Inoichi’s decision to adopt the boy was a spur of the moment thing, but he stood by it, and he could not be prouder of both his children, even if they lived to give him grey hair.

Or, how a Yamanaka-trained Naruto went and cheerfully dismantled the last shreds of Sasuke’s self-image because conventional therapy obviously wasn’t working well enough, and then proved that even the best minds could be entirely dumb when it came to romance.
This story has no aspirations of seriousness. It’s a romantic comedy with ninja (i.e. assorted mindfuck and violence). It was meant to be a cute three-chapter little thing, and at this point it’s 100K and I’m done. It’s completed. I see the huge gaping holes in it, but I’m going to go back to working on TYN and maybe some original stuff, and this terrible, horrible idea is finished. I’m not writing any more of it.

The characters are all intractable arseholes and refuse to do what I tell them to.

I initially intended to write a Naruto/Shino story, because there’s not enough of that pairing, but a four-year-old Shikamaru imprinted and you know geniuses, you tell them they can’t have something and they find a way to get it anyway. And then an obligatory angsty Kakashi walked through, clocked Iruka, and that was that. Whyyy? This was not supposed to have any Kakalru in it… ugh, needless to say, yet another genius got what he wanted.

Weirdly, I kinda really like most of the characterisations here.

Also, as stated somewhere in TYN, I can’t write kids. Well, I can’t write authentic kids. But they’re still funny and maybe a little cute, so enjoy the blatant lack of realism.

(detailed warnings are in the end note)

See the end of the work for more notes
“What were you thinking?!” Yuuki hissed through the crack between the bathroom door and its frame.

Inoichi gulped, still riding a bit of an adrenaline high but slowly unthawing back into the half-rational human being he was during most of his life. He scratched at his cheek – hopefully the toddler wasn’t diseased (could he even catch any human illness?) – and pressed his temple to the doorframe.

He could see a slice of his lovely wife bathing what had previously looked like a ball of grime, but now had resolved itself into a tiny boy. Inoichi had known his father. Had been a – thank Izanagi only – passing acquaintances with his mother. And he was many things, among them an elite jounin and the Head of the Torture and Interrogation Department, but none of that amounted to him being soulless.

This was a child of his village, of his comrades, out in the street at night, looking like he had literally crawled out of a gutter.

When Inoichi spotted him, his thoughts went somewhat like: Oh, poor little blond child, look at those cerulean peepers, obviously you’re a lost relative of ours. Come to the bosom of the Yamanaka Clan! It was better than the alternative: They already sacrificed you twice, why does this village keep sacrificing people? I won’t let you die.

And… maybe he was not as okay as he pretended to be. The grief still choked him at odd times. And the guilt – he couldn’t have done anything for Hizashi, and he couldn’t do anything for Neji, but that didn’t make the feelings go away.

So, he had to do this.

“Wha’s ‘at, Ba?” asked the child.

Yuuki’s attention was redirected so swiftly it looked like Inoichi hadn’t ever been its subject. He watched his wife lean down to the boy standing up in the bath, wet golden (too yellow, they would have to do something about that) hair darkened and plastered to his head by water, eyes like saucers.

“It’s a rubber ducky, Naruto-chan,” said Yuuki.

“Ducky!” exclaimed the toddler, waving the orange toy around in the air. “Yosh!”

And whatever dark and twisted things people might have said about the greatest offensive imitator of their generation, Inoichi did not doubt for a second that Yuuki would never let this child out of her grasp.

Konoha was full of orphans in the wake of the Kyuubi event. It wouldn’t be that odd if Inoichi had picked one out in the street; the physical resemblance suggested he might have been a lost clan member, and… well, once anyone would think to look into a questionable adoption, years down the line, the boy would be already too integrated for anyone to touch him.
“Wha’s at, Ba?”

Yuuki sighed. She loved the boy’s inquisitive spirit, but she was taking care of two children now, and hearing ‘wha’s at, ba?’ every thirty seconds got old fast.


“Uh?” The boy was looking up at her, eyes wide and incomprehensive.

Of course. Of course his development had been completely neglected, just like his appearance and his hygiene. It had taken Yuuki a couple of weeks to get the child reasonably house-trained.

“Reading,” she repeated, then suppressed another sigh and put away the stack of evaluations. She patted the sofa cushion next to her and, just like a pet, Naruto hopped up to curl in the indicated spot. Yuuki took the book from him. “I will read you one of the stories in here, but then you have to promise to go do your exercises.

“Yosh!” exclaimed the boy. This was the second most frequent thing to come out of his mouth.

“Once upon a time,” Yuuki started, “there lived a brave little shinobi called Takashi-kun.”

The story unwound, so familiar that she might have well recited it from memory. She let her eyes drift over the lines, and thought wistfully that Ino was already reading hiragana by herself, and had since started learning her kanji.

Naruto-kun was behind. Fortunately, he could start learning now – she didn’t want to imagine what would have been of the boy if no one had taught him anything until he started at the Academy. If he even would.

They had entrance exams to weed out the too weak, those unable to focus, those incapable of chakra manipulation and the illiterate.

For better or worse, circumstance had put the task of preparing this boy into Yuuki’s hands, and she was going to do her best by him.

x

“Naruto-kun, you remember the people you were with before?”

The boy’s face scrunched up in what would have been a fearsome scowl on a grown man. It was not quite cute, but only because there was genuine fear behind it. “Yeaap.”

Inoichi took a deep breath and promised himself that in this case the end justified the means times ten. “Those people are going to come for you if they find out you are here. They will take you back, and I will not be able to stop them.”

“Ba?!” Naruto yelped, fearful.

“She won’t, either. No one will be able to stop them.”

“But…”

“We want you to stay, but we have to make sure nobody knows this boy.–” He pointed his finger at Naruto. “-is Naruto. You will have to pretend you are somebody else, all the time, in front of everybody. Can you do that?”
“Not Naruto stay?”

“Yes.” Inoichi prayed to Izanagi it would be enough. That they would somehow pull this off and manage to hide the jinchuuriki in plain sight.

“Yosh!” the toddler punched the air so hard he almost upended himself. “I promise!”

“Very well. Now, let’s start with the name. What is your name?”

“Naru- uh. Um.” The boy blinked. He mimed a tentative punch. “Yosh?!”

Inoichi shrugged. Why not? It was perfectly serviceable. “Your name is Yoshi? Well, that is a very nice name, Yoshi-kun.”

He glanced over at Yuuki who was supervising from afar. Her face betrayed nothing. Inoichi steeled himself, even though he wanted to chew on his hair with the phantom of future frustration.

This would take a lot of training.

x

“No!” Ino screamed. And threw herself onto the floor. She tried to play dead – or possibly unconscious – for a moment, then gave it up and started punching and kicking her soft, fluffy carpet.

Yuuki and Inoichi shared a look. It was a quietly resigned and entirely unsurprised look.

“I thought she grew out of this a year ago,” Yuuki pointed out.

“Only because she learnt that it didn’t work,” Inoichi replied, “and apparently this is the time for the truly desperate measures.”

His clever daughter had caught the exchange and cottoned onto the fact that she was shit out of luck with the performance. She knelt up, clasped hands in her lap, and made the biggest pair of wide, sad, puppy eyes that Inoichi had faced in his life. There was brightness in them that hinted at future tears.

“Da-daddy… Daddy, please…”

Inoichi raised an eyebrow. This one was new.

“Daddy, Mummy… please send him back?”

“I want to give her a cookie,” Yuuki admitted, torn between pride and exasperation.

“Oh.” Inoichi had an idea. He hoped his smile wasn’t as bloodthirsty as it felt, because he didn’t mean to frighten his family. “How about each of us four has a cookie, and we introduce the concept of sharing?”

Ino’s pleading eyes were replaced with a thunderous pout. “He don’t belong here! I don’t want him here! He’s a new-sense! A… a something we toss away. Like trash!”

“If she says this to us, she will say it to him, too,” Yuuki muttered, worried.

Inoichi nodded. She absolutely would. A psychological abuse campaign against someone who had already been abused? Ino could take an untrained peer apart. His princess was only four, but she had already manifested excellent social instincts.
“Ino-chan, if you are mean to your new brother, he might be sad. He might even feel like we don’t want him to live here with us, and want to leave.”

Ino’s whole countenance shone with eagerness.

“If that happened, darling, your Mum and I would just have to try so very hard to convince Yoshi-kun that we really like him, and really want him here. Why, we might have to give him lots of presents. And sweets. We might have to spend a lot of time with him, doing the things he enjoys, to make sure he believes us.”

Ino’s pout of doom returned, and so did the tears of frustration. Ino stood up, stomped very hard (on the soft, fluffy carpet, so this had very little actual effect) and threw herself on top of her bed, where she proceeded to bawl her eyes out at the terrible injustice of the world and her heartless, beastly parents.

x

Shikaku crawled out of bed, remembered that it was Saturday, and attempted to crawl back in.

Yoshino kicked him in the hip hard enough to bruise, and then glared through one eye from under an unholy mess of hair. “Conditioning day,” she growled.

Shikaku shuffled off to the bathroom and then downstairs in hopes that some solicitous clan member would have brewed a pot of coffee for any poor, benighted passing Clan Head to find.

Two hours later he was sitting, hunched over, in the corner of the gazebo. They were surrounded by trees – deep enough within Nara grounds that they couldn’t be seen or heard from outside without some heavy duty chakra techniques – because it was his turn to host the ‘conditioning day’, as Yoshino called these meetings.

She used to spit the words, as though they were acid, but these days she said them with resignation. Two generations of clansmen proved Ino-Shika-Cho to be a great team, so it made sense to repeat the combination, but Shikaku admitted that Yoshino did have a point when she protested boxing their son in before he even started the Academy.

He sighed.

“Ji-san!”

Shikaku looked up and mustered a smile for Chouji-kun, who was running forward like a scout ahead of his team. He waved. “Hello, Chouji-kun. Where did you leave your parents?”

Chouza rolled his eyes, stepping out of the trees, arm in arm with Mayu, despite being about two heads taller than she.

“They right there!” Chouji reported enthusiastically, waking up Shikamaru who had taken the opportunity to nap.

“Welcome,” Shikaku said to the Akimichi family, and pointed his thumb over his shoulder at the spread on the picnic table. Let it not be said that the Nara could not be proper hosts. Even if this whole production was such a pain in the arse.

And, for all his enthusiasm, Chouji wasn’t half as loud as Ino. There was a reason why the deer weren’t anywhere around. They would have come out if Shikaku were here alone, or with Yoshino
in one of her calmer moods, or even with Shikamaru (who hadn’t changed much from his baby self, and still spent most of his time asleep, with little breaks thrown in for eating).

“Can I have a moshi, Daddy?” Chouji hopped on the spot. “Can I? Can I?”

Shikaku cast a hopeful gaze in the direction of his house, but he knew Yoshino would be a while yet. She didn’t outright boycott these occasions, but she did everything short of that to make it clear how ardently she disapproved.

“We don’t have to do this,” Mayu said quietly, sitting next to him.

Shikaku scratched at his goatee. Yoshino was the most outspoken out of the Sinister Three, but that didn’t mean Mayu or Yuuki disapproved any less. They were just quieter about it.

“Yes, we do,” he replied under the negotiation for sweets before lunch that Chouza was conducting with his (hilariously tiny in comparison) son. “We do, because they will be Ino-Shika-Cho, and of course everyone will expect them to be a great team right away. People won’t remember it took Inoichi, Chouza and me years and a war to get there. They won’t remember the first Ino-Shika-Cho team wasn’t even meant to be a team – that they were just the leftovers of other slaughtered teams who came together in a crisis and survived by a fluke.”

Mayu stared at her happy four-year-old lardball. “Wish that I could have more.”

Yes, the terrible curse of the life of shinobi parents – knowing how high was the likelihood that you would have to bury your child. Better to have a few spares around to fill that hole. And yet – look at them. Three Clan Heads with only children, each family for their own reasons.

“So we’ll keep doing this,” Shikaku concluded, “and give them all the headstart we can scrounge up for them.”

“I see,” grumbled Shikamaru, rubbing his eyes with his fists.

“When did you wake up?” And why hadn’t Shikaku noticed? This wasn’t a conversation he would have wanted his son to overhear.

“Hello, Ba-san,” Shikamaru said instead of an answer. He slid off the bench and went to say hi to their other visitors. Which was wildly out of character for him, and probably inspired by the bomb Shikaku had just unintentionally dropped on his little head, damn it.

“Pekopeko!” Chouji yelled.

For being about knee-height, Shikamaru managed to mimic Yoshino’s long-suffering expression astoundingly well. “I’m not food,” he complained, but it didn’t seem to matter to Chouji, who was hugging the stuffing out of him.

“Shikaku,” Yoshino said in a things-had-gone-pear-shaped voice, “I’m seeing double.”

Shikaku obediently followed the direction of her look. He let his chopsticks fall and jumped to his feet. He looked about as alarmed as Yoshino felt. This was… wrong. What was going on?

Yuuki walked lightly across the expanse of grass, carrying a monkey-like Ino in her arms.

Half a step behind her walked Inoichi, carrying in his arms a monkey-like… not-Ino.
Did Inoichi spawn again and keep it secret? No, Yoshino would have known if Yuuki had been pregnant, and she knew that if the pregnant woman hadn’t been Yuuki, Inoichi wouldn’t be alive today. Cloning, then? she mused fancifully.

She left the formulation of realistic hypotheses to her husband.

“Mummy?” Chouji was asking somewhere behind them. “Where do brothers come from? I want one, too!”

“Troublesome…” muttered Shikamaru and then, yet more quietly: “Me too.”

“It’s not fair!” Chouji was crying. “Why Ino gets one and I not?!”

“’cause she’s a girl?” suggested Shikamaru. “Some clans don’t let girls be heirs, so they have to have children until it’s a boy-”

“I’m sure that is not the case here,” Mayu cut in, trying to placate the two boys, although there was an underlying question in her voice.

“Introductions?” Yoshino suggested dryly. Her right hand was on her hip; her left hovered (with heavy implication) around her tag pouch.

Inoichi sported a pained expression, aware that this confrontation was coming and that he was going to have to come up with some really good explanations. “This is Yoshi. He’s my ward, right now, but Yuuki and I are looking to adopt him.”

The boy weathered the attention of six big (some of them extremely big) adults with very little nervousness; he seemed to be fine as long as he could chew on his necklace.

“Oh, is he a cousin?” Mayu inquired, coming closer, watching the boy with the same intensity as the boy watched her (all big blue eyes and zero fear). “I… haven’t heard you’ve lost anyone? Condolences…”

Inoichi shook his head. “Years ago. Per his parents’ wishes, Yoshi-kun was placed with guardians outside of the Clan, but I have recently found that they were unsuitable.”

“I gots to live with Ba and Ji!” the little boy informed them solemnly.

Yoshino heard Mayu breathe out an ‘aww’, and was extremely proud of herself for managing not to do the same. The boy could have been Ino’s brother just as easily as her cousin – the same flaxen hair, even though his stuck out like the short section of Inoichi’s, blue eyes just a shade darker, the same wide grin, the same future of breaking hearts wherever he went.

