “Team 7 is well, then, I take it?” he asks, moving back to his seat behind the desk.

Itachi inclines his head. “Yes, Hokage-sama. When I arrived, they had already managed to sever Orochimaru’s arm and were in the process of retreating. I told them to continue on to the tower, seeing as they were already in possession of their second scroll.”

With a sigh that is purely relief, Sarutobi settles back in his chair and inclines his head. He isn't going to ask what happened to Orochimaru—it’s already clear, and regardless, some things are better left unsaid. But he can say, “Good job, Crow, thank you.” A slight hesitation, and he adds, “Sasuke-kun?”

When that soft voice comes again, the smile underneath the mask is clearly audible. “Ah. He…had already made his choice, when I arrived. And that choice was his team.”

Sarutobi smiles, because he remembers very well how Danzo had always warned against leaving Sasuke alive, regardless of it being Itachi’s condition. It is…satisfying, to see that such worry was unfounded. “I see. Well, should they beat the exam record, perhaps we will have to come up with a new title for them. After all, the Sannin are a broken team, and Team 7 is clearly not.” He considers for a moment, tickled by the idea, and chuckles. “Yes. For facing down one of the Sannin, for holding fast, I think they’ve earned themselves a name.”

Kakashi comes awake slowly, fighting a persistent throbbing in his head and a deep ache in throat. He’s in the open air, he can tell without even opening his eyes, out of that cage of branches, and there's a faint scorched scent lingering on the wind, ash and char and the faintest edge of melted plastic.

It’s only after a moment that the sound of voices registers, low murmurs just within range of his senses when he stretches.

“—take it you’re not going to need to use that time reversal thing again?”

“Seal, you barbarian, it’s a space-time seal, and how the hell were you a student of Konoha’s greatest fuinjutsu master when you can't even get the terminology right—”

“Yes, alright, I get it, your seal, then. Happy with this set of circumstances?”

An aggrieved sigh, a rustle of cloth and hair, and Kurama bemoans, “You say that like it’s easy to jump through time, when I had to tie the thing to goddamned star movements to get enough chakra. Do you have any idea how difficult that is?”

“I'm fairly certain you're going to tell me regardless of whether I want to know or not. And no more picking on my language, brat, you're just as bad.”

“Because you're infecting me!”

“Breathe, brat, you're turning purple. Oka, are you sure you patched him up all the way?”

Kakashi loses the thread of the conversation there, but that’s fine, because pieces to a puzzle he hadn’t even known existed are snapping into place, sliding together to form a complete and startling picture that should be blindingly confusing but instead just makes sense.
Oh, Kakashi thinks, a little dazedly. I see now.

It’s possible he wanders in and out of incredulity for a little while, because even knowing Minato and his incredibly complex, beautifully intricate seals, time travel is still a new concept, and a fairly large one to wrap his head around. And—

Kurama is from another time. Past? Future? He’s young but he knows about Uzushio. Though, as far as that goes, he’s also uncannily good with Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura.

Do I really want that answered? Not really, honestly.

So either he’s a cradle-robber or a grave-robber. Wonderful.

Neither thought sits well with Kakashi, so he pushes the matter out of mind and tunes back in.

“—many times do I have to call you an idiot before it gets through to you? Fucking brat—oh. Oi, Bakashi, how long are you just going to lie there and play dead?”

Kakashi’s breath catches in his chest, as sharp and painful as a dagger to the gut because only one person has ever, ever called him that. He wrenches upright, all thoughts of time-travel and Kurama’s age completely obliterated by the sight of the man sitting in the middle of the clearing.

He’s not tall, only about Kurama’s height, with spiky, untamable black hair and deep scars carved into the right side of his face. Two eyes, both Uchiha-black but bright with a humor most of the clan would’ve have known if their lives depended on it. Wry mouth, not open and shouting but curled in a fond half-smile that’s edged with mocking affection.

Scars carved into the right side of his face.

Kakashi stares, unable to catch his breath, unable to move so much as a muscle, because—

“Obito?” he whispers, and then can’t think of a single solitary other thing to say.

The man smiles at him, the mockery edging out until it’s pure affection, warm and bright. “Yeah, Kakashi,” he answers, rising to his feet in a smooth, graceful movement Obito as a child never could have managed. But it—it fits his frame, his lean muscles and lithe poise, and Kakashi wants to cry because this is the shinobi he always thought Obito could have been, if not for a stupid sacrifice saving Kakashi’s life that day.

There’s no pause for questions as to how he survived, no hesitation, no waiting. Kakashi is on his feet and across the clearing before he can consider any other choice of action, though he doesn’t think he would even if he could. He grabs Obito, feels warm skin beneath his fingers—solid, solid, not a ghost or a chakra impression or something else, solid and real—and drags him forward, wraps his arms around the man who’s been his best friend since his death and now can be his best friend in life as well, not a dream and a halfhearted wish but a reality.

Arms come around him in return, slightly more tentative but just as tight, and Kakashi can feel the resonance between the pair of eyes they share, the twin Mangekyo split between them. There’s no doubt, then, that this is Obito.