Shikaku groaned and went straight for the sake – which Yoshino had brought for herself and the ladies, but he was willing to fight for it, kami-damn it!

“Yoshi, huh?” said Chouji. “Like Shika’s Mum. He seems nice-”

“I hate him!” yelled Ino, tugging on her pink dress so hard a seam came loose. She turned her back to where the adults were all admiring the new boy.

“Why?” asked Shikamaru, chewing on the edge of his sleeve.

“He wants to steal Mum and Dad! He steals everything! He’s a stealer!”
“Thief,” Shikamaru corrected, and then frowned. “What did he steal?” That shiny necklace, maybe?

“Oh… uh… stuff,” Ino said unconvincingly.

“If you don’t want him,” said Chouji, “give him to me. I want a little brother, but Mummy says I don’t get one.”

“Me too,” Shikamaru said, and it came out all garbled, because his sleeve got in the way. He spat it out. “Me too. If you don’t want him, I’ll take him.”

“Humph!” said Ino. “I hate him, but he’s mine.”

“Years ago. Per his parents’ wishes, Yoshi-kun was placed with guardians outside of the clan, but I have recently found that they were unsuitable,” Shikaku quoted, even mimicking the tone in which Inoichi had said it.

He had been sitting on this one since lunch, and it was now long after dinner, children had been packed off to their respective beds, and when Shikaku signaled Chouza to retreat under the guise of getting more alcohol, he finally got his chance to corner his lying best friend. “You’ve got to have picked him up a while ago – he’s well-coached.”

Inoichi crumpled down into an armchair and buried his face in his hands. “Should have known better…”

Shikaku thought that for a blond, he hadn’t done so badly. He made two definitive statements, both hundred percent true, both a little too vague to allow for investigation of the claims, and diverting the attention far, far away from the identity of the child.

“How do you keep the-” Shikaku mimed three lines down his cheek, “-hidden?”

“The necklace,” Inoichi said, muffled, into his hands. “Seal. Locked genjutsu. It’s a risk, but short off scraping off his skin and letting it heal anew-” and possibly disfiguring him terribly, not to even speak of the pain and the emotional aspect of inflicting such damage on a toddler, “-it was the best I could do.” He looked up. “Please, Shikaku? Please! You didn’t see him – like the last gutter rat in the village, like a wild animal… please…”

Shikaku had not even considered reporting Inoichi for this, but now that the idea was planted, he couldn’t help but think of all the risks. The team personally weren’t all that touchable, but their children… if Inoichi and Shikaku made powerful enemies, their kids would be the ones targeted.

Damn it!

Shikaku sank into the armchair opposite Inoichi’s. And bit his tongue, because it took inhuman effort not to say how much of a pain of his arse this whole situation was.

“Hokage-sama, I came to inform you that I have taken guardianship of a previously misplaced clansman, and petition to officially adopt him.”

After a day of politicking and administrating, this appointment was almost refreshing. What dismayed Hiruzen was the – for his Head of T&I so uncharacteristic – amount of bullshit. And, given that this was indeed his very competent Head of T&I, Hiruzen was absolutely sure that the
man had asked for the graveyard slot on the Hokage’s schedule on purpose, just so he could unload this shit while Hiruzen was too tired to rake him over the coals for it.

Well, in the name of Konoha’s values and the standing good relationship of the Hokage administration with the clans… “How nice of you to tell me.” It was, Hiruzen found, one of the silver linings of old age that you could be sardonic inside your head and still come off as sage on the outside.

Inoichi flinched. Not much, but there was a movement around his eyes.

“And who is this newly discovered clansman?” Hiruzen asked, so mildly that the ANBU guard in the corner squirmed.

Inoichi blinked, all innocent surprise at why should the Hokage be interested in that particular detail of such a banal story.

“An orphan,” Inoichi said without answering. “It is important to take care of all members of the Clan regardless of how they are related to the Clan Head-“

Hiruzen raised his hand before he got truly irritated. Silence reigned for a moment; then Inoichi’s teeth clacked as he shut his mouth.

“If I understand correctly,” he mused, “you are not in possession of the documentation for this child – we are speaking of a child, right? Or is this guardianship to serve as protection from some enemy?”

“A child, yes,” Inoichi admitted.

“So nice. How old would you say?”

Inoichi had the temerity to say: “A small one,” with a shrug that implied he was not good at estimating the ages of children and, honestly, the topic was of little interest. Which might have held water, had he not been the father of a four-year-old girl.

“What is his name?”

“Yamanaka Yoshi,” said the jounin readily. “I have had him added to the Clan records, even though we suspect he might be illegitimate.”

“He was not in your records, and you are unaware of how he is related? How can you be sure that he is truly a member of your clan?”

Inoichi drew his shoulders back. “He is blond and blue-eyed, Hokage-sama!”

Hiruzen was rarely stumped.

He was stumped now.

‘Blond and blue-eyed,’ he repeated to himself, lips moving soundlessly. What could he answer to that? There were so many possible responses, ranging from calling Inoichi on his contempt for the Hokage to attacking that pile of nonsense with logic to a comeback that was as witty as it was true.

(In no way had Hiruzen been going spare for almost four months since Konoha’s jinchuuriki disappeared. On the other hand, given that said jinchuuriki disappeared because the orphanage lost him – intentionally, it turned out, and there was for once pleasure in seeing heads literally roll – and he could have been picked up by anyone – hence the aforementioned going spare… Inoichi might
have saved *everybody’s* life. It was a dilemma.

But the hour was late, willful ignorance had been the best policy for years, and so Hiruzen pulled out his pack of tobacco and his pipe, and started stuffing it. “Well then, I truly don’t see how this is a matter for the Hokage office. It is not every day an esteemed Clan Head such as yourself chooses to foster an orphan; it does you credit. Indeed, I know that you and Yuuki-san will be *the most diligent parents* to both your children.”

Inoichi barely moved, but the ‘oh fuck’ look in his eyes was a sight of beauty.

Hiruzen waved his hand with the still-unlit pipe in it. “Congratulations, and all that. Now, time has gotten away from us, and we both have homes to get back to.”

“What did he say?” asked Shikaku.

Inoichi shrugged. “Pretty much the same thing you did: I never said anything to him, he doesn’t know shit, but there’s no need to panic about the village losing a you-know-what.”

Chouza, the silent guardian shadow towering over them, nodded. “Lateral thinking, huh? Your favourite.”

Chapter End Notes

A long, long time ago, Lin-Dragon-Dreyer asked in a review to The Proposal:

“. . . I’m very confused about Yoshino-san’s nickname for Shika! What does pekopeko mean?! I looked it up and all I got was: The sound an empty stomach makes (peko peko [from the verb hekomu, へこむ], meaning caved in gives us a way to say ‘I’m hungry’” What does it mean??”

And I replied:

“I thought about this a little more than is probably healthy. The original intention was to show that Yoshino is exactly the kind of mother who would delight in reminding her deadly ninja genius teenage son that she knew him before he was cool. A childish nickname would absolutely be one of her little ways.

But, now there is headcanon. We know that the new Ino-Shika-Cho trio knew one another all their lives. ‘Pekopeko’ – that is, the baby talk for ‘I am hungry/want to eat’ would absolutely be Chouji’s first word. And, in a hilarious turn of events, tiny Chouji would use it to refer to anything he actually liked/loved/wanted, not just specifically food.

Including Shikamaru.

I find that image absolutely cackle-worthy. Thank you, Lin-Dragon-Dreyer.”

As Freddie said: it finally happened.
Hiruzen froze at the sight in front of him. Sadly, it was familiar.

Kakashi stood in the middle of the corridor, dressed in his full ANBU uniform except the porcelain mask, which hung at his belt, and holding a chokuto in his hand. There was no expression on his face, but if there had been one, Hiruzen fancied it would have been murderous.

He had suspected that this was coming. He had just been nurturing the mad hope that, perhaps, this boy could learn from his mistakes.

Or maybe he learnt. Maybe he was here with the full awareness that his actions would result in his death. Maybe he did not care to live anymore.

These last six months of back-to-back ANBU missions certainly suggested so. Kakashi had been badly off before, but he was spiraling now.

“Good evening, Hound,” Hiruzen said mildly. Until the boy attacked, he was still – oh, kami, please – salvageable. “Nice night we’re having.”

Kakashi remained motionless.

Hiruzen thought of reaching for his pipe, but that might have betrayed the tremor in his hands. Still, last time Kakashi tried to kill him, he hadn’t let Hiruzen get a word in. Just sprang, chokuto-first. Got himself slammed head-first into the floor by the attendant ANBU guard (admittedly, Kakashi had been chakra-exhausted and dead on his feet at that point).

“Where is Sensei’s legacy,” said the boy.

“Safe,” Hiruzen replied obliquely. Telling Kakashi would negate all the good that could potentially come with the unexpected development regarding that particular child, and while Hiruzen wasn’t at all confident about how long the ruse would last, there was still enough Will of Fire in him to make the wager. This cruel deception was just a part of the gamble.

If he could have told Kakashi, he would have. It tore at his heart to see one of the last few things this shinobi cared about ripped from him, after so many, many catastrophic losses.

“Where.”

“I do not know,” Hiruzen obfuscated. “Part of the security precautions.” He had, in fact, not been to the Yamanaka clan lands since his first term of service, and had no idea where exactly the boy could be at this very moment.

It was thin, but enough to make Kakashi’s cynical mind jump to the wealth of worse alternatives instead.

“Danzo,” Kakashi breathed almost soundlessly – yes, a worse alternative indeed. “See you spitting on Sensei’s sacrifice again, Sandaime-sama.”

At the sibilant sound of the sentence, Hiruzen found himself painfully reminded of Orochimaru-kun.
And, just like Orochimaru-kun, Kakashi turned and walked away, without making a single threatening move in Hiruzen’s direction, and that was somehow worse, because if he was going to get himself killed by Root for some madcap mistaken rescue mission-

“Stand down, shinobi!” Hiruzen bellowed.

Kakashi paused.

“You will not attack your own village. You will obey your orders, trust your Hokage, and wait until the day when your service is needed!”

Kakashi briefly looked to his blade, then to Hiruzen, and to his blade again. It wasn’t quite a threat – just a tacit promise, and Hiruzen didn’t doubt that the boy meant it with his whole being.

x

Inoichi knew that from the ANBU’s point of view, Kyuubi festival meant drunkenness and riots, but from a Father’s point of view it was wonder in children’s eyes, loud happy exclamations at the fireworks and then a lot of chasing the little critters around after they binged on sugar.

Yuuki used mysterious female powers to calm them down long enough to go hang their wishes onto the Fox’ tails, which was a tradition that was started mysteriously (by drunk Anko and Aoba) on the first anniversary of the Yondaime’s death. Now all the children wrote their wishes – Yoshi had needed a little help, but Ino had proudly managed by herself – and were standing on their tiptoes to reach up to the effigy’s tails.

“You gotta write your real name, stupid!” Ino yelled, looking at the fluttering piece of paper Yoshi had just hung up.

“I…” Yoshi gulped. “I am Yamanaka Yoshi! I am. For real-”

“No, you’re not! Izanagi-sama will never ever grant your wish ‘cause you lie about your name!”

Yoshi’s lip quivered, and he was clearly hesitating about whether a god was a high enough authority to warrant disobeying his parents’ order.

Inoichi sighed – fortunately Yuuki was already on it, crouching by the their son’s side and promising that of course Izanagi-sama was smarter than that, and that many adopted children changed their names, and it was not lying.

Ino flounced off toward the games, pleased with herself.

Inoichi followed to keep an eye on her. They were going to have their hands full with the two bratlings, but he remembered last year this time (violence in the streets, a ‘die, demon!’ graffiti on the walls of the orphanage) and was more than willing to put in the effort.

x

Nothing. There was nothing!

Absolutely ready to start gouging eyes and ripping off fingers out of the insane conviction that any passing-by civilian might have seen something, just needed to be motivated to talk, Kakashi took to the training fields.

He left Nine a smoking ruin, and was working his way through Ten, which gave him a little more
resistance, because those were Mokuton trees.

And then, in the middle of powering up another Chidori, the exhaustion washed over him. He paused, took stock of himself, and realised that he was done.

He raised the Chidori up to his temple. He would have to be fast and resolute, else the jutsu might go askew, he’d score a glancing blow and survive. He took a deep breath-

“Stop!”

Instinct made him push the lightning away from himself, in the direction of the voice. Fortunately, the speaker was standing far enough, and even had the presence of mind to cover behind a tree before he established that Kakashi wasn’t about to kill him.

He was… short.

“What are you.”

“What the hell are you doing?” countered the intruder.

Kakashi did not dignify that with an answer. It was self-evident.

The interloper stepped out from his improvised shelter and edged a little closer, hands empty and held within Kakashi’s sight, like he had been coached on how to talk to violent headcases. “Why don’t you put that away, shinobi-san, and, dunno… talk to your commander. Or to the Psych Department. Maybe better go straight to the Psych Department.”

“It’s late,” said Kakashi. And he might have been late by now, too, if not for somebody rudely butting in. “You should be at home.”

The busybody snorted. “Yeah, home at the gennin dorm, with the cardboard walls and the guy next door entertaining his lady friend.”

Somebody laughed. A moment later Kakashi realised it was himself. Onset of hysteria, perhaps? “Lady friend,” he repeated incredulously. The boy was talking like one of Jiraiya’s novels. “Then find a lady friend yourself. Or a gentleman caller. Just go be somewhere not here.”

By the sound of disgust coming from the stooped figure, Kakashi had overestimated his age. In any case, he thought, dismantling the Chidori before it scorched off his hand, the boy had done him a favour.

Now, in a little more rational state of mind, Kakashi remembered that he was an elite fucking jounin, an ANBU Captain, and one of the best damn trackers in Konoha, and if he tried hard enough, he would find Naruto even if the boy had been hidden away in the pits of Hell itself. It might take him a little longer if that was the case, be he would find him.

“X

“A word, Hound,” said Yamanaka Inoichi, pausing at the door of the ANBU lounge.

Kakashi peered over the top of his book, spotted the T&I Head’s expression, and filled in the details. “That little fucker reported me!”

Yamanaka, owing to a lack of mask, managed to convey ‘what did you expect, moron’ with a minute shift of facial muscles. “Well, he saw you attempt suicide. He was, naturally, quite shocked
and worried.” He blithely ignored the sudden interest of the other occupants of the room.

Being ANBU, they had watched the whole exchange from the start, but at this point they didn’t even bother to pretend otherwise anymore. And Kakashi had done this to himself, by not following his superior officer to his superior office like a good soldier, but starting the conversation in front of an audience.

Let them stare. It’s not like every second person in this room hadn’t tried it once or twice.

Yamanaka waited until Kakashi ambled across the room to him; instead of leading him down to the Pits, he handed over a folded piece of paper. “Here is the schedule of your counseling sessions. They are mandatory and, Hound, by mandatory I mean that Falcon won’t let you in the field if you miss any. Have a good leave.”

x

It hardly ever happened, but some Saturdays Dad was on a mission and Mum was on a mission, and so were Ji-san, and then Saturdays didn’t happen. But Chouji begged, and Chouza-ji-san asked Dad, and Dad got babysitters so Shikamaru and Chouji could spend time with Yoshi… and with Ino, too.

Babysitters were easy to get rid of. And the park was close to the Compound.

“Who goes highest wins!” Ino pointed at the swings.

“Troublesome,” Shikamaru said, and bit on his sleeve. The swings went high. Falling would hurt.

“You’re a chicken!” Ino told Yoshi.

“Am not!” protested Yoshi, and then they sat on the swings and swung, first low and slow, then higher, and then Yoshi even higher, before he let go and flew through the air and almost took down Chouji when he fell.

For a moment Shikamaru thought he was dead. Ino started crying and braked hard, pushing her feet into the sand under her swing.

“Didya see that?!” Yoshi yelled, getting up from the ground. He was laughing, even though his hands and knees were scraped and bleeding. “I flew!”

“Flew,” Shikamaru corrected him, chewing on his sleeve. Yoshi did fly. It was really cool.

“Wow,” said Chouji, rubbing his bruised arm. “That was so-

“What are you doing?!” yelled one of the babysitters, who was in fact Shikamaru’s older cousin. Though not very smart. “Oh my gods, Yoshino-san will murder us- are you bleeding?!”

The cousin ran up and knelt in front of Yoshi, who just grinned and patted her shoulder. “Don’t cry, nee-chan-”

“‘e made mee!” Ino wailed, hugging the other babysitter’s leg. She continued crying, but Shikamaru could tell she wasn’t scared anymore. “I didn’t wanna, but he-”

“That’s not true!” argued Chouji.

Ino looked up at the other cousin, face red and wet with tears. “N-nee-san, ‘e said I gotta, or I’m a chicken! I’m not a chicken!”
“You are too!” Yoshi cried. He wasn’t smiling anymore. He was angry. “You’re a chicken, ‘cause you squawk like a chicken. Squawk, squawk-”

“That’s enough!” yelled the first babysitter. “I’ve had it up to here with your shenanigans-” She waved her hand above her head, but it wasn’t very high, because she was still kneeling. “-and you’re all going straight to the backyard, where you will each stand face to a tree until Mayu-san and Yuuki-san come for you! And I will tell your parents everything you did today.”

Shikamaru bit down on his sleeve very hard. When the babysitters herded them back to the Compound (Ino got carried, because she begged and went all sniffly again), he held Yoshi’s hand and promised that he and Chouji would tell their parents the truth.

x

“Worth a cookie?” Yuuki asked dryly on Sunday, after she reported the events to her husband.

So much for their carefully planned re-introduction of Yoshi to the public. It was just luck that most people viewed children as non-entities, and nobody had asked any questions either of them or about them.

Inoichi sighed, covering his face with both hands. “Why not? Let’s give each a cookie and ground them both for life.”

x

Nothing. Nowhere. There was no trace of the boy; his scent was gone from the village, and must have been gone for months, because one by one all Kakashi’s nin-ken hung their heads and admitted defeat. Kakashi spent his week’s worth of leave infiltrating offices and searching for paper trails, but there was predictably not a single relevant document.

Naruto was not dead. The Sandaime would not have been nearly as calm about Kakashi’s questioning otherwise.

And the boy was not out of the village either, citing the same evidence.

But short of some of the most powerful clans – who had all petitioned to absorb the jinchuuriki in some twisted political play, and who had all been repeatedly informed by the Hokage and the Council of Elders about whose arse they could go suck – the only places in Konoha where a human being could disappear so thoroughly were the deepest underground. Either black market (again, Sandaime would have blown a gasket) or black ops.

Naruto was gone – beyond Kakashi’s reach, entrusted into the hands of a man who made a sport out of turning people into puppets. Kakashi had seen a few of those ‘trainees’ in ANBU, and there was nothing in them. They were empty.

Kakashi himself had at least the grief and the guilt, but those operatives were human dolls.

How long would it take before the light in Minato-sensei’s son’s eyes went out?

x

At a glance this Saturday didn’t seem any different from the past ones – the women grumbled and drank their cocktails, the men complained about politics and unmanageable subordinates, and the kids did their own thing. Only, Shikaku thought while eyeing the last mochi and wondering if it was worth the trouble of standing up to get it, Chouza had been too quiet.
“What’s eating you, then?” asked Inoichi. And stole the mochi.

Shikaku swallowed his reflexive comment and shifted his attention to his other best friend.

Chouza sighed. “I’m going to have to ask you to do something very unfair and hurtful.”

Shikaku straightened.

Chouza let his despair show on his face. He looked like just speaking of it was hurting him, and yet he had to power through for whatever the objective was. “I… I spoke with Mayu, too. She said to wait a little longer. But we’ve waited, and it’s getting worse and… I am sorry, Inoichi.”

Just spit it out, for gods’ sake, Shikaku thought, about ready to chew on his sleeve the way his son tended to.

Inoichi didn’t betray any reaction, but from him that equalled having shifted to mission mode.

“Look at the children,” Chouza said quietly.

Both Inoichi and Shikaku did as bidden. Shikaku himself did not pay a lot of attention to the progeny; as long as there were no mean words and no screaming in pain, he was content to let them be. But apparently he had been too complacent.

He saw what Chouza meant. And he knew what Chouza was going to ask for. Unfair, hurtful, but – fuck – he was right.

Shikamaru, Chouji and Yoshi were huddled together around the base of a tall tree. Shikamaru seemed asleep, while the other two boys were talking quietly – about some manga, Shikaku determined by channeling chakra to his ears – and watching a roe that was tentatively moving closer to examine them.

Ino was barely visible behind a tree about fifteen yards away, curled up and sniffling.

“Shit,” Inoichi muttered, moving to stand-

“Wait,” Shikaku stopped him. Ino wasn’t hurt, just sad, and could wait for a few minutes before the concerned parental unit descended upon her. “Chouza, has this been happening every time?”

Chouza shrugged. “With variations. Admittedly, it’s invariably Ino that starts it. She does not seem to like Yoshi at all, while the boys like him damn sight better than they like Ino. I asked Chouji, and it’s not even about her being a girl. It’s just that she’s – sorry, Inoichi – really bossy and kind of mean.”

“Shit,” Inoichi repeated, closed his eyes, and covered his face with his hands.

Shikaku felt with him. They all loved Yoshi, had loved him within weeks of meeting him. He was bright and friendly, and his inexhaustible energy never manifested as aggression, which was just startling if you knew who the boy was and what sort of situation he had come from. But there was a reason for establishing the conditioning day, and if Yoshi’s presence compromised that, then it did not matter how much they wished the boy would feel like a part of the family.

He was a part of the family. Of course he was.

If anything happened to the Yamanaka, either the Nara or the Akimichi would be taking him in, no questions asked.

But he was not Ino’s replacement.
Shikaku realised Inoichi was crying. He couldn’t see or hear anything, but there was the smell of tears in the air.

Chouza grimaced. “I’m so fucking sorry…”

“Don’t,” Shikaku snapped. “It’s an ugly decision, but it’s the right one, and you were right to point out the problem. We’ll figure this out. We’ll organise other outings and include Yoshi; soon enough they’ll start the Academy and they’ll have the chance to socialise there. But we suffer Saturdays to make sure our children survive.”

X

Yuuki hated the conclusion, but she understood. Fortunately, so did Mayu and Yoshino when she informed them that she would stop attending the drink-and-bitch sessions while their husbands supervised their future substitutes.

If Yoshi could not come to Saturdays – and he objectively could not, not as things stood – then Saturday at the Yamanaka Clan Head’s house would be declared the Father-Daughter/Mother-Son Day.

“Oooh, is this the famous Yoshi-kun?” Ayaka called out as they entered the greenhouse.

“Nee-san?” Yoshi inquired, stepping forward – no trace of shyness, just curiosity.

Ayaka remained kneeling, just turned away from the pots and took off her muddy gloves. “Hello, young master. I’ve heard so much about you! You’re a little famous, what with your Mum and Dad hiding you for so long. I’m Ayaka, but you can totally call me nee-chan.”

“Oi, what’s this? Are they finally letting the new boy out of the house?” Rikuto, Ayaka’s brother, stepped out from behind the birds of paradise. “Hey there, chibi! I’m your… let’s say cousin, yeah?”

“I’m Yoshi!” shouted Yoshi, punching a fist in the air.

Ayaka melted; Rikuto squatted to meet the boy at his height. “Nice to meet you, Yoshi-kun. Have you come to see the plants?”

“Plants?” Yoshi inquired. He looked up and around himself, and his eyes widened with awe. “Green!”

Yoshi, it turned out, loved plants. He was a lot more interested in them than Ino. He seemed to have two green thumbs, too, and after watching him take care of some of the less delicate flowers in the greenhouse, Yuuki decided to let him keep some in his room.

He asked, perhaps a little predictably, for a monstera.

It was taller than himself, and he loved it with the fervour other children felt for their pets.

“Are we sure he’s not part-Senju?” Yuuki whispered to her husband that evening, from where they watched their adoptive son talk to his philodendron and stroke the edges of its leaves. Vestigial traces of Mokuton talent might have explained this.

Inoichi shrugged. “No idea. But he’s fitting in like he was meant to be ours. He is ours. And I’ll be damned if he ever doubts it.”
Yes, Kakashi is a little more unhinged than in canon. I figure the perceived loss of baby Naruto would do it. I promise the story gets funnier from now on, but this had to happen.

Regarding monsteras: My Grandparents used to have a monstera that took up almost quarter of their bedroom. It was the most amazing creature you can imagine, especially to a small child. It was huge, complicated, green, calm, kind, and let you hide inside it. I did realise even then that it was a plant, but it always felt like I would be doing something magnificent a disservice if I denied it the acknowledgment of its sentience.

These days my Mother has two tiny monsteras, and she is only babysitting one of them for somebody else. I have huge hopes for those green little babies, but with my crops-killing aura I don’t dare come close to them for fear of inadvertently killing them.

So when I was writing this Naruto (canonically a plants-lover) who is here being brought up by the Yamanaka (whose main business is a flower shop), I didn’t even have to think about what kind of green thing would live in his room.
It was way past time for this conversation, but Inoichi had put it off for as long as he feasibly could. It was a heavy topic, and his son had always been a good sport about playing along, understanding the need for secrecy (and probably thinking it was a great prank, the way Kushina-san would have) even without the spiel.

But now the Academy was starting. There would be a lot of other children, who would create a brewing ground for bullying and resentment – and Yoshi being adopted was not a secret.

Inoichi had to at least try and give his son the perspective he would need to let nasty words slide off his back and never give in to the temptation of revealing his true self out of the mistaken assumption that it would make it easier to fight for his place in society. It wouldn’t be. The boy had to know that he had every reason to be proud of himself, and yet every reason to hide those reasons from the world.

It was far too complicated a concept for a six-year-old.

“It is crucial,” Inoichi reiterated while his son tried to make heads or tails of the explanation, all squinty eyes and a scrunchied-up nose. “ Especially if you are going to be playing mindgames, going undercover, or using our clan jutsu, you need to maintain absolute clarity of who you are. You cannot afford to ever doubt yourself. You are your own anchor to reality. We Yamanaka do not have the same luxury as other ninja do – we cannot displace that anchor into somebody else.”

No, that was going too far into the future. They would have to revisit this conversation later on. For now, Inoichi would have to – well – dumb it down.

“You must always remember that you are, in fact, Uzumaki Naruto, a son of two great ninja who gave their life fighting the Kyuubi. You are also Yamanaka Yoshi, my adopted son, your sister’s brother – but that is a layer built upon the core of Naruto. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Dad.” The boy nodded so hard and so fast it was a wonder his little blond head didn’t roll off.

“I’m like a wasabi peanut. Naruto is peanut, Yoshi is wasabi. People only ever see wasabi when they look, or even when they lick it-

Inoichi facepalmed, already sure where this was going to go.

“- and people only know that there’s a peanut inside if I tell them. So I gotta make sure that even when people lick me-”

Yes, it went there.

“- they can never tell there’s a fishcake on the inside.”

Inoichi mentally apologised to his wife in advance, because this would definitely come back one day to bite them on the arse, smiled and nodded. “Exactly.”

The Shinobi Academy was huge and full of ninja, and even the older kids who weren’t real ninja yet looked so strong when they practiced outside. The teachers were nice, even if the classes were sometimes boring.
Two things stopped Naruto from enjoying it. The first was that now he and Ino were big, their Mum decided to travel for business, and it had only been a few days but Naruto missed her horribly.

The second thing was the other kids.

It took Ino a week to take over their entire class. And, unlike their parents, their classmates couldn’t tell when she was lying, or when she was faking, so in two more days she convinced everyone that Yamanaka Yoshi was a liar, a thief, and that he pulled hair (to the other girls this seemed like the worst crime).

“Liar!” Naruto yelled at the top of his lungs, even though he already knew it wouldn’t help.

Ino was just better at talking to people. Probably ‘cause she was a girl.

“He’s not even a real clansman!” Ino announced, eyes bulging and hands waving, as though she was making a huge, important, dramatic reveal. “He’s adopted!”

Naruto would have been devastated by this proclamation. Had, in fact, been devastated by it, the first few times Ino shouted it in a fit of jealousy. But Dad and Mum always told her off and spoke to Naruto afterwards, and they were nice.

“Oooh!”

“Is that true?”

“Poor Ino-chan!”

So Naruto didn’t get angry now. Instead he stepped up and tried to repeat what Inoichi-san had told him. “I am too a Yamanaka. ‘cause Dad said so. And I am a real clansman. It’s just ‘cause I was born elsewhere that I’ve got to work harder and prove myself before everybody acknowledges me. So don’t worry, Ino – I will be a good ninja and make the Clan proud!”

It was just coincidence that Naruto noticed the look on Daikoku-sensei’s face. That surprise with a bit of pride mixed in it felt good. Like Mum’s hands guiding him in a taijutsu kata, or Dad letting him pick what they would have for dinner.

Shikamaru had observed a worrying trend.

The classes were boring – he had expected this – the teachers were catering to clan children over the civilian students – also expected – the children were stupid and noisy – obvious – and there was a boy in class C that always ate his lunch alone. Bullying happened, that was a fact of life, and Shikamaru did not mean to change the world, but when bullying happened to his friend, he was not going to let it go.

And because they mostly had lunch in different time slots, Shikamaru made the bold decision to skip his History-class nap.

“Hey, Blondie,” he said and sat on the bench next to Yoshi. Quick check of the bento revealed that it was one of the store-bought ones. Why didn’t Inoichi-ji-san ask one of the clanswomen to make his children’s lunches was a mystery.

“Shikamaru!” Yoshi exclaimed, so startled that he dropped one chopstick. “What are you doing here?!”
Why so loud? Shikamaru thought wearily. “I go to school here.”

“What? Really? I’ve never seen you ‘round.” He peered up through his hair suspiciously. “Do you skip a lot? It’s only the fourth week!”

Shikamaru reached out and pushed the hair behind Yoshi’s ear. Better. “Get a tie for it if you’re going to grow it out. There are three classes in the first year. Since we’re sorted by surname, you and Ino are in class C; I’m in B and Chouji’s in A. It sucks.”