Obito is alive.

“Bakashi,” he hears, murmured right into his ear and rough with choked emotion. There are tear-marks on his vest, and he wants to laugh at that, wants to call Obito a crybaby ninja again but can’t because his heart feels like it’s about to explode from concentrated happiness. “You’re such a jerk.
God fucking damn it, I haven’t cried in years and you have to go and make me. You bastard—fuck Kakashi I missed you so much.”

Kurama is smiling at them, when Kakashi opens his eyes, warm and sweet and soft, and it doesn’t matter that he’s from another time, not exactly who he claims to be, because claims aside Kakashi has seen who he is, and that’s more than enough for him.

Obito lets him go reluctantly, rubbing the back of his scarred hand over his face and very determinedly not looking at anyone. With a huff, he spins on his heel and stalks back over to where Kurama is leaning back against a grey fox and watching them both, humor in his blue eyes, and throws himself to the ground. Kakashi trails after him, taking in the signs of wind and fire jutsus used in the clearing, and the burned patch of grass off to the side. There's a charred scrap of fabric fluttering away in the breeze, black with a design of red clouds, and on the edge of the blackened grass is a piece of orange mask, warped and melted until it’s nearly unrecognizable.

“Madara,” Kurama says suddenly, and Kakashi drags his gaze away from what was clearly a pyre to meet those blue eyes that have suddenly gone cold. Kurama returns the gaze, chin tilted up and jaw tight with what is clearly painful anger. “He called himself Madara. Possibly the original, possibly not, but either way he was the one controlling the Akatsuki. Obito took him out from behind while I distracted him. He’s not a threat anymore.”

Kakashi takes a seat on the grass, watching both men and recalling their easy banter. “I take it you know each other, then?” he asks a little wryly.

Obito meets his gaze, too, and reaches up to tap a finger against his scars. “Madara saved me,” he says flatly, and that emotion in his voice is a world away from gratitude. “He pulled me out of the rockslide and took me to the Mountain’s Graveyard, where he experimented on my body with Hashirama’s cells until I was the kind of creature he wanted, and then he let me go just long enough for me to see Rin commit suicide via Chidori.”

Kakashi stiffens, but forces himself to stay still. He remembers the way Obito practically worshiped their teammate, and braces himself for any sort of retaliation. It would be Obito’s due, after all, since Kakashi promised him and then broke that promise—

But instead, Obito just gives him a slightly weary, pained smile. “Stop it, Bakashi. That was a long time ago, and it was her choice, made in order to save Konoha. I just wish she hadn’t used you to do it. That was…cruel. But Madara took advantage of the situation to slap a cursed seal on me, and I was his mindless minion until Kurama broke the seal and freed me.”

Because he’s not an idiot, Kakashi hears the whole wealth of things that go unsaid in that explanation, the layers and horrors that Obito is leaving out, but for now it’s enough and he won’t push. Maybe he’ll never push, because Obito is alive and never in Kakashi’s wildest dreams was he brave enough to imagine that.

He reaches out, clasps Obito's shoulder, and tugs Kurama against his side. In the middle of a battle-scarred clearing, with the ashes of Konoha’s greatest enemy cooling behind them, Kakashi is happier than he’s ever been. Than he’s ever imagined being, and it’s so goddamned good that he just wants to laugh or cry or something.

But he grips Obito's shoulder, holds Kurama tightly, and says with all the lightness in his heart and soul, “Welcome home.”
Threads

Chapter Notes

After this there’ll be an omake-ish chapter (with a scene that quite a lot of people have said they wanted to see), but backslide is pretty much COMPLETE. Dear sweet heaven. I am so very done with this story, even though I love it to death.

Over 400 pages in Word fuck my life.

“I bet we’re the first Konoha team here,” Kiba says gleefully, all but bouncing as they follow Iruka-sensei through the tower, towards the rooms they’ll stay in until the exam is over. “Or, no, maybe we’re the first team here, period! Wouldn’t that be awesome?”

“Y-yes,” Hinata agrees with a tentative smile. “But I think Neji-nii-san and his team m-might be here already.”

Shino nods. “Statistically, the probabilities of us being first—”

“Oh, can it,” Kiba huffs, ignoring Iruka’s fond but exasperated “Behave, you three” as he throws the door open. “At least we can say we’ve beaten—”

“Oh, hey, Kiba!” Naruto says brightly, straightening up from where he and Sakura and Sasuke are all huddled together. “Hi, Shino! Hey, Hinata-chan!”

Hinata squeaks and attempts to retreat inside the collar of her jacket, while Shino simply nods. Kiba, faced with a clear challenge, puffs up.

“Loser, what are you doing here?!” he demands, and on his head, Akamaru yips in agreement.

Naruto just rolls his eyes, but Sasuke narrows his at Kiba and rises to his feet, clearly bristling. “Don’t,” he warns darkly, “call him that again, Inuzuka. Didn’t I tell you before?”