“Whoa, really?” Yoshi stared at him as if Shikamaru was presenting him with the secrets of the universe rather than basic information that had been explained to their parents at the entrance exam. “Aw, yeah, that sucks. I wish I could be in your class instead.”

Shikamaru nodded in complete agreement. He noticed the other kids around them watching, as if Yoshi having a friend was weird. “Ino?” he asked.

Yoshi ducked his head. The hair fell loose and hid his face again, and he pretended to be too occupied with his lunch to have the time to answer.

Shikamaru shuffled closer on the bench and put his arm around Yoshi’s shoulders. He didn’t really get it – he and Chouji agreed that Yoshi was tons nicer and more likeable than Ino – but if all these other kids wanted to be idiots, that meant there was more of Yoshi left for Shikamaru.

“So, what are you going to do?” he asked quietly.

Yoshi grinned through the curtain of pale hair. “Oh, she’ll regret it.”

Shikamaru nodded. And, because he knew Ino, he whispered back: “If you need to hide from her, come to our house. You can live with us.” They could even share a room. Yoshi was not loud all the time.

“x

“What is all this?” Shikaku inquired, trying to sound less worried than he felt.

His son, sitting in the centre of the carpet, glanced over the absolute mess of paper spread over half of his room. “Recon.”

“Recon,” Shikaku repeated. He picked up one of the papers.

It was a copy of a student’s file. Watanabe Hiro. Class 1-C at the Shinobi Academy, civilian parents, preliminary estimate as little potential. There were notes penciled in the margins of the paper.

Quick check revealed that there were a lot more similar profiles and similar notes, as well as a pile yet to be processed.

He shivered. “Shikamaru, why are you making plans to have your classmates expelled?”

Shikamaru, writing around the intake photo of Yoshitami Keiko, sighed, like explaining himself was far too much of an effort. “The reason for having three classes in the first year of the Academy is that many of the students will fail to meet expectations and be removed from the program. It is expected that by the fourth year there will be less than thirty students left, and those will all graduate.”

“That’s right,” Shikaku agreed, “but it’s not actually an explanation.”

Shikamaru briefly glared upwards from where he was sitting on the floor, and then turned back to his
work. “I’m saving time and resources. None of these people will be able to become ninja. If they are
dismissed now, the remaining students can be folded into one class.”

Shikaku suppressed a snort. “Shikamaru, I know you miss your friends, but listen to me. You are not
allowed to sabotage your classmates.”

“I won’t get caught,” the boy protested, offended.

“Not by your teachers, perhaps.” Seeing the preparations in progress, Shikaku was absolutely ready
to believe this. “But by me. And I’m saying no.”

This time Shikamaru’s glare was sustained and mulish.

Shikaku was almost, almost tempted to let him do it, if only because this was more enthusiasm than
he had seen from his son ever, and he was supportive of that cunning, devious streak. But for once
morals won, and he mimed ‘I’m watching you’ at his sullen child before he left him to tidy up the
mess.

x

“That’s new,” Inoichi remarked over the dinner table as his son sat down – as far from his daughter
as possible.

Yoshi reached up and touched the headband. It was orange but, oddly enough, Yoshi could carry it
off. “Is it okay? I tried to pull my hair back, but it’s too short for a proper ponytail.”

“Hey!” Ino cried. “That’s mine!”

Yoshi flinched.

Inoichi did not like where this was going.

“It’s not,” Yoshi muttered. He looked at Inoichi pleadingly. “It’s not Ino’s, really, I promise. I bought
it on the way from school at that shop on Aspen Lane. With my pocket money. I’m not a thief.”

Inoichi looked at his daughter.

She crossed her arms and looked away.

He put his chopsticks down and stood up.

Ino tensed, but Yoshi looked like he wanted to hide from him under the table and maybe cry, and
that was unacceptable. Yuuki was busy travelling and procuring new specimen for the shop, and
Inoichi was busy with his work, and apparently his two children could not be left to their own
devices, if this was the result.

“Ino?” he asked softly. “Why did you just lie to me?”

“Uhm… I… Daddy?”

He frowned. “I’m waiting for an answer, daughter. I am not interested in your scams right now.”

Ino let the cute expression go and puffed up her cheeks. She shrugged. “Why not? It’s easy.”

“It’s easy to lie to me?” Inoichi repeated, incredulous. There were A-class ninja that would have
disagreed.
“It’s easy to lie to everybody!” Ino snapped. “Everybody is stupid, Daddy! I can tell them anything, and they’ll believe it!”

“She’s right,” agreed Yoshi, looking small and sad and angry. “They’ll believe anything she tells them.”

Oh Hell no, thought Inoichi. “This ends now.”

x

The Head of T&I walked into his office for a graveyard appointment, and Hiruzen immediately felt a sense of apprehension.

Last time they met like this, the papers in Yamanaka Inoichi’s hands were a petition for adoption. Whatever he was bringing in now, Hiruzen almost certainly was not going to like it.

“Good evening, Inoichi-kun,” he said with plastic joviality. “Have a seat. How is your family?”

The man grimaced. “Not optimal.”

Hopefully, this was not what Hiruzen thought it was.

“In fact, this is exactly what I have come about, Hokage-sama. I have recently found that there are things I have neglected and…” He leaned forwards and placed the papers in front of Hiruzen.

They were not what Hiruzen had expected.

They were… surprising.

In a fit of spontaneity, Hiruzen grabbed his pen and signed before he could think better of it. It was an impractical decision for the village, but he was a father himself and knew that practical decisions for the village came at a steep cost.

He handed the papers over and took a small enjoyment from the perplexed look on his former Head of T&I’s face. “The Department will miss you, but there are more ways to skin a cat.”

x

Naruto woke up in the middle of the night when someone opened the door of his room.

Ino stood on the threshold, like a ghost with glowy blue eyes. “You set me up with Dad.”

“You deserved it!” Naruto snarled, and bared his teeth. “And if you come to my room again, I’ll come to yours, too.”

And he was going to set up a nasty prank in there. He would put the ugliest, slimiest toad in her bed, and it would jump on her face and she would scream. Maybe he would put a little trap on his door, too. There was a textbook for one of the classes that had diagrams.

“Maybe,” said Ino, stepping back into the corridor, “you are a real Yamanaka, after all.”

x

“Hey, guys!” Yoshi called out, just before he climbed up the jungle gym.

“Yoshi!” Chouji turned around and hugged him quickly before Shikamaru could steal him for
himself. Shika kinda hoarded Yoshi even more than Chouji hoarded food. He never talked about it, but whenever they had to split and go home, he always scowled and slouched more and kicked at stuff all the way to his house.

“You look happy, Blondie,” Shika said. Normally he wouldn’t ever move once he found a comfortable position on top of the gym, but now he shuffled off, making space for Yoshi between him and Chouji.

“Uh-uh,” Yoshi agreed.

Shikamaru grabbed his hand before he could take off the headband and hide his face behind his hair. “Don’t pick up bad habits now.”

“I won’t if you stop chewing your sleeves,” Yoshi countered.

Shika scowled. “Deal.”

Chouji had a strong suspicion that Shikamaru would just start wearing short sleeves, or binding the edges the way older ninja did… or maybe just cut them off. Still, it would be good for him; Chouji didn’t want to say anything, but that habit kinda always made Shika look like a baby.

And Shika hadn’t let go of Yoshi’s hand. It was part of that hoarding that Chouji noticed. Also, he always pushed Yoshi’s hair out of his face, even when it didn’t actually fall into his eyes or anything.

He never did any of that stuff with Chouji. Not that Chouji wanted him to – he was happy when Shikamaru returned hugs. That depended on Shikamaru’s mood. Which wasn’t fair, because he always returned Yoshi’s hugs, and Chouji would have been so jealous except you couldn’t be jealous of Yoshi if you tried.

“So, how’d it go with Ino?” Shikamaru asked quietly.

Yoshi grinned. “Just like planned. Only, I didn’t even have to say anything about wanting to colour code our practice kunai so they wouldn’t get confused. It’s like she forgot it was Dad and not one of the Academy sensei and started lying for the heck of it.”

“Is she very mad?” asked Chouji. Ino was scary when she was mad. She yelled, and then set up everybody to look like troublemakers in front of the grown-ups.

Yoshi shook his head. “Nah. I thought she would be, too – but she started talking to me. Like, for real. Like I just became a real person to her.”

Chouji wondered if that was the big secret. If, to be friends with Ino, you had to stand up to her and defeat her at her own games. Even if it was so, he could never do it.

Shikamaru met Chouji’s eye. He was frowning, and his hand tightened around Yoshi’s. “You’re going to be friends with her now?”

Yoshi shrugged. “I’m gonna try. It would be great if we could all be friends, ne?” He grinned, and leaned into Shika’s side.

Shikamaru looked unconvincingly but also distracted, and Chouji couldn’t help but hope that it would work out. He’d like being on team with Ino a lot more if Ino was their friend and only played her games with other people.
Yuuki came home exhausted and looking forward to a shower, but before she could get to it she had to run the gauntlet of her family.

“Mum!” yelled Ino, and launched herself at her.

“Mum? Mum!” Yoshi came in on her heels and joined in on the hug.

Yuuki freed a hand to prevent the imminent bloodshed but, to her shock, Ino did not even shove Yoshi. She didn’t seem entirely happy with the situation, but the extent of her protest was sticking out her tongue and, huh, had Yuuki truly been gone that long?

What had happened?

“Is this dark magic?” she inquired.

Her husband walked out of the living room – at half past six, was this his day off? – and embraced her over the tops of their children’s heads. “Welcome home, dear. I resigned from the Department,” he whispered.

Yuuki grabbed him around the back of his neck and kissed him hard. The kids made disgusted noises and extricated themselves to get away from all the affection, but Yuuki didn’t even care – she was just so deliriously happy.

I minute later they were both still standing there, holding one another. Having caught their breath, Yuuki inquired: “You did not take Yoshi for a haircut once since I left, did you?”

Inoichi shrugged, not even sheepish. “The first month got away from me, and then he refused. Determined to grow it out.”

Yuuki tugged on his own ponytail. “I wonder where he got that idea.”
Wow, can I just say I greatly appreciate the supportive response? Thank you, gentlebeings!

That said, don't kill me.

“Bleach Boy! Bleach Boy!”

Iruka sighed and lamented his bottom position on the Academy totem pole – there was a reason why nobody wanted to supervise lunch breaks.

On some days Kiba-kun was a lot more trouble than he was worth. Marks just barely above the cut-off line, no discipline to speak of, an especially disruptive ninken puppy (that could not be barred from the classroom if Iruka wanted to avoid a complaint to the Council from one of the scariest Clan Heads, which Iruka did want, because he was newly assigned to the Academy and couldn’t afford that sort of trouble) and a habit of trying to bully his classmates.

“Leave Yoshi-kun alone, Dog Boy!” yelled one of the girls. Her voice was pitched so high that Iruka couldn’t even guess at who she might have been.

Another of Kiba-kun’s unfortunate characteristics was an extremely hard head. Yoshi-kun was popular enough – a little too popular for someone with so few genuine friends, but with him being the adopted brother of the Yamanaka Clan Heiress, no one was surprised – so trying to bully him was downright stupid.

“It’s okay, Ami-chan,” Yoshi-kun said with despondence that was as fake as it was funny on a seven-year-old. “I know it’s silly to bleach my hair—”

“Oh no! It looks so great on you!”

“Blond is definitely your colour!”

“Don’t listen to the idiot, Yoshi-kun!”

“Thank you, guys.” There was a smile in that voice. “You’re really nice to me. I just wanna feel like I belong to my family, and you know the Yamanaka…”

“Champagne blond,” said one of the girls under her breath to the others, confirming the theory that, being adopted, Yoshi-kun was sensitive about feeling like he belonged.

Frankly, Iruka absolutely understood his desire to fit in with his adoptive family. And Yoshi-kun did not actually smell of bleach – at least not to anyone who didn’t have an extremely sensitive canine nose.

Shikamaru’s name was right in the middle of the hiragana, and he ended up being assigned to class
2-A with Chouji rather than with the blondes. He did not mind this.

Yoshi had changed.

Obviously, he had done it so he would not be bullied anymore, and he did make it a point to stop bullies regardless of whomever they targeted now that he had some personal power, but this still wasn’t the Yoshi that Shikamaru wanted to spend time with. He was way too Ino-like.

The classes were still boring – no change there – the teachers still catered to the clan children over the civilian students – no clan member had been dismissed from the program – the children were even stupider and nosier – however counterintuitive it might have seemed – and there was a boy in class B that always ate his lunch surrounded by a bevy of admirers.

“Um, Shika?” inquired Chouji.

Shikamaru raised his head from the desk and looked at his best friend.

His best friend was holding an open bag of chips in his direction. “You look sad. Eating always makes me feel better.”

Shikamaru smiled and took a chip. Chewing was a bother, but for Chouji – who grinned, happy to have helped – he was willing to exert himself.

“D’you think Yoshi could start coming to Saturdays again?”

Shikamaru shook his head. The few weeks after Yoshi had stopped coming had been terrible for everybody. Chouji had cried a lot, and that made Shikamaru mad – mad enough to even yell, to his parents’ shock. Everyone had yelled at everyone. Only it was obvious how sad Inoichi-ji-san had been, so Shikamaru stopped yelling and started listening and thinking and…

He knew why Yoshi couldn’t come. He just didn’t want to tell Chouji.

“Maybe Yoshi would come play with us after school like he did last year?” Chouji asked after a while.

“Maybe…” Shikamaru wasn’t sure. It was likely that Yoshi had a lot of better offers now.

Chouji nodded to himself. “I’m going to ask him.”

x

“Uhm, I’m sorry,” Naruto said quietly, toeing the dirt with his sandal. “I can’t.” Mum was leaving tomorrow early morning on another trip, and they were spending the last night together as a family – there was a restaurant reservation and all.

Chouji’s face fell.

Naruto felt really guilty. “I want to, though? Could we do it next week?”

“Yeah!” This seemed to cheer Chouji up – enough that he hugged Naruto, right there, in the middle of the schoolyard.

“Let go of Yoshi-kun, fatty!”

Naruto was jerked with the force of Chouji’s flinch. Chouji immediately let go and stepped away, face falling, shoulders hunching and – just no.
Naruto gritted his teeth, reminded himself of what Dad had told him – don’t let them see they have gotten to you, it makes them feel like they have power, and confident enemies are harder to emotionally destroy. Instead he made sure to look simply surprised as he grabbed for Chouji’s wrist and turned around to face Keiko.

“Oh,” he said, pulling Chouji closer with all his might, which didn’t actually move Chouji at all, “but, Keiko-chan, Chouji’s my friend! He’s big and strong and will be an awesome ninja!” He made a face like he absolutely didn’t understand what Keiko had said and why.

Chouji’s breath caught. He stopped resisting and let Naruto drag him closer.

“What?” Keiko yelped. “I-I didn’t mean… Yoshi-kun-”

“I like Chouji very much, and when he’s sad it makes me sad-”

“I’m sorry! Yoshi-kun… and Chouji-ku-n!” She looked horrified that she might have offended ‘Yoshi-kun’ instead of her target, and thus lost her position as one of ‘Yoshi-kun’s favoured classmates’.