With a sigh that sounds incredibly put-upon, Sakura snags the back of Sasuke’s shirt and yanks him back onto the couch. “Down, boy. Green’s not your color.” Then, without warning, her gaze swings to Kiba, and green eyes pin him with a narrow look that all but promises pain. “But really, Kiba-kun. Please don’t call Naruto that.” Her smile is sweet and lovely and more threatening than a kunai at the jugular.

Really, Kiba wants to know what the hell kind of twilight zone he’s living in. For years Sasuke and Sakura were the ones who constantly belittled Naruto and called him names, and Kiba was his slightly antagonistic friend/rival. And now—just what the hell is this?

“But—” Sasuke protests, and since when did he do anything but condescendingly bulldoze over everyone else’s opinions?

“But they’re friends? Well, you’re a friend too. But Kiba’s had years and you’ve only had a few months? Your own fault. But you’re—”

Sasuke slaps a hand over her mouth and glares. “Finish that sentence. I dare you.”
With a resigned sigh, Naruto pushes between his teammates and hauls them apart. “Guys, guys. Why do I have to be the mature one here? Sakura, you're supposed to be the brains. And Sasuke-teme, what’s with you and Kiba?”

Well, that’s what Kiba would like to know. He always thought he was just about the same level as everyone else in the Uchiha's opinion—that is to say, dirt. But now he’s looking somewhere closer to primordial ooze, and it’s weird.

Sasuke crosses his arms over his chest, and instead of looking derisive, he seems petulant. “He keeps insulting you,” the brunet says haughtily, though there's a faint flush up around his cheekbones. “I've already told him to stop, and it’s annoying.”

No. No, no, no. Stop right there. No way in hell the arrogant last Uchiha has a crush on Naruto.

Of course, being Kiba, the first words out of his mouth are, “Oh my god, Uchiha, you have a crush on Naruto?”

Dead silence in the room. Kiba rewinds that, plays it back, and winces. He can practically hear Hinata faint behind him. Sasuke's face currently rivals the color of the tomatoes he loves.

There's a long pause, and then Naruto asks uncertainly, “I…Sasuke?”

An even longer pause, and then Sasuke says stiffly, “I…do. But it doesn’t have to change anything, dobe. It’s just…emotion.”

Perhaps predictably, Naruto rolls his eyes. “Exactly, teme, and you suck at emotions. So I'm gonna help you with these ones.” He’s got his arms crossed over his chest and his expression set to ‘stubborn’, and Kiba wonders vaguely what the hell that even means.

Apparently, he’s not the only one, because Sasuke blinks in surprise, leans back to look at his blond teammate more clearly, and blinks again. “What?”

Naruto gives him a cheery grin. “Well, I'm not a bastard who goes around rejecting his fan club out of hand, so—”

“Oi, dobe, since when the hell did you even have a fan club, and why are you putting me in it?”

“Well, since you got a crush on me, obviously!”

“If anyone in your family gets a fanclub, it’s your cousin, not you. My crush is momentary insanity, nothing else.”

“Teme! Then I'm definitely gonna make you fall all the way in love with me, believe it!”

“Yes, it does! I'm totally gonna get you to fall for me, and then you’ll have to see just how awesome I am and admit it!”

“Not if you fall in love with me first. Why are you even going to try? I’ll definitely win.”

“Teme!”

“Stop shouting, dobe.”

“Both of you, SHUT UP!” Sakura brings her fists down hard on top of their heads, and both boys
yelp as they go sprawling off the couch. “Geez, you two. When you get like this I can't even begin to understand how we broke that exam record.”

“Record?” Shino asks suddenly, and Kiba blinks at him. He’s usually not one to interrupt other conversations, after all.

Sakura glances up from where she’s grinding Sasuke and Naruto’s faces into the floor. “Oh. Right. Apparently we finished this portion of the exam faster than anyone in the last fifty years. Maybe longer—they haven’t checked all the records yet.”

Kiba gapes. “What? How long have you been here?!”

“Five hours.” Sasuke levers himself out from underneath the kunoichi (and honestly, Kiba is so glad that Hinata is sweet and mild-mannered for the most part, because if he’d gotten stuck with a harpy like Ino or Sakura and no way to hit them because they’re girls he would have died) and rises to his feet, brushing himself off. The look he levels at Kiba says, very clearly, that he’s holding a grudge, and that Kiba had better watch himself for the next two days they’re trapped together in tight quarters.

He swallows thickly. Maybe now would be a good time to work on those stealth and evasion skills, the way Kurenai-sensei has been recommending.

Before he can suggest a tactical retreat to his team, though, the doors open again, and a trio of figures come through—not genin, as two of them are wearing jounin vests, and they all look about the same age. Behind them is a foreboding-looking blond woman with huge jugs, a pair of tokubetsu jounin, and a dark-haired woman carrying a pig.

“Kurama-nii!” Naruto cries, bolting to his feet.

The redheaded man from that day in the training grounds, supported with an arm over the shoulders of the men on either side of him, smiles at the blond. “Hello, Naruto. I hear congratulations are in order.”

“What happened to you?” Naruto demands, sounding aghast. “That guy you were fighting—was he really that strong?”