“What do you think, Chouji?” Naruto prodded.

Chouji shrugged. “Yeah, okay.” He didn’t sound convincing.

Naruto put his arm around Chouji’s shoulders as far as he could reach standing on his tiptoes, and watched as Keiko apologised again, this time a little more sincerely, and then ran away, embarrassed, followed by a few other girls that had come as her backup.

The others were lucky that they hadn’t said anything; hopefully they would learn from Keiko’s example. Naruto would tell on her to Ino, and Ino would make sure there was either a ‘looking a little chubby, Keiko-chan?’ campaign or ‘Keiko-chan is crushing on Chouji from class A’ rumour among the girls. That should teach her how nasty bullying was. Naruto preferred direct confrontation, which was better to deal with boys, so he and Ino had an exchange program for these things.

“I’m not very good at being subtle yet,” he said quietly to Chouji, “but Ino is right. This is like taking candy from babies. People are very stupid. Kids especially.”

Chouji shrugged, dislodging Naruto’s arm. “I’m used to it-”

“I know,” Naruto cut him off. Of course he was – Chouji was an easy target, with an obvious weakness that he was extremely sensitive to. “So is Shikamaru. So are we. The difference is that Ino and I use it, Shikamaru ignores it and you… are letting them hurt you.”

“But.”

“Is your Dad fat?”

“No!” Chouji exclaimed. “It’s all muscle!”

“Is your Mum fat?”

“No!” The boy went red in the face. “She’s pretty!”

“See? It’s what happens when you grow up. Look at Shikamaru – he’s like a walking skeleton. But he’s gonna get tall and strong like Shikaku-ji-san!”
“But you and Ino are pretty,” Chouji protested quietly.

Naruto shrugged. “And maybe we’ll grow out of it, too. You’ll see. One day people are gonna scrunch up their noses at us and sigh about how cute we used to be and where did it all go?”

“I doubt that,” said Shikamaru. “You’re not caterpillars, Blondie.”

Naruto and Chouji startled and looked to the Academy building; Shikamaru was standing in the shadow of the front door and leaning against the wall. He was watching them like they were an especially interesting game of go.

“How long have you been there?” Naruto asked, even though he was already sure that Shikamaru had heard the ‘walking skeleton’ thing. He felt heat rise in his cheeks. “I didn’t mean-”

“Come on, Chouji. Class started a minute ago. We’re already late, and if I skip again this week, Mum’s going to take it out of my hide.” Shikamaru put his hands in his pockets and shuffled off inside.

“Uh… thanks, Yoshi,” Chouji said, running after his best friend. “See you next week!”

If you still want to, Naruto thought, biting his lip to suppress the urge to cry. Because the way Shikamaru had looked at him… maybe by gaining a lot of easy friends he was losing the few really important friends he had.

x

“He didn’t mean it like that,” Chouji implored over their glasses of lemonade. “He wasn’t being mean. He was just trying to make me feel better.”

“I know,” Shikamaru grumbled, and sucked on his straw.

He was lying to Chouji. He was letting Chouji think that the comment about Shikamaru’s appearance – which was absolutely correct, and did not offend Shikamaru in any way (he had heard way worse from his Mum) – had bothered him.

Shikamaru was not bothered. He was troubled, and the troublesome source of the trouble was that he had been punched in the solar plexus. At least so it had felt, watching Yoshi defend Chouji, take some little girl apart with just a couple of sentences and then try so hard to convince Chouji that he had no reason to be embarrassed by how he looked.

“Shika, please don’t be mad at Yoshi, please?”

Shikamaru pressed his palm to his chest. Like a punch, stealing his breath.

“I’m sure he’ll apologise when we meet him next week. He said yes. He’ll come out with us after school-”

“I’m not going,” Shikamaru announced.

He slid off the bench, left his half-empty lemonade glass behind for Chouji to finish and walked away, ignoring Chouji’s calls.

Like a punch.

x
After lights-out, Yuuki snuck into her son’s bedroom.

Just as she had expected, he wasn’t actually asleep. He was crying into his pillow.

“Oh, baby,” she said softly, sitting on the edge of his bed. She stroked his hair. “What’s wrong?”

“N’thing,” he sniffled.

Yuuki gathered him up and pulled him to her chest; he put his arms around her neck and buried his face in her shoulder. She rocked him a little. Oh, of course they had noticed – during the dinner, and the board games and the late night movie – both she and Inoichi had known there was something wrong with their boy, but he had been trying so hard not to show it, to be so cheerful for them, that they didn’t call him on it.

Yuuki couldn’t leave in the morning if her son was crying himself to sleep at night.

“Tell me,” she whispered.

“’m sorry.”

“Did you do something wrong?” she asked. If he did, they would solve it. Apologise, make it up to whoever had been hurt. Of course such a little boy would feel that his problems were unsolvable – that was why he had adults to turn to.

Yoshi nodded into her shoulder. “I said something mean about Shikamaru. I didn’t mean it. I said I was sorry. But he doesn’t wanna be friends with me ‘nymore.”

Well, Yuuki was hundred percent certain that was not the case. “Maybe he just needs a little time. He’s hurt now, but the hurt heals and goes away. You’ll have to be patient, but Shikamaru-kun is worth waiting for, isn’t he?”

Yoshi nodded into her shoulder again.

x

“What’s wrong with you?!” Ino demanded, kicking Chouji in the calf.

“Yeowch!”

Shikamaru opened one eye and glowered at her. “I have no qualms about hitting girls, Ino. Hurt Chouji again-”

“Has every boy I know turned into a blubbery mess?! I thought girls were supposed to be the crybabies!” She stomped her foot. “You’re boring and annoying, and so is Yoshi, and so is Dad, and I’m going to find some better friends!”

“It’s been a while since a Saturday exploded this badly,” muttered Inoichi.

Shikaku put his hand on his friend’s shoulder; Chouza did the same from the other side.

“What the hell happened this time?”

Inoichi shrugged. “Yuuki got Yoshi to talk a little, but all I know is that Yoshi said something about Shikamaru, Shikamaru broke off their friendship, and poor Chouji got caught in the middle.”

“Yoshi?” Chouza repeated. “Said something bad about Shikamaru? I can’t even imagine that.”
“I can’t imagine my son breaking off his friendship with Yoshi regardless of what he might have said,” added Shikaku. He rubbed his goatee. This was beyond troublesome, and he was going to figure it out.

x

“Nee-chan?” Naruto asked once the customer left and Ayaka-nee remained alone in the shop.

“Where did you come from, Yoshi-kun?” she exclaimed, startled. “You look a fright!”

Naruto pointed over his shoulder to the backdoor leading to the garden with the greenhouses. He had tended the plants all morning. They were good listeners, plants. He told them all about Chouji and Shikamaru and missing his Mum, and, okay, he cried all over himself again and tried to wipe his tears away and smeared mud over his face.

“Sorry, nee-chan,” Naruto said, and sniffled.

“Let’s get you washed up. Are you home alone again?”

Naruto obediently went over to the sink and refused to climb onto the stool, even though he had to stretch really far to reach. The water was cold, and Ayaka-nee made him use the raspy towel to scrub his face and hands properly, until they were raw and red.

“Good,” she decided after giving him a thorough inspection. “Now, do you have any chores to do, or are you free today?”

Naruto shook his head. “Saturdays are Greenhouse Days.” They used to be Mum Days, but Mum wasn’t home a lot anymore.

Ayaka-nee humphed. “Well, from now on, Saturdays are Shop Days. I’m usually here, and if I need the day off, Rikuto takes over for me. You’ll be our shop assistant. We’ll teach you everything about selling flowers, yeah?”

Naruto punched the air and said, as determined as he could: “Yosh!”

x

“Anything you want to tell me?” Shikaku inquired over the shogi board.

“You’ll lose if you don’t focus, Pops,” said his son, curled up in an armchair too big for him, looking for all the world like a cat. With a spiky ponytail.

The threat was credible – one day soon Shikamaru would be able to defeat Shikaku in shogi, especially if Shikaku didn’t entirely concentrate on the game. But it wasn’t the point.

“Pops?” he repeated, although that wasn’t the point either.

“Problem?” The expression and tone of voice seemed to belong to someone at least three times the boy’s age. He was not even insolent as someone twice his age might have been to a parent – just plain challenging Shikaku to call him on his bullshit, like that was a game they were playing in addition to the shogi.

“I don’t give a damn what you call me,” Shikaku parried, moving a piece on the board, “and neither do you give a damn what people call you.” Not even Ino could get a rise out of him, no matter how hard she tried (short of hurting Chouji, but Shikaku was certain that Ino would never go that far).
“Sometimes someone hits a sore spot,” Shikamaru said and leaned over to make his move.

“I’ve heard someone apologised.”

Shikamaru glowered. “Well, an apology doesn’t always make everything right, does it, Pops? I forfeit.” He lurched out of the armchair and dragged his feet upstairs to his room.

Shikaku sighed and tidied up the game. Obviously something more had happened, and nobody who knew talked. Chouji and Ino were both in the dark regarding the true conflict. And, Shikaku knew, if his son was standing by idly and letting Chouji hurt like this, it meant that whatever had happened had been really fucking important.

Ino spotted her brother, stopped in the middle of the room, and pointed her index finger at him. “I like it.”

Yoshi seemed shocked for a moment, and then brightened up. “Thanks. It’s neat, huh?” He shook his head; his brand new ponytail swung this way and that. He didn’t leave a fringe the way Ino and Dad did, and there was no trace of the orange headband – although he had picked an orange hair tie, so Ino didn’t doubt it was, indeed, her stupid brother.

“Finished bawling?” she demanded.

He nodded decisively. “It’s the new and improved Yamanaka Yoshi!” He punched the air. “The Yamanaka Flowers Shop Assistant!”

Ino snorted. “Better you than me. And come on, your roots are showing. We have to deal with those before someone at school notices you’re a fashion disaster.”

It was a sleet of bad luck that brought Kakashi to Training Ground Twenty-Two – a mission had gone to hell, one of his team members was growing more unstable by the day and soon enough would need intervention from Psych (but Kakashi so hated reporting anyone for mental instability), another lead on Minato-sensei’s son had dried out and, instead of getting his well-deserved eighteen-hour sleep, Kakashi had woken up from a nightmare about Obito.

To top off the shit cake, Gai was out of the village, so Kakashi was left to blow off steam all on his lonesome.

That never ended well.

He started blasting his way through the training ground Minato-sensei used to prefer, and hoped that after the landscaping there would be nothing at all recognisable in the place left.

One of his Doton jutsu ripped a crack in the earth and Kakashi went on, destroying everything he came across. He hadn’t noticed how far he had gone, until-

“Stand back!” shouted a young man’s voice. A half-spherical barrier rose around a copse of trees right in front of Kakashi; the shouting young man was crouched behind it, palms pressed to an ofuda stretched in front of him and covered in a complex seal.

“Hm,” Kakashi said, not entirely unimpressed.
“Form pairs!” barked the man. “Hold hands; don’t move; stay quiet; don’t distract me!”

And, well, that didn’t make sense. At all. Kakashi was just fine with standing back, but forming pairs would require at least a Kage Bunshin, and he was not inclined to hold hands. Before he got further in facetiously misanalysing the set of orders, some slight movement within the half-sphere revealed other people present.

Small people. Tiny people, in fact.

“Daycare?” Kakashi inquired. His killing intent was by now completely under wraps, and the chakra he had amassed was also dissipating. There was little he could do about the smoking ruins of a training field behind himself, short of a genjutsu – although that seal looked complex enough that it might have shielded against genjutsu, too.

“Second year Academy,” hissed the – probably still – teenager behind the barrier, who had in the meantime identified Kakashi as a Konoha shinobi, and not a traitor (just a really absent-minded and overworked poor chap). “This training field is permanently designated for Academy field practice, jounin-san. Most ninja have the presence of mind not to use A-rank jutsu around here.”

That was a lot of venom for a scrupulously polite sentence. Kakashi remained in his slightly impressed state.

“Ah, did I scare the pipsqueaks? Sorry.” He was a little sorry, but he made it a point not to sound like he was.

The young man’s eyes narrowed. “If I had known you would try to kill my students, I would not have cared so much about keeping you from hitting yourself with a lightning ball.”

The statement was a little vague – in deference to tiny ears – but clear enough that Kakashi managed to parse it. Finally he recognised the gennin that had startled him out of committing suicide out of a combination of exhaustion, grief and fury.

“Young,” he remarked. Had to have been a child last time they met. He grinned. “Not getting sexiled anymore, huh?”

The eyes narrowed further, to a pair of slits. Kakashi felt the heat of that gaze, and it made him want to grin more.

“I gaslighted that man out of that room within a couple of weeks of our meeting,” said the teenager, with the due amount of self-satisfaction.

Kakashi went from amused back to mildly impressed.

“Now, if you would be so kind as to… sod off, jounin-san, we were doing something here before you rudely interrupted and put us all into terrible danger.”

Oh, Kakashi was going to get reported again. And this time he did not even mind. He could get used to being reported hard.

“Alternatively,” said the vindictive chuunin, “you are welcome to stand around like a fencepost and wait for Daikoku-sensei to come back from his errand and find you here menacing his class and his teaching assistant. On second thought, please stay right where you are-”

“Bye,” said Kakashi, and disappeared in a handy tree.
“Sensei?” asked a little child with far too much blond hair. “What does sek-ziled mean?”

“It means,” said the teenager with a cheerful smile, “that the next time I meet that ninja, I am going to kill him.”

“Wooow!” was the general response to this statement.

The assistant teacher basked in the adoration of his students, and Kakashi was charmed enough that he thought he might let the boy get a hit in to please the audience if that ever happened. Just one, mind you.

The next one would have to be paid for in trade, and Kakashi already had an idea of the price.

“Sensei?” asked Yoshi-kun, so cute that Iruka momentarily forgot how angry he was. “What does gas-lited mean?”

Kakashi was ready for it when Ibiki stood in the doorway to the ANBU lounge and called out: “Hound!”

“Did the little fucker report me again?” he asked cheerfully over the top of his book.

The audience, he checked from the corner of his eye, was on tenterhooks.


Kakashi stashed his book away and followed Ibiki down the hall in the direction of the T&I rather than Psych. That was… unexpected. Worrying.

“So,” he asked while he had the chance, “what’s his name?”

Ibiki’s expression wished immeasurable amounts of pain at him. It was very worrying. “I will not give out our shinobi’s personal information to someone potentially hostile.”

“I am not potentially hostile!” Kakashi protested, with a little more heat than he had intended to put into those words. “It was an oversight on my part – I should have paid more attention to where I was going, and I’ll take responsibility for that fuck up. But I did not, at any point, intend or attempt to harm either him or the children.”

Ibiki’s look remained unfriendly, but that was the man’s default expression, and the tension in the air between them lessened. “Then why do you want to know his name?”

“So I can invite him to dinner, obviously.”

The tension was back and skyrocketing. Huh, looked like Kakashi had unintentionally stepped on somebody’s toes here, although he doubted very much that the cute chūnin was Ibiki’s type. On the other hand, maybe that dissonance was exactly why he could have been Ibiki’s type?