“Your cousin’s just an idiot,” the black-haired man on the left says, rolling his eyes as he helps the redhead over to a chair. “He wanted me to be able to get my revenge, so he played distraction and it backfired on him.”

“I resent that. It worked perfectly, thank you,” Kurama says loftily, though the tone is slightly ruined when he winces as he sits down. “Argh.”

“Uchiha’s right, you’re a complete moron,” the blond woman says sharply, stalking over and batting the man’s hands aside as his human crutches step back. “What were you thinking, Red? All that blood—if I hadn’t—” Her hands clench and her mouth tightens as she directs her focus entirely at Kurama’s stomach.

The redhead reaches up to set a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Hey. It was fine. You overcame it when you winces as he sits down. “Argh.”

“Don’t patronize me, brat.” But there’s a faint smile playing around her mouth as she spins, facing Naruto squarely. Large brown eyes assess him for a long moment, and then she nods decisively. “So you’re Kushina’s son. Uzumaki Naruto, I’m your great-aunt, give or take a few relations. Senju Tsunade.”
Even Kiba has heard of Tsunade of the Sannin. His jaw drops, and he’s fairly certain his isn't the only one.

And then, in the hush that follows, Sasuke asks very quietly, “Uchiha?”

There's an awkward, uneasy pause between the adults, and then a bout of murmurs as Team 8 is escorted to another room, but Sasuke doesn’t care. He can't drag his eyes away from the man standing at Kurama's left elbow. The man isn’t tall the way most Uchiha are, not lean and lithe and moon-pale, and his hair is wild and loose around his face. But his eyes are Uchiha-dark, and there's a quiet sort of power to them, a grace to each of his movements that comes with full mastery of the Sharingan and the ability to read the tiniest of cues.

At length, the man sighs, runs a hand through his hair, and nods. “Yeah,” he says, meeting Sasuke's eyes squarely, something Sasuke is grateful for. No evasion, no pandering to a child, just direct honesty. “Yeah, Sasuke-kun, I'm your cousin. Fourth, I think, probably at least three times removed, but—yeah. Sorry I couldn’t get here sooner.”

Is this, Sasuke wonders, what Naruto felt like when Kurama introduced himself? Is this roiling, rolling tumble of emotion normal for such a situation? Because first Itachi returning, and now this. Another Uchiha.

Sasuke isn’t the last anymore.

But he’s a shinobi first and foremost, for all that he’s still a genin, and Sasuke's brain is already working, whirling through possibilities. He trades quick glances with Sakura, who already looks concerned, and then says, “Something happened. All of this—it’s part of something bigger, isn’t it?”

Kurama smiles at him, weary but warm, and inclines his head. “Yes. I believe I can tell you, as the Hokage will be making his announcement shortly, now that he’s spent the last four hours getting every last detail from us.” A wry tilt to his lips, and it makes his whole face shift into something subtly sad. “Uchiha Madara was attempting to manipulate factors and destroy Konoha. He was present the night your clan was killed, and your brother pretended to join him in order to play the spy. Those bounties I claimed were all members of an organization of missing-nin out to collect the nine jinchuuriki, and Madara was the one who formed them. He wanted revenge on Konoha, as far as I can tell.”

Naruto is stiff and still beside him, and Sasuke spares him a worried glance before turning back to the other Uchiha. “And you?”

That earns him a quick, grim smile that pulls strangely at the man’s twisting scars, but surprisingly it’s Kakashi who answers. From where he’s hovering at Kurama's right, he reaches out and touches the man’s shoulder, quick and light but more than Sasuke has seen him do with anyone but Kurama. “Uchiha Obito,” the Copy-Nin says. “Officially he died as a chuunin in the Third Shinobi War, on a mission to destroy Kannabi Bridge.” A slight pause, and he adds, “I told you my best friend’s name was on the Memorial. It’s his.”

“I didn’t actually die, clearly,” Obito puts in. “Madara found me while I was dying and… manipulated me. And events. To make me…easy to control.” He grimaces, touching the deep scars on his right side. “He was good at that. But Kurama managed to knock some sense into me while we were fighting, and broke his hold on me. We started planning, and…it worked out.”
“It worked out to Red getting a kunai to the gut,” Tsunade of the Sannin mutters, sounding less than pleased. When Kurama gives her a longsuffering look, she huffs at him and crosses her arms under her breasts. “Oh, stick a sock in it, brat. And you! Little Uchiha! How long has your brother been sick?”

Sasuke blinks at her, still trying to parse everything and not quite able to understand her words. Itachi? Sick? But—

“Do you mean in the head?” Naruto, ever tactful, demands.

Kurama snorts, a grin spreading over his face, as Kakashi rolls his eye and Tsunade slaps a hand over her face. “You are definitely Kushina-chan’s son,” the woman says wearily. “And Red, stop laughing. If you reopen that wound I’m leaving you to bleed. No, Naruto, I don’t mean in the head. He’s got a weakness in his lungs that should prevent him from being a shinobi, if he’d just take my damned advice.”

Sasuke swallows, hands closing into fists even as Sakura tugs him back onto the couch and takes up position pressed against his left side. A moment later Naruto is on his right, shoulders braced and arms tangled together and legs touching, and it’s…a comfort. A happiness. Itachi is…sick, and apparently Sasuke never knew or noticed. He’s not sure how he feels about that.

He’s not sure how he feels about any of this, for that matter. Itachi killed the clan—and there’s no explanation given for that, no reassurance that it wasn’t madness or a lust for power beyond Itachi’s appearance in the Forest and words about returning to the Hokage. But—Madara is someone Sasuke knows of, because everyone in Konoha knows of the founders, of Madara and Hashirama and their statues in the Valley of the End, their rivalry and friendship and the basics of what happened between them. It seems…possible that Itachi, with his vast loyalty to the village, would have volunteered to play the spy, taken advantage of any circumstances to do what he could to protect Konoha.

It’s not an excuse, but…

Maybe, just maybe, it’s an explanation.

“Madara is dead now?” Sakura asks softly, lacing her fingers with Sasuke’s and giving his hand a light squeeze. He squeezes back, though he doesn’t know which of them needs the comfort more. Him, probably, given the achy, fragile sort of feeling twisting through his insides.

Kurama nods. “Dead and burned to ashes. We…didn’t want to risk leaving a body, when he’s apparently so good at surviving.”

“It was a very impressive fight,” Kakashi puts in, sounding inordinately cheerful. “Very awe-inspiring, really.”

“Bakashi, how the hell would you know? I seem to recall you spending the vast majority of your time either trapped and choking or unconscious.” Obito glares at his friend, looking entirely exasperated and vaguely murderous. Immediately, Sasuke comes to the realization that this is very much like his and Naruto’s relationship (without the, well, other stuff, though, given the way Kurama is leaning into Kakashi’s side and Kakashi has Kurama’s hair twined carefully around his fingers). Only Kakashi is standing in for Naruto, which is a little…mind-boggling. And unsettling. And weird.

“But you told the Hokage it was,” Kakashi reminds him. “And on that note, I don’t think I’ve said it yet—”
“Please, if it’s what I think it is, don’t bother—”

“But welcome back to life, officially now!” The Copy-Nin beams at Obito, bright and cheery, and yeah, Sasuke’s totally being reminded of why they died his hair pink. Maybe they can go with another color this time. Like orange. With polka dots. In fuchsia.

With some effort, he drags his attention away and files that plan for later discussion, turning back to his cousin who appears to be about to strangle their sensei. “You’ve been reinstated?”

Obito shoots one last, dark look at Kakashi before nodding. “I have. Your brother, too. The Hokage’s going to issue a statement about what happened in the forest, and what Itachi’s been doing all of these years. It won’t fix everything, and with the idiot’s cough and him overexerting himself it’s likely he won’t be an active shinobi again, but…”

*Maybe that’s for the better,* Sasuke thinks, and it feels a little like sacrilege, even now, because Itachi was always, always one of the very best shinobi Konoha ever produced, but…

Well. Sasuke hasn’t decided whether or not he forgives his brother yet. He doesn’t want to lose him before he has the chance to make up his mind.

The sound of voices in the hall makes Sasuke look up, and when the door opens the two tokujo guards—Kurama’s friends and usual mission partners, Sasuke remembers, Genma and…Raidou? Or something like that—move to intercept. But a word from Kurama stops them, and the redhead pushes to his feet, a familiar warm smile lighting up his features as he looks at the small, slender redhead boy in the doorway.

“Done already, Gaara-kun?” he asks lightly, and the wary, tense boy and girl—the team Sasuke and Naruto and Sakura all encountered, that time with Konohamaru, Sasuke realizes now—go even tenser.

But the boy just stares at Kurama for a long moment and then inclines his head in a faint nod. “It was…simple,” he says, strangely careful, as though the words are foreign in his mouth. “But these forests are…different than what I am used to.”

Kurama steps across the room, ignoring the look it gets him from Gaara’s teammates, and reaches out. The girl takes an aborted step forward, eyes widening, but before she can do anything Kurama’s hand settles in Gaara’s hair and ruffles it lightly, and Gaara looks up at him with an expression that Sasuke is intimately familiar with.

*Why do you care?*

*Do you know how strange it is, that you do?*

*Why do you think I’m worth it?*

All of that, and more besides, and Kurama just smiles down at him and says, “Well done, then. I’m very glad you made it here safely.”

Gaara looks away, off to the side, and his glance instantly settles on Sasuke and his teammates twined together on the couch. He blinks, and then his eyes widen faintly.

“Oh, right.” Kurama sounds faintly satisfied, but mostly amused. “I wanted you two to meet. Naruto, this is Gaara. Gaara, my cousin Naruto. I think you’ll be…good friends.”

Both genin glance at each other, and then back at Kurama, and he smiles at them. Smiles, warm and
kind, and Sasuke closes his hand around Sakura's, leans into Naruto, and tries his very hardest not to image what his life would have been like without this man.

Team 7 beats all the records in the end, even with Orochimaru’s interference.