Annoying.

Ibiki opened an interrogation room and stood by for Kakashi to precede him.

They sat down opposite one another. Ibiki fiddled with the lights and the air conditioning. Kakashi
considered pulling out his book again, but decided that there was a limit to how far he could push Ibiki, because Ibiki was still new at this post and hadn’t yet had the time to develop a healthy sense of humour about it.

Too bad that Inoichi had given it up to be a househusband. Or, well, a regular jounin who consulted *ad hoc*, but there wasn’t any appreciable difference there.

“Hound,” Ibiki said eventually – possibly after night had fallen outside, but it was hard to tell underground – “state your personal number and current assignment for the purpose of the recording, and then report in minute detail what happened on the day when you encountered a field practice of the Academy class at Training Ground Twenty-Three.”

Mandatory counseling hell was a little worse this time around. Understandably. While it worried people a little bit that he might be suicidal, nobody would actually put someone with tunnel vision that prevented them from noticing a bunch of kids in charge of a team.

Oops.

Well, more time to devote to his personal project.

It went according to plan, almost like it had been choreographed. Kakashi went in, went through with the assassination, left a mud clone to impersonate the mark in case there were unexpected checks or visitors, and spent half the night rummaging in the mark’s personal archives.

He pulled a few choice documents – just enough paper to start a forest fire – and dropped those anonymously at the Sarutobi Clan compound. By which he meant he ducked around the ANBU guard (not nearly paranoid enough even in these paranoia-saturated days) and slid the documents in under the front door.

He was pissed enough to destroy another field, but the chances of a cute chuunin mysteriously appearing to stop him from doing something stupid – like killing either himself or a bunch of little kids – were negligible on this not so fine a morning.

He sat on the edge of Nidaime’s happuri guard, let his legs dangle over the fall and tried to think what now.

After four years of concentrated effort, Kakashi had managed to get to that fucker and kill him.

His only regret was that he had not managed to do it a few weeks earlier, before the Uchiha massacre happened. Perhaps if he had, Itachi would not have snapped. Itachi had unwittingly – or perhaps not quite so unwittingly, especially toward the end there – supplied a lot of intel Kakashi needed for the assassination.

But a red dawn was rising over the forest in the east, Danzo had tragically fallen down the stairs during the night and broken his neck, and there was nothing at all in the Root’s archives about a child of Uzumaki Naruto’s age, description and unique characteristics.

Kakashi’s mission was not over; he did not know where to start now, but if he had to comb the village inch by inch… Minato-sensei’s son had to be *somewhere*. 
“It’s not here this year either.”

“Maybe it died.”

“Maybe it finally croaked.”

“Ain’t seen it ‘round in a while.”

“Ugh, that thing, creeping around in the gutters…”

“Demon child!”

“Demon!”

Naruto watched as the parents who had already dropped off their children for the first day of the school year congregated in front of the Academy, and reflected. His parents had never lied to him about where he had come from, and he still had a few indistinct memories of the time before he was adopted, but this really put it into perspective.

Naruto loved his parents very much, and was very grateful for them. He even loved his sister, although that was sometimes difficult.

“Oh, the Yamanaka children,” said someone in the same huddle of mothers by the gate. “So beautiful!”

“Unbelievable, really. They could be actors!”

“They could be models!”

Naruto loved his family very much. For a lot of reasons.

“Hear that, Mum?” Ino drawled, pulling out a round cosmetic mirror and checking her face, “we’re the prettiest.” She tried not to open her mouth too wide, ‘cause she didn’t want anyone to see that she was missing two teeth.

When Naruto’s baby teeth fell out, the new ones always grew in overnight. Ino’s took ages.

Mum shook her head in mock dismay. “Well, they’re right, Ino-chan, but if you come back home with a swelled head, I will make sure to puncture it during our weapons practice.”

Ino shuddered.

Naruto didn’t know why. Mum was awesome with kunai and shuriken and even senbon, and she taught taijutsu a lot better than Dad did, so Naruto always enjoyed it when she was home and spent time teaching them. Dad took over whenever she was travelling, but he was just a lot better at teaching the other stuff.

“Yeah, Sisterror,” he said, taking advantage of the golden opportunity, “if we let you stay full of hot air, you’ll float off one day, and what a tragedy that will urk.”

Ino retracted her hand from Naruto’s stomach and calmly stashed away her mirror.
Mum sighed at them. “Try to remember that how you act reflects on the Clan, will you?”

Ino and Naruto exchanged a look and nodded. They both turned wide, innocent eyes at their Mum.

Mum didn’t seem impressed at all. “And, what we’ve talked about yesterday-”

“You repeated it a million times, Mum,” Ino pointed out. “We’re unlikely to forget.”

“And you know I don’t stand for bullying,” Naruto added.

If anyone said or did anything nasty to that last Uchiha boy, they were going to inflict the full Power of Blond on them. Ino and Naruto were rivals, sure, but on this one thing they were in complete agreement.

The third year of the Academy only had one class.

There should have been two, still, with Shikamaru safely on the other side of the wall from the two pains in his neck, but the Uchiha massacre happened. Their year only lost two Uchiha students, but it was enough for a number of the civilian parents to panic, realise what they had signed their children up for, and pull those children out of the program.

Hence only one class. Luckily, they scored Iruka-sensei as their homeroom teacher. Also luckily, Shikamaru and Chouji sat in the back with the other social outcasts – Minekawa Fuyumi, an orphan who had apparently been subjected to something that had caused her to close off; Aburame Shino, who barely spoke and did not socialise at all, and Inuzuka Kiba, who was tolerable enough in very small doses and sort-of friends with Chouji since they started the Academy in the same class. The outcasts by the laws of nature didn’t have much direct contact with the Yamanaka siblings, who sat in the centre of the popular crowd as though they were holding court.

“I’ll ask him to have lunch with us,” Chouji announced. “I’ve packed an extra bento-”

“You mean Bleach Boy?” Kiba cut in. “Yeah, dream on.”

His ball of fluff that would one day resolve into a dog yipped in agreement.

“Let him have his graft,” Shikamaru mumbled into his arms, ready to fall asleep on his desk the instance Iruka-sensei would shut up the students and start droning on about the Shinobi Rules or the History of Konoha or whatever. “He’s working hard for it.”

“So whatcha mean, graft?” asked Kiba.

Shikamaru didn’t feel like opening an eye to convey his estimation of Kiba’s intelligence. “Graft. Con. He’s charming the crowd. Let him. When he wants to be a real person again, he knows where to find us.”

Chouji angrily shoved the second bento into his bag. “That’s not fair! He’s like this because you stopped being his friend, not the other way around.”

And that hurt. A little. Because it was true, and because Chouji was still suffering the repercussions.

But Shikamaru had made his decision, and it was a good decision. Chouji would get it one day. Until then, Shikamaru was just glad that Chouji loved him too much to stop being his friend over it.
When Inoichi came home from work after a hard day of running drills with ANBU trainees, his wife was lying in wait for him. She might not have been literally lying, but she had definitely been waiting, and the expression on her face read as ‘we need to talk’.

Inoichi was an elite jounin of Konoha. He did not scare easily.

Yuuki rolled her eyes at his wary expression. “I was tidying up the bedroom, and found your lesson plans for Ino and Yoshi.”

Inoichi wasn’t sure what was the problem. He had consulted Yuuki regarding those plans, and they had agreed on the rough schedule. “I based them on my Father’s plans for me, only spread them over twice the amount of time, since we’re not actually at war right now.”

“Right now?” Yuuki repeated suspiciously.

“Just realistic future outlook, no concrete news,” he assured her.

She sighed in relief.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you.” He sat down next to her and suddenly felt the weight of the past ten hours crash on him. This was nonsense. He wasn’t nearly as old as to feel this tired after supervising ANBU recruits. There had only been two emergencies, and only one of them ran the risk of a fatality. It was a slow day by ANBU standards.

“Honey,” Yuuki said, “I know you want to focus on teaching Yoshi Clan techniques, and I absolutely agree. But that does not mean he should be denied his own heritage.”

Oh. Inoichi had… forgotten about that. Yoshi was his son, and it had been a very long time since Inoichi had looked at the boy and remembered Namikaze Minato. “Am I doing that?”

“No, you are not.” Yuuki patted his knee. “Not more than you must by the order of Hokage-sama, anyway. But there are still things you could give him.”

“Well, I don’t know anyone who has a clue about chakra chains, but we can start him on fuuinjutsu. I’ll ask Hideyoshi.”

“With his parents being one Uzumaki and one homegrown fuuinjutsu genius, he is bound to take to it,” Yuuki approved, flashed a brief smile, and promptly turned grave again. “Also, we’ll have to tell him about you-know-what.”

It was too early. Far too early. Yoshi was only not quite nine yet… But he was starting the serious Clan training, and it was better to tell him now so he could build a solid sense of self and not have to start again from the ground up once that truth-bomb was dropped on him. It was the reason why Inoichi made sure that the boy never forgot his first name and his origins, even though he might have been happier not remembering.

Inoichi agreed with the decision to tell Naruto. But there was a pretty serious catch. “If you can convince the Hokage to give us the dispensation. I am not risking either of us being executed over bullshit charges – and you know there are people that would push it.”

“Yes, dear.” She stood, kissed him on the brow, and left.

Yuuki was what they called ‘offensive imitator’ at the office. She could get into people’s heads – not literally, like Inoichi, but figuratively – and act like their double or their mirror, whichever the mission required. For instance, she didn’t have any exceptional talent for strategy, but she had once
nearly beaten Shikaku at shogi simply by imitating him – in essence letting him play himself.

Inoichi had no idea how she was doing it. It wasn’t a kekkei genkai – just a very special skill that she had honed until it became a great weapon in the village’s arsenal. He had literally delved into her mind a few times over the course of their relationship and he still didn’t have the first clue about how the trick worked.

He did not ask how she did it this time when she came back from the Hokage office looking smug. He just accepted the scroll from her hand, and kissed that hand in mute adoration.

"Uhm,” Yoshi asked, frowning, “by Nine-tailed Fox you mean the demon that attacked Konoha nine years ago?”

Yuuki and Inoichi nodded.

“Uhm… err… Daikoku-sensei said that Yondaime-sama killed the demon?”

“That is not entirely correct,” admitted Yuuki. “It’s what we call ‘historical negationism’ -”

“So, like, a lie that sounds better than the truth?” Yoshi suggested. “Written-by-the-victors sort of thing?”

Inoichi was still waiting for the blow-up. This discussion was far too calm and light-hearted for such a heavy and upsetting topic.

Yoshi’s hand rose to tug at his hair, encountered air, and with belated realisation moved to tug at his still-new ponytail instead. “Uhm… So that’s why I came to you that way, huh? And why people still sometimes say that stuff…” He bit his lip.

Inoichi took a deep breath and braced himself.

Yuuki simply nodded.

“So, who else knows? Are they gonna take me away when I’m a ninja?”

“Absolutely not,” Yuuki snapped. “You’re our son, and they can take you out of our cold, dead-”

“Dear,” Inoichi hissed. Cold and dead was still frighteningly possible if the wrong people caught wind that Yoshi was Naruto. “Hokage-sama knows. Shikaku and Chouza do – I am not sure about Yoshino and Mayu?”

“Yes,” Yuuki confirmed. “And that’s it, Yoshi. Please, keep it that way.”

“I promise,” Yoshi said quietly. “I don’t want to be taken away.”

Inoichi hoped the blow up would not be literal. And if it was, that Yoshi would not get caught.

There were no literal explosions. There was some shockingly defamatory graffiti all over the Hokage Mountain, but the perpetrator had not been identified.
When Shikamaru decided to follow the one-eyed jounin around – and was summarily ditched by Chouji, who said he was too hungry to do anything before he had had dinner – he had expected to witness some more suspicious behaviour and maybe have to report to Iruka-sensei about an adult man that had no business hanging around the Shinobi Academy. The run-down izakaya was exactly the kind of place where this jounin would fit in.

Shikamaru had not expected that the man would be waved over to join Inoichi-ji-san and presented with a cup of sake.

Oh, fine. Obviously people knew about this creeper, and that meant that Shikamaru didn’t have to do anything. Cool. He could go home, cloud-watch while there was still a little light and not think about what certain someone was doing right now at all-

“How many psychological problems are too many, and can I afford a stalking charge?” asked the one-eyed jounin with the kind of sarcasm that was a cover for seriousness. Shikamaru only recognised the tone because this was exactly how his parents argued – both were masters of passive aggressiveness.

“You’re already pushing the limit,” Inoichi-ji-san replied gravely – he must have recognised that tone, too. “There were a handful of instances when the only thing that kept you from being decommissioned was Hokage-sama’s guilt.”

“Oh,” the jounin said dryly.

Inoichi-ji-san sighed. “I spoke with Ibiki-kun—”

“Oh?” the jounin cut in, tone changing from dry to acerbic.

“Yes, so I know what this is about. And I would love to see you form an emotional tie. I would. I think it would do you a world of good. But if you’re in this just to stir shit, don’t.”

“And if I mean it?” the other man inquired faux-nonchalantly.

Shikamaru wondered if this was just how jounin communicated – in outright lies and mocking, and words that never meant what they seemed to mean. It did make sense. It also sounded like far too much effort.

He was definitely following in his Mum’s footsteps and remaining chunin for life. Preferably in an administrative position. But not at the Hokage Tower. He had seen what Missions Desk duty did to people.

“You’re an intelligent man, Kakashi,” said Inoichi-ji-san, while the other man drained his cup and set it onto the counter with a quiet clack, “however much you try to hide it. If you want an actual human connection, you won’t get it from stalking. Go home and think about it.”

“Yeah, yeah. I guess we gave our little stalker enough to think about. See you ‘round, taichou.” He slid off his chair and ambled out of the izakaya, past Shikamaru – catching Shikamaru’s eye for just a moment, but even that was enough to make sure that Shikamaru knew he was the ‘little stalker’ in question.

“Get in here,” snapped Inoichi-ji-san.

Shikamaru contemplated the pros and cons of running for the hills, but if he pissed off Inoichi-san chances were that he would regret it very much. Between his parents and Ino, it wasn’t worth it.
He slunk inside the bar, took stock of all the drunks lounging around the place, and then climbed up onto the barstool next to Ino’s Father. He set his forearms on top of the bar and pillowed his chin on them. He’d point out that he was too young and too civilian to be in this place, but it wasn’t as though Inoichiji-san wasn’t aware of that, so why waste words?

“He’s not a danger to anyone at the Academy – but good catch, kid.”

Shikamaru blinked. And blinked. This wasn’t what he had thought the man would say.

“Apropos,” said Inoichiji-san.

Shikamaru warily glanced sideways at him; surely this was a golden opportunity to lay into him regarding … well, all that stuff? That he was trying not to think about? Which was hard, because the Yamanaka were loud, and he spent the days in class with them.

Inoichi-san seemed entirely preoccupied with his sake.

Shikamaru could probably say something first. He should say something. But what?

Inoichi-san sipped and hummed.

Shikamaru swallowed dry. He wasn’t going to mention that thing he didn’t want to talk about. Not at all. If Inoichi-san wanted to discuss it, he would have to bring it up himself.