Kurama leans against the railing of the balcony overlooking the arena, feeling easy and languid and at peace. The matches had been just about the same as they were last time, but it’s better now. Sakura won her match outright, but when she was done she offered Ino a hand up, and Ino took it. And when she was on her feet she had stepped forward to give her best friend a tight hug. They were laughing when they walked out of the arena, shoulder-to-shoulder and strong.

Naruto won against Kiba, and Sasuke against the Oto nin, and it feels so achingly right to see Team 7 advancing together. Kurama hasn’t stopped smiling in a while, and he’s truly looking forward to the coming weeks, the training and then the final exam with no threat of invasion looming over them. Because Gaara is sane, and wary of it, but drawn to Naruto and his cheer and strength, the same way Kurama remembers.

A sandal scuffs across stone, and a moment later Kakashi folds his elbows to lean against the railing beside him, watching as a team of shinobi repair the arena as the last of the spectators filter out.

“Sasuke, Sakura, and Naruto are making me buy them dinner,” he says mournfully. “A real dinner, apparently, not just ramen. Kurama-chan, won’t you please save my wallet?”

Kurama laughs at him without mercy. “Not hardly. You’re their sensei, and they just advanced to the final round. Pretend you’re happy and celebrate with them, Bakashi.”

Kakashi winces. “Please, only one person is allowed to call me that, and you don’t have the hair, Kurama.”

The elbow Kurama plants in his ribs is just this side of gentle, but still fond. “Jerk,” he says lightly. “Where is your shadow, by the way?”

“Genma and Raidou dragged him away.” Kakashi sounds incredibly amused. “I think they were going to go bar-hopping. Or is it bar-crawling?”

“Well, they’ll probably end up crawling at some point,” Kurama acknowledges wryly. “Raidou and Obito, despite appearances, are complete lightweights, and Genma can drink Anko and Ibiki under the table and come back for seconds. Somehow I think this isn’t going to go well for anyone but Genma.”

“Who will doubtless end up with enviable amounts of blackmail material.”

“Of course. It’s Genma. I think he carries around pictures of Kotetsu, Izumo, and Iruka as kids just to pull out and threaten them with. He’s in Interrogation for a reason.”

The silence settles between them, comfortable and full, and Kurama leans into Kakashi’s side a little more. A lean arm drops over his shoulders and pulls him a few inches closer, and Kurama smiles.

It’s…good. Definitely not what he ever expected, when he landed in this time, but—

Good. Maybe even wonderful.

The arm tightens a little more, and a hand come up to play with his hair, winding the red locks
around long, slim fingers and tugging thoughtfully at the single, slim braid that remains even now. A pause, a moment, and then Kakashi asks, tone light and idle, “So did you come back in time, or jump forward?”

It takes every last bit of Kurama's control not to wrench away, and his heart gallops in his chest, sudden and startling and making his knees weak with sheer, unmitigated terror.

Why does he know? He tries to step back, duck away from Kakashi's hold, but the Copy-Nin isn't budging. Gradually, slowly, Kurama lets his struggles die out, goes still and slumps against the railing with his pulse thundering through his veins and his head spinning, because, what?

“What?” he manages weakly.

A single dark grey eye settles on him in a sideways glance, full of humor and warmth and a faint touch of mischief. “I think you heard me, Kurama,” Kakashi says with amusement. “Forward through time or backwards?”

Kurama licks his lips and swallows, throat dry. “Back,” he whispers. “Kakashi, I—

Lips over his steal the words before they're even formed, and when Kakashi pulls back he’s smiling, clear without the mask in the way. “Nope,” he says cheerfully. “Ignorance is probably a blessing here. I don’t want to know who you were, and I'll assume you had good reasons for doing it.”

“The best,” Kurama manages, though it’s a struggle. His brain feels sluggish and dazed, overwhelmed with surprise, though really—Kakashi's always been good at surprising him. Right from the very first moment. “You…don’t mind?”

Kakashi looks at him, really looks at him, penetrating and square and getting at all the little things Kurama has kept hidden. Then he blinks, and the look has softened, eased into something that’s more than simply fond.

“No,” he says simply. “I don’t.”

A shout from below draws their attention, and they peer over the edge to see Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura clustered near the entrance. Naruto is waving energetically, and Sakura is laughing, and Sasuke is smiling, standing just a little closer to Naruto than normal.

“Food!” Naruto calls. “Come on, Kakashi-sensei, Kurama-nii! We’re hungry.”

“My poor bank account,” Kakashi bemoans, pushing himself upright. He smiles, tugs his mask up, and offers Kurama a hand. “Coming?” he asks gently.

Kurama hesitates, but only for a moment. He smiles back and slides his hand into Kakashi's, twining their fingers together.

“Definitely,” he answers, and lets Kakashi pull him away.
Now I'm going to go pretend that the Naruto fandom doesn’t exist for a week or two. I've got a couple of cracky crossovers gnawing at my fingers and a trio of Bleach stories I really should be finishing up, but after that I'll most likely be back, since I'm like a bad rash that way. Scared yet?

(Also, ILOVEYOU. All of you! Amazing people, have my gratitude. All of it. ALL.)