Inoichi-san idly swirled the liquid in his half-empty cup.

Shikamaru realised he was sweating. His mind kept offering up excuses he could use in an increasingly panicked internal voice. All were at least somewhat plausible. He could explain. He could apologise. He could… beg for forgiveness?

Inoichi-san hummed again. He looked at Shikamaru, one corner of his mouth lifted. “I trust I have made myself clear?”

Shikamaru nodded and fled.

“Finally!” Ino exclaimed. She was all jittery, clutching a notebook with a bunch of sparkly butterflies on the cover to her chest. “Let’s start, Daddy! Are you going to teach us how to tell if somebody lies? How do you always know? And can we learn to make somebody despair and want to kill themselves? There’s this girl in the year above us-”

“Slow down, daughter,” Dad cut her off. “Sit before you wear a groove into the floor. You too, Yoshi. The study of the mind is an incredibly complex and comprehensive undertaking. It will take you a lifetime, and you will still have more questions than answers in the end-”

“But mindfuck, Daddy!”

“Where did you even hear that word!!” Dad exclaimed.

Ino blinked at him innocently.

Dad groaned and sank into an armchair. He covered his eyes with his hand, as though he was getting a headache.

“Stop it before he postpones training again,” Naruto whispered into his sister’s ear.
“Don’t use that word, Ino. Not until you’re at least a gennin. And even then have a really good story about where you learnt it, and it better not be at home.”

“Yes, Daddy,” Ino assured him sweetly.

They knew the Nara – scapegoats were plentiful.

Dad sat up, planted his feet wide and leaned forwards. It was a little scary – just him, sitting there, looking grave and cold like he never usually got at home. “You’re kids, so I’m easing you into it. Yes, Ino, I know you are talented, but talent gets you nowhere without knowledge and practice. So, let’s start close to home. Who is the best ninja in your class?”

“Sasuke-kun!” Ino replied immediately. “He’s strong and serious and has the best marks in everything except flower arranging, because boys don’t have the flower arranging class! I am the best one in that,” she added, beaming.

Dad accepted that answer and turned to Naruto. “Yoshi?”

“Aburame Shino. Hands down.” Quiet, observant, could fade into the background so completely that people didn’t notice him or forgot he was there, with high marks in all subjects but no first place in anything. Sasuke made it easier for him by stealing almost all the first places, but Naruto was pretty sure that even if Sasuke wasn’t there, Shino still wouldn’t have been first in anything.

“Ugh, that freak?”

“Ino, that word does not mean what you think it means. You were saying, Yoshi?”

Naruto shrugged. “I guess Shikamaru is pretty good, too, or could be if he tried, but he just doesn’t ever try.” And Naruto tried not to notice him so much, because it hurt.

“Sasuke-kun has the best scores of our whole year!” Ino argued, waving about her sparkly notebook with its sharp edges, making Naruto duck to avoid having an eye stabbed out. “He’ll be the Rookie of the Year when we graduate!”


“Well,” Dad corrected.

“Of angst,” Naruto punned. “He’s cuckoo, Dad-”

“Don’t say such things about Sasuke-kun, idiot brother!” Ino waved her notebook again, this time intentionally using it as a weapon.

Naruto leaned backwards, away from her, and stuck out his tongue. “The truth hurts, Ichimatsu-chan!”

“Enough!”

“Sorry, Dad.”

“Yeah, sorry, Dad.”

“Conclusion?” Dad crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow.

Naruto huffed and puffed up his cheeks. He knew why he couldn’t claim that the best ninja was
himself, but it wasn’t for a lack of effort. “I suck at the fading into background trick, but I’m pretty good at being noticed but dismissed.”

“Serviceable. Ino?”

“I’ve sold the Sasuke-kun idea already,” she reported proudly – with reason, because Ino could actually claim that she was the best kunoichi. Not that the competition was tough there. “We’re forming an official fanclub, and of course I’ll be the president, because there’s nobody as pretty and cool as me in class!”

“Hyuuga is prettier,” Naruto pointed out. “And, face it, Uchiha’s prettier, too.”

Ino shrugged. “Sasuke-kun is perfect, so I can take it. We’ll make beautiful babies. But Hinata has to die. Or, do you think extensive scarring would be sufficient? I can disfigure her in, like, an afternoon.”

“Ino,” Dad snapped, “if your persona starts leaking into your personality, I’ll take you to the Hard-and-Fast decompression program.”

“I… ah… I thought that one was only for ANBU?”

“It is. Because sometimes people break in it. But we have a limit for acceptable losses, and my technicians are very good at staying below it. I’ll take the chance.”

Ino and Naruto exchanged a worried look. Their Dad wouldn’t really…?

x

Shikamaru thought the Academy was a waste of time that could have been better spent sleeping.

Not that he didn’t sleep a lot there, but the teachers kept waking him up, the bastards. Iruka-sensei threw chalk. It hurt.

The classes continued being boring – zero surprise – the teachers continued catering to clan children over the civilian students – still zero surprise, and also crossing all lines of professionalism when it came to Uchiha Sasuke in particular – the children continued being stupid and noisy – imitating the Yamanaka who were naturally noisy and by now really good at pretending to be complete airheads – and there was a boy in the class whom Shikamaru managed to avoid pretty well for spending so much time in the same room with him.

Only three more years of this. Now, if he could figure out how to maintain a Henge while sleeping, he could fake being awake and avoid any more chalk-bruises.

Laziness was actually a very good motivator.
“Tomorrow,” Inoichi announced once the food was consumed, the argument concluded, and his children had stopped glaring at one another, “starts your final year at the Shinobi Academy.”

“Right, the wasted year,” muttered Ino. She had tried to graduate early, citing boredom at the Academy, which no one bought. Apparently even the lure of Uchiha Sasuke was so strong that she would not try to get out of being placed on a team with Shikamaru-kun and Chouji-kun.

“I do not doubt that you both could take the Academy graduation exam today and pass—”

This was not entirely the truth, because Yoshi still could not seem to create a regular Bunshin, but Inoichi was working on getting him a special dispensation. They let that Rock kid graduate, so holding Yoshi back because a practically useless genjutsu technique was below his limits was ridiculous.

“-but you are not run-of-the-mill gennin candidates. You are Yamanaka clansmen.”

He was pleased to see that both kids straightened and puffed up a little. So long as it didn’t go to their heads.

“We’re not gonna shame the Clan, Dad!” Yoshi exclaimed. “Yosh!”

“Yeah, Dad. I’m, like, the best kunoichi in our year.” She sighed. “Not that it means I’ll get the better team assignment, damnit.”

Inoichi let them enjoy the praise for a moment, before the cold shower came. “You would not, however, pass my own requirements.”

The speed with which their faces fell was hilarious.

“Dad-!”

“But that’s-”

“Quiet!” he ordered. “You want me to regard you as ninja? Well, then it is time you started acting like ninja. You have been taught how to assess personalities and find weakness in enemies. Have you ever used this skill in practice?”

“Daily, for Ino,” grumbled Yoshi.

“What was that?” Inoichi demanded.

Mulishly, Ino raised her chin. “School is a battlefield, Daddy. I have done what I had to, to earn the respect of my peers-”

“Fear,” corrected Yoshi. “The word is fear.”

Ino shrugged to indicate that she did not perceive the difference. Inoichi knew her, though, and he did not want to be here for hours repeating lectures the kids knew by heart, so he skipped over this facetiousness on his daughter’s part. “And you, Yoshi?”
“Here and there, mostly on the bullies,” Yoshi said. “I prefer the other side of things, Dad. I find weaknesses in my allies and patch them up. I kinda like it when people like me. And they do.”

Inoichi took a moment to reflect upon this, and then nodded. “Well done, both of you. To conclude your elementary Clan training, each of you will have to complete a project. You are allowed consultations, but you personally will have to be the one to perform all practical aspects.”

He had hoped for a little anxiety out of them but, as was usual for them, they went straight for excitement. Give them a challenge, and nothing would stop them.

“What kind of project, Dad? Ooh, do we get to break people’s minds?”

Ino twisted her ponytail around her palm. “We’re a little young for enemy conversion.”

“You’re still civilians,” Inoichi reminded them. “I am not letting you anywhere near enemies.”

“I’ll make do with that Ueda bitch that failed graduation. I heard she’s coming back this year. Bet I can make her quit in a month—”

“Don’t terrorise your classmates, Ino,” Inoichi admonished, but without much feeling. His princess knew better than to get caught, so it was no skin off his nose. “No, your assignment is this: choose a classmate that has the potential to be a strong ninja, a credit to the village, but is being hampered by a psychological disorder. You will help them overcome their psychological problems, or at least ameliorate them to the point that they will be ready for service.”

They looked at one another, wide-eyed. Admittedly, this task played more to Yoshi’s strengths, but Inoichi was not willing to set these hellions loose on an ally with the intention to harm. And he had faith in Ino.

“You may choose your own subject – some disorders or traumas are more difficult to deal with, and at this stage I will not make you interact with someone whom you dislike. As I said, you can consult with each other, myself, any of our clansmen or the library.”

“Uhm…” Yoshi’s face scrunched up in thought. “Uhm, can we talk to other people? Not like a consultation, but what if we need to find out something about the subject and we’ve got to ask their friends or family—”

“You may not reveal the true purpose of your questioning to them,” Inoichi cut him off. “Intelligence gathering is within your skill set, and I am not limiting your creativity.”

“What is the actual definition of disorder, here?” asked Ino. “Like, say I wanted to make Shikamaru into a ninja, because he could be strong if he just—”

“No, Ino,” Inoichi sighed, “you may not hit someone until they overcome their problems out of sheer self-preservation. That is physical abuse, punishable by law, and with extremely damaging consequences even if you manage to cure the initial problem. Which you know.”

Ino shrugged, tugging on her fistful of hair. “But, Daddy, I just want to help my future teammate be the best he can be.” She pouted.

“Save it.” Inoichi saw the gleam in her eye, and added: “Conversely, you may not extort your other future teammate into starving himself. And, before either of you gets any bright ideas, you may not choose one another as your subject even though, Izanagi knows, each of you is a therapist’s nightmare.”
They wilted, brilliant notion dashed before it could even occur to them.

That was the trouble with clever children – the little shitheads found loopholes in everything.

"Psychological disorder," Inoichi said, because that was actually a good question, “for the purpose of this exercise, is one of those defined in Chapter Four of Yakushi-sensei’s Comprehensive Encyclopaedia of Malaise.”

“So, what can we *not* do?” asked Yoshi, bouncing back to his previous worrisome glee.

“You may not be caught breaking laws,” Inoichi said hastily. “If you are, I don’t know you, never met you in my life, and project? *What* project?”

“Acknowledged,” Yoshi replied, grinning.

“You may not negate your efforts by damaging your subject. Or, I suppose, damaging them further. The goal here is to help create a sufficiently stable ninja.”

They nodded.

“You may not damage anybody else – example, if you know someone is being bullied, you will not beat up the bullies to make them stop.”

“I don’t like bullies. What, am I supposed to just let them do their thing and walk past? Dad, that’s kinda majorly not okay—”

“Yoshi…” Inoichi sighed. “If they bully anybody but your subject, do what you want. *Don’t get caught.* If they bully your subject, get the subject to solve the problem. Don’t do it for them. Coddling somebody does not help them get strong.”

“Aww, Daddy, you know you love to spoil us—”

“You’re a pair of headaches and I’m swapping you with Hiashi-san’s kids tomorrow. He’ll see through your bullshit in one second flat and put you to task, and I’ll be left with two well-behaved children.”

“You’ll get a fainting, stuttering mess and a little robot girl,” Ino pointed out.

Which, sadly, was fair. Inoichi had met the girls at a few social functions, which was the extent of Ino’s familiarity with Hanabi-chan, too, and the description fit the observations. Hiashi was right to be concerned – Inoichi at least did not have to be afraid that the world would roll over his children.

Ino and Yoshi were going to be the ones to roll over the world. And possibly set it on fire afterwards, but most likely they would tolerate being universally feared and adored.

x

Finally, finally they were asleep.

Inoichi went straight for the Nara clan house. Yoshino had the best stash of alcohol, and he needed to drink until he could forget that he had done this to himself *willingly.*

x

“Thank you!” Yoshi said, bowing. “Please, come again!”
“I definitely will, Yamanaka-kun!” said the jounin, saluting with the bouquet he had just purchased. “One of these days she’ll crack and let me take her out!”

“And when she does, remember that you’ve got to continue showing your appreciation,” Ayaka called out after him. There was no sense in losing a customer just because the girl would finally cave. She spun on her heel and scrutinised her shop assistant (in all honesty, he was way beyond assisting, but Ayaka had never liked leaving him alone). “Now, tell your nee-chan what’s got you all glum today. I don’t think I’ve seen you smile once.”

“Just a lot on my mind,” he said evasively.

“Midori-sensei is well?”

“Growing greener every day,” Yoshi confirmed – not that there was any doubt that his beloved monstera flourished, given how fiercely he protected her from any potential harm.

“Are you missing Yuuki-san a lot? Is Ino being a brat again?”

Yoshi-kun shook his head.

“Inoichi-sama working you hard?”

“No… okay, yes, but that’s fine. I like training hard. It’s just these… instructions. I’m trying to figure out what they mean.”

Ayaka knelt down by the buckets of roses and started picking up a few that would go well together and maybe save another poor guy in love that couldn’t express himself by opening mouth and speaking words. “Want some help with that?”

“Um… nee-chan, if somebody tells you to act more like a ninja, what does that mean? We’ve learnt the Shinobi Code at the Academy, but it doesn’t make a lot of sense, and I don’t think anybody really obeys it strictly. Or do they?”

Ayaka had no clue. She was a gennin herself, and didn’t have any ambitions of advancing. She liked her work, both at the R&D and here, and the Shinobi Code did not really feature in her life. “I guess maybe the ANBU? Or if there’s a war?”

Yoshi-kun came over to hand her a piece of string so she could tie the roses and the greens together. He also brought a ribbon – not the colour Ayaka herself would have chosen, but orange went well with the roses, too. “How do I be more ninja-like? I guess I could be more serious. Would that help?”

“Maybe,” Ayaka allowed. He was a brat, especially when he was around his sister – somehow they were ten times worse together than individually – but he was eleven, so that was to be expected. “So long as you focus on your training, I think you’ll be okay.”

Yoshi-kun let this percolate for a bit, and then nodded determinedly. “Thank you, nee-chan.”

“Yoshi-kun!” called out Ami.

“Yoshi-kun!” Keiko stood by Ami’s side. “We’re leaving. Ino-chan is waiting outside-”

Naruto smiles sheepishly and tugged on his ponytail. “I’m so sorry. I can’t come today. Next time,
okay?”

Keiko pouted. “Promise?”

“Cross my heart.” He mimed an X over his chest, and waved at the dejected girls as they went to join Ino and go descend on the ice cream stall like a swarm of locusts.

He liked ice cream. And dango. It wasn’t as good as ramen, but he enjoyed getting it. He missed the times when he used to go with Shikamaru and Chouji – back when a little bit of Naruto still showed on the outside, before all the wasabi swallowed him up completely just how Mum taught him – but that was a childish thing to dwell on and, anyway, he had studying to do.