Five years later:

The sound of a screech wakes Kurama from a sound sleep.

Because it’s just about dawn, and he only returned from a mission about three hours ago, Kurama doesn’t immediately throw himself out of bed and go for his weapons. Instead, with a weary groan, he rolls over onto his stomach and props himself up on his elbows, shoving sleep-tangled hanks of hair out of his face as he blinks blearily out the window at the brightening sky.

“Ugh,” he mutters, running a hand over his face. “I take it Sasuke and Naruto got back, then?”

From where he’s leaning against the headboard, nose buried in his Icha Icha, Kakashi snorts. “What was your first clue?” he asks dryly.

Entirely too punch-drunk-tired to deal with this, Kurama huffs out a breath and sits up, but can't quite bring himself to swing his legs out from under the very warm and cozy blankets yet. He hesitates, then looks at Kakashi again. “I will give you the most unspeakably amazing sex for the rest of your natural life if you will deal with this instead of me,” he offers, although he can already tell it has a very, very slim chance of working.

“I thought that was already part of the domestic life partners deal?” Kakashi, the rat bastard, doesn’t even bother looking up from his book. “Also, no. Last time I had flavor-of-the-week duty I ended up getting cried on by a hysterical chuunin for two hours straight.”

That, at least, means that Kakashi likely won't be taking what Kurama calls explanation-and-removal duty and he insists on terming flavor-of-the-week duty for months. Giving in with bad grace, Kurama mutters an oath and slides out of bed, making a quick stop at the wardrobe to unearth a loose pair of sleep pants and pull them on. He pads out the door on silent feet, carefully rearranging his expression into something comforting and vaguely sympathetic as he reaches the kids’ room.

As is entirely expected, there's a vaguely familiar chuunin boy standing in the middle of the room, pale-faced and open-mouthed, gaping at the pile of limbs splayed out across the bed. It’s not Naruto’s old, small bed, which broke in an interesting and entertaining way about three years ago, but a new one, finally large enough to fit the newly-minted jounin who occupy it regularly.

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And, indeed, all three are currently present, tangled together and barely covered by the blankets. It likely isn't helping chuunin-boy’s state of mind that Sakura, who’s in the process of blinking her way back to alertness, is wearing nothing but her panties, breasts bare and miles of toned, tanned flesh on
display. Naruto—also mostly naked, of course—has his head on her thigh, and is stretched out on his back, leanly muscular and golden-skinned where he doesn’t have swirls of multicolored seals inked across his body. Sasuke is somehow managing to be the most well-covered of the three and yet not look like it in the least, the blanket riding low on his hips and wrapped tightly across his thighs, all pale skin and messy dark hair and heavy-lidded eyes as he props his arms on Naruto’s chest and rests his chin on them, legs wound with Sakura’s.

Their opponents call them the Three Demons of Konoha. Kurama’s willing to bet, though, that no one who uses the name has ever seen them like this.

Kurama sighs and presses a hand over his eyes. Really, his life.

“You’re…Ayumu, right?” he asks the chuunin politely.

The boy manages to drag his gaze away from where his girlfriend of nine days is in bed with not one other man, but two. It takes about three attempts, but he finally manages a nod and a squeak of, “Yes, Uzumaki-san. I was just…we were going to train early?”

Kurama glances at the bed, raising an eyebrow at Sakura, who manages to look faintly embarrassed in the same moment as she looks entirely unrepentant. “Sasuke and Naruto got back late last night,” she says in explanation. “They’ve been gone for two weeks, Kurama-nii. I missed them.”

Which also explains why Ayumu the hapless chuunin has never walked in on this before, given that it’s their preferred method of sleeping more often than not. They’re not in a threesome, at least as far as Kurama can tell, and Sasuke and Naruto are most definitely a couple while Sakura changes partners whenever something new catches her eye—experimenting and exploring the available options, she calls it—but…sometimes he wonders.

“Right,” he sighs, entirely resigned to this after five years of it happening on a more and more frequent basis. Turning, he fixes Ayumu with his most intimidating polite smile—the one Naruto calls his ‘let’s bond over a detailed examination of your entrails’ smile—and offers lightly, “Goodbye, Ayumu-kun. It was nice meeting you.”

The chuunin turns pale, stutters out something that might be a farewell, and hightails it from the room so fast it almost looks like a shunshin.

Kurama waits until he hears the front door slam—sloppy, that, but probably why he’s still a chuunin—and then fixes a weary stare on the pink-haired kunoichi. “Sakura, dearest, I love you like the daughter I do not have a womb to bear, but why must you always pick the high-strung ones?”

Sakura gives him a pout she most definitely learned from Fuji. “I don’t mean to,” she protests, sitting up fully and flicking her hair over her shoulder. “But I want someone who’s good in bed, and that’s just how it seems to work out. And besides,” she glances at the two boys on her right with a fond smile, “if they can’t handle us being…us, I don’t want them anyways.”

Silently, Kurama prays that Ino will get her act together sometime soon and pounce on her childhood friend the way she’s been threatening to. It can only come to some good, at this point. Rolling his eyes faintly, he turns his attention to his counterpart and Sasuke, and allows a touch of concern into his voice. “You’re both okay? No pieces missing? Everything attached?”

Naruto rolls his eyes right back. “Yes, Kurama-nii, we’re fine. It was just a diplomatic mission. Besides, it was like a vacation, too, seeing Haku and Zabuza again. Haku says hello, by the way.”

Kurama arches one wry brow. “A vacation. Of course. Did I tell you that before I left Tsunade took
great pleasure in informing me about how Sasuke threw a Taki diplomat through a wall?"

Sasuke doesn’t even have the grace to look abashed. “Hn. The bastard kept winking. It was
aggravating.”

“At you?”

That gets him a flat look in response. “At Naruto,” Sasuke says, mouth tightening into a grim,
foreboding slash. “I warned him. Twice. It was his own fault he didn’t listen.”

The headache is imminent. Kurama rubs his temples and sighs. “Well, Naruto, at least when you're
Hokage you won't need to invest in a team of bodyguards,” he mutters.

Naruto laughs, leaning up on his elbows and carding a fond hand through Sasuke's spiky hair.
“Noo,” he agrees, far too cheerfully, as Sasuke closes his eyes in pleasure like a cat being stroked.
“I’ve got two of them, after all.”

Sakura grins and flops back onto the mattress, raising a hand and throwing up a victory sign. “Yosh!
No one but Sasuke is youthful enough for our chakra tank and fuinjutsu master!” she chimes in.

“Don’t let Kakashi hear you talking like that,” Kurama warns, amused despite himself. “He’ll jump
to conclusions, and hunt Gai down to skin him.”

“Oh, ew.” Sakura wrinkles her nose. “Kurama-nii, what the hell? That’s gross. And besides, it’s not
like Lee isn't a mini-Gai. I could just as easily have picked it up from him.”

“Either way, I get the feeling Kakashi would end up with a new wall hanging.” Kurama pushes off
the doorframe and shakes his head, checking the sky through the window and deeming it too late to
go back to bed. So much for his lazy morning. “One made of green spandex, at that. What do you
guys want for breakfast?”

“That omelet with tomatoes,” Sasuke answers instantly, sitting up. “And some grilled salmon?”

“Miso with eggplant!” Kakashi butts in from their bedroom, though Kurama has yet to hear him so
much as stir himself from the bed.

“Anything,” Sakura says easily, elbowing the boys out of her way as she slides out of bed.
“Everything you make is good, Kurama-nii.”

Footsteps in the hall are the only warning Kurama gets before something heavy and vaguely scruffy
drapes itself over his shoulders. “Kurama's cooking?” Obito asks drowsily, peering into the room.
“Am I invited? And what did I tell you about threesomes, Sasuke?”

Sasuke fixes his cousin with a flat stare. “I don’t remember,” he says, eyes narrowing. “I think I was
too busy shoving your head in the river to listen.”

“Off,” Kakashi warns, suddenly at Kurama's elbow and prying his former teammate off of his lover.
“How did you even get in here? I thought we warded to windows after last time.”

Obito just grins at him, the scars pulling it into something wicked and wily. “Oh, were those
supposed to keep me out?” he asks with faux innocence. “I just used Kamui. Oops.”

Kurama rolls his eyes and ducks out of the way of their antics, glancing over at Sasuke. “Should I set
a place for your brother?” he asks, dodging a stray elbow as Kakashi and Obito devolve into genin
and start wrestling on the floor.
Sasuke shakes his head. “He has an early appointment with Tsunade-sama. She thinks this new treatment can give him an extra three years.” With a lithe stretch, he slips out of bed and joins Sakura in hunting down their clothes.

It’s only when he gets hit in the face with a pair of pants that Naruto grumbles and starts getting up as well. “Come on, teme, I worked hard this last week! That was over thirty large-scale seals for communication, laid all the way from here to Kiri!”

“Up, dobe. We have a debriefing in three hours. And I'm not letting you make us late.”

“But, Sasuke—”

“Get up now and we can have ramen for lunch.”

Naruto is dressed and out the door before Kurama can make it halfway down the hall. He falls into step with the redhead, locking his arms behind his head and grinning at the older man. “So, Kurama-nii, did you miss us?”

Kurama rolls his eyes and reaches out, fondly scuffing a hand through the shoulder-length blond hair. There’s no mistaking the two of them as anything but relatives now, with their many similarities, but thankfully the coloring—and Naruto’s extra two inches of height—means most people write it off as simply being related. “What’s to miss, brat?” he asks, but his voice is entirely too warm for it to be any sort of serious statement. “Earn your keep and go chop the eggplant.”

Naruto just grins at him, looping an arm around his waist and pulling him into a quick, firm half-hug, and then lopes away to get the vegetables.

Kurama watches him go, heart light and feeling warm down to his soul. He closes his eyes, basking in the sounds—chaotic as they are—of his family here and whole and complete.

_Home_, he thinks, and smiles.

Works inspired by this one: _Backslide [PODFIC]_ by Opalsong

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