There was a chapter of The Comprehensive Encyclopaedia of Malaise waiting for him at home, and then he would have to revise the Shinobi Code and once more try to figure out how much of it was meant seriously and which rules were put there just to show to the civilians that shinobi were hardarses. So far he was only sure about the ‘no crying’ one.

He would make his family and his Clan proud, and act like a proper ninja.

x

“Yoshi-kun?!” Inoue called out through the shop’s door. “Have you got time?”

Inoichi stood to go and see what his sister needed, but a blond streak flashed past him.

“I thought you were busy,” he remarked, entering the shop on his son’s heels at a more sedate pace.

“It’s just extracurricular reading, Dad,” Yoshi said, flashing him a quick – and empty – smile. “I can do it later.”

Inoue frowned. “If you’ve got schoolwork-”

“No,” the boy assured her, “this is just something I picked up at the library. It can wait. The Shop is important.”

Inoichi’s sense of bullshit raised up an alarm. “If you’re sure-”

“Sure I’m sure, Dad,” his son said lightly, and let Inoue direct him to Greenhouse Seven, where some finicky lilies were driving Saiyuri to tears.

Inoue, too, was disconcerted. “Nii-san-”

“He can make his own decisions,” Inoichi assured her. “If he bites off more than he can chew, it will be a worthwhile life lesson.”

x

Since they didn’t actually have anything to talk about, and the vague idea of ‘playing’ had lost last vestiges of appeal years ago, Shikamaru, Chouji and Ino usually spent Saturdays getting their homework done. This arrangement had several advantages: it helped pass the time they were forced to spend together, it gave them a reason to interact, they could pool their resources, and they got rid of it and then could spend their actual free time as they wished.

For example, watching clouds.

Shikamaru definitely preferred contemplating clouds to copying basic seals. He groaned and let
himself fall backwards onto the grass. The open textbook blocked out the sun and he could claim he was reading-

“Sleep on your own time!” Ino snapped. “Don’t waste mine!”

“What a pain…”

“I hate you!” Ino hissed. “I hate you, and the Council, and this stupid idea of this stupid team-”

“Ino?” Chouji cut her off. He set his pen down on top of his notebook and gave her his full attention. “What’s wrong?”

“More wrong than usual,” Shikamaru added, because they had already heard every variation of the rant about the stupidity of repeating the Ino-Shika-Cho configuration as if they were clones of their fathers, and a lot of complaining about Uchiha Sasuke’s lack of appreciation for Ino’s (as of yet lack of) feminine wiles.

“Nothing,” Ino told Chouji. Then she turned to Shikamaru and said, about thousand times chillier: “Nothing. You’re an annoying, stupid, self-centered bitch, but that’s not new.” She shoved her books and notes into a flower-decorated bag, slung it over her shoulder, grabbed her sandals, and barefoot made her way toward the Akimichi house.

“Hm, was she looking into a mirror?” Shikamaru mused, staring after his pissed off fellow Saturday inmate.

“She seemed normal at school yesterday,” Chouji pointed out. “Or, normal for Ino.”

“She did,” Shikamaru agreed. She had seemed normal.

It was Yoshi that had been acting off.

x

Yamanaka Yoshi was asleep and drooling onto a book. A library book, in fact, as Iruka determined when he sat down next to the boy in the shadow of a tree.

The view from the Hokage Mountain was amazing, and few people ever came up here, so he completely understood why someone might choose this place to study. People other than Yamanaka Yoshi, that was. This boy was so intensely social that just seeing him alone here seemed completely surreal to Iruka.

“I’m so stupid!”

Iruka jumped.

Yoshi, shocked awake by his own exclamation, jumped too.

For a moment they both stared at one another, coming down from the sudden adrenaline surge. Then they dissolved into giggles.

“Se-sensei, what are you doing here?”

“I c-could ask you the s-same, Yamanaka-kun.”

The boy raised his slightly wet book in both self-defense and explanation.
“Huh.” Iruka felt his eyebrows rise. “I didn’t know you were interested in philosophy. Wouldn’t have guessed it.”

Yoshi-kun made a face. “Nah. It’s sooo boring, Iruka-sensei. Every time I open it and try to read, it puts me right to sleep. How could this guy even stay awake long enough to write it?”

Iruka choked. Mainly because ‘this guy’ was, according to the book’s cover, Sarutobi Hiruzen-sama. “Why force yourself into reading it, then?”

Yoshi-kun groaned and flopped down dramatically. “Because I’m stupid!” He pinned Iruka with a liquid blue stare that could have melted the heart of a granite statue. “Ne, Iruka-sensei, you won’t tell anybody, right?”

Iruka grinned. “As long as nobody’s getting hurt, I will keep everything you tell me in confidence.”

“Somebody told me that if I wanted to be treated like ninja, I had to act more like a ninja. That makes sense, right? I thought it did. But then I started thinking – how does a ninja act? It seems like every ninja acts different! So I looked for what they have in common, and I haven’t found anything!”

Oh dear. Iruka’s eyes slid to the abused library book. It was, indeed, Sandaime-sama’s monograph on the realities of ninja life and the philosophy of developing a personal nindo in compliance with the Will of Fire.

“But,” Yoshi-kun continued, this time more enthusiastic, “right now when I was sleeping it just came to me! I don’t have to act like every ninja. I just have to act like the ninja that is treated like how I want to be treated. So I pick one and imitate them!”

Iruka tried to imagine his eleven-year-old student spending his entire life undercover as a creepy double of some other shinobi. Considering who his Mother was, the boy might have had the skill to pull it off, too.

Iruka shivered. “Uh, let’s think this through a bit more, Yamanaka-kun. I think you might be putting too much emphasis on how this theoretical shinobi is treated and not enough on how he acts.” Also disregarding environmental effects such as family background, rank, specialization and personal history, all of which heavily affected the social status, impression made and response garnered.

“Oh.” Yoshi-kun reflected on this for a moment, and then brightened up again. “Oh! So I shouldn’t pick someone based on how they’re treated. I’ll pick someone that acts the way I think is right for a shinobi.”

“…yes,” Iruka agreed, afraid that if he let this exchange continue he would get completely tangled in the twisty reasoning. “And, if I can make a recommendation – make your goals realistic.”

Yoshi-kun grinned cheekily. “So, I shouldn’t start acting like Hokage-sama, huh?”

“You even think of smoking before you make chuunin, Yamanaka-kun, and I’ll tattle on you to your Clan Head.”

x

“Thank Izanagi!” Ino wailed dramatically when Naruto fell through the door. “Are you back to normal now, idiot brother?”

“I’m sorry I’m late!” Naruto thrust forward a note. “I had a private consultation with Iruka-sensei.”
His Dad took the note with suspicion, perused it carefully (as if Naruto would ever dare try and give
the former Head of T&I a counterfeit teacher’s note – he was intermittently stupid, not suicidal!), and
then nodded. “As long as you’re not in trouble.”

“I’m not!” Naruto assured him. “I was just having trouble with some of my reading and he helped
me clear up a few points!” He smiled widely, aware that his audience knew he was fibbing, but
counting on them to let it lie. They had training to get to!

Ino’s jaw dropped. “You can read?”

Naruto rolled his eyes.

“You can start by reporting on the status of your project, Yoshi,” Dad said with a bit of
condescension that felt like a cold shower.

Naruto guessed he once again wasn’t acting ninja-like. He promised himself he would do better in
the future. “I haven’t picked yet, Dad. I wanted to do Shino-”

“You wanted to do Shino?” Ino repeated, mock-scandalised.

Naruto scoffed. “I know you’ve got your head full of what’s under Sasuke-kun’s clothes, but some of
us don’t actually spend every waking moment-”

Dad smacked his hand against the table.

Naruto realised that he had already broken his promise to himself. But Ino made it so hard to stay all
calm and serious. She was really good at getting a rise out of him.

At least he could do it right back to her.

“Why have you decided not to select Aburame-kun as your subject?” Dad asked.

“Because I haven’t managed to find anything at all wrong with him. I mean, he comes across as
antisocial, but that’s mostly the hive and the creepy self-control and, okay, it’s the glasses a little bit,
too.” Naruto grumbled. “I’m still doing research. So far he seems disappointingly well-adjusted. But
the not speaking and the glasses, and the coat… it just bugs me!”

Ino scowled at him, but Dad snorted.

“That-” Ino waved her hand as if she was swatting a fly, and thus indicated the secret Aburame
techniques involving the kikaichu. “-is so… urgh.”

“What is it with girls and bugs?” Naruto wondered. “And not just bugs, but all sorts of things are
uuurgh. Do you just not know how to have fun?”

“We have fun!” Ino protested, but she was probably thinking about giggling over shoujo manga or
admiring Sasuke-kun’s assets, so that didn’t count.

Their Dad just raised his eyebrows for a moment, and then pulled out a book of logic puzzles.
Apparently he had given up on getting them to do something constructive today.

Naruto twirled a shuriken at the tip of his index finger and pouted. “It’s shocking people ever even
have kids. The way girls talk ‘bout boys and boys talk ‘bout girls, you’d think everybody would
prefer to be in a gay relationship.” Except maybe those hopeless guys that kept the Shop in business.

“I’m going to marry Sasuke-kun!” Ino informed anybody willing to listen, which was nobody,
because Mum was out of town and Dad had already put his foot down regarding an alliance with the Uchiha Clan.

Also, Naruto wasn’t sure if Sasuke counted as a ‘boy’ for the purposes of this conversation. Really, the girls treated him more like a life-sized doll.

“Are you trying to tell me something, son?” inquired Dad.

Naruto shrugged. “I don’t think it’s that I like boys. I just like people who are both kind and strong, and I don’t know any girl like that.”

“What?” Ino snapped.

Naruto eyeballed her. “Maybe you could help Hyuuga-chan get a little stronger, and then we’d have one.”

“What are you blind?”

“Daughter, are you convincing your brother that he should be romantically interested in you?”

Ino shuddered.

So did Naruto. But at least he finally figured out why she had been so offended. “You’re not kind, Sisterror. You could be if you wanted to, you just never bother with it. And before you try to suggest your pink shadow as a substitute – she punches people out of frustration. Not-kind. Is she gonna be your project? ‘cause she needs psychological help almost as badly as Hyuuga-chan does.”

“You’re an arse, too!” she proclaimed, and slammed the door behind herself on the way out.

Although she could still be heard yelling: “I’m washing my hands off you!”

Naruto shook his head in mock-despair. “Girls.”

“So,” said his Dad, “the Aburame boy, huh?”

Naruto bit the inside of his cheek. It wasn’t like he was… whatever. Just, that coat. Those glasses. Years in the same classroom, and he had never seen the guy’s face. Barely heard him speak, too, and that was mostly when Shino was called on by a teacher to answer a question.

Puns aside, it was really bugging Naruto something fierce.

A corner of his Dad’s mouth quirked up. “Just tell me before you decide to start experimenting.”

“What, do I get some kind of specialised Clan Talk?”

Dad’s mouth stretched to a full smirk. “Yes. You do.”

Chapter End Notes

Please don’t expect any serious psychology from this story. It is basically just Naruto’s Friendship Jutsu getting a little more intense. Also, somebody taught him to lie. Any and all serious psychology happens off screen, and we’re left with the delightful cracky shenanigans.
“Watch this,” Ino whispered to Sakura and pulled the girl against her side. This way it looked like they were quietly gossiping, but they could at the same time watch the verrry interesting development on the other end of the classroom.

“Hi, Shino-kun,” said Yoshi in his friendly-and-interested-in-you voice, which was known to make girls fall for him over the course of a single conversation.

The quiet boy reached up and adjusted his sunglasses. “What,” he said slowly, “do you want?”

Yoshi kept smiling, as if the mere fact that Bug Boy deigned speak to him made him really happy. “I wondered if you wanted to do something after school? Like, together. The two of us, I mean. I realised we’ve never even really talked, and it’s such a shame – I mean, we might be on a team together and we should use the opportunity to get to know each other, don’t you think?”

Sakura shivered against Ino’s side.

“He’s good at this, isn’t he?” Ino whispered. “Look at Shino stunned under the onslaught of cheer and friendliness.”

“Uhm,” Sakura mumbled, “what does Yoshi-kun want with him really?”

“That’s the trick in it,” Ino replied. “Yoshi really wants to get to know him. Maybe get to know him too.”

Sakura shivered again, fists clenching and pressing to her belly, face growing red. “Shi-shino?”

“And why not?” Ino inquired. “It’s not for me, but there’s certainly the element of mystery.”

She watched Sakura’s face as Sakura’s eyes travelled over the bulky coat and she realised that she couldn’t even guess at Shino’s body-type, nor at anything else except his hair colour.

“I do not think that would be a good idea,” Shino said mechanically. “Why? Because you have no logical reason to approach me.”

“I told you my logical reason,” Yoshi countered, smile dimming. He half-sat on top of Shino’s desk and leaned close, maybe close enough to see a little bit through the sunglasses-

Shino flinched away.

“Hey, sorry, I’m sorry,” Yoshi placated him, hands raised palms-out. “I didn’t mean to startle you. I just… I just really wanted to talk to you, and it’s so hard to do that when you don’t talk in words and you don’t talk in body language either and I can’t see your eyes…” He hunched over, appearing sad and guilty.

“Do not… concern yourself…?” Shino suggested, confused about how to deal with this.

“I’m sorry,” Yoshi repeated plaintively.

It was a devastating tactic.
“I must attend training with my Father,” Shino said hesitantly, “but I will have a short time after our lessons conclude today.”

Yoshi sprang up and beamed. “Really? That’s great! See you then!” And he bounded off back to his seat.

“Poor Shino, all confused about what just happened to him,” Ino whispered Sakura, grinning. But she was actually looking one row up from Shino, to where Shikamaru was for once not pretending to be asleep at all.

x

Yosh! Naruto would get to pick Shino’s brain about how to act like a shinobi!

That problem solved, he could shift his attention to the pressing issue of The Project.

Who to pick? Who to pick? Hmm… nope, not the fangirl – you couldn’t even have a real conversation with most of them, they were like Ino-programmed puppets, or like radios tuned to one channel that played the same song all over again, and the dial was broken… and they were aggressive. It would have been a challenge, but Naruto was not that much of a masochist.

Besides, Ino already controlled that group, so it would be like a doomed attempt at poaching.

The Minekawa girl had been treated by a regular psychologist and seemed to be doing perfectly fine, even though she still didn’t socialise more than she had to. A loner by nature, that one.

Oh, too bad Shino was so mentally healthy. Naruto could really enjoy stripping layers off that guy-

His mind. Naruto meant, stripping layers off Shino’s mind. Of course.

“Ryo for them,” said Shikamaru, dropping heavily into the next seat.

Naruto blinked at the boy. They did not have assigned seating in class (except sometimes Kiba, because once in a while Kiba needed a swat and an order to ‘sit’ in a firm voice, and then Iruka-sensei preferred to have him within arm’s reach), but this was still a very unusual spot for Shikamaru to take. Especially since they hadn’t spoken a word directly to one another in about three years.

Naruto wasn’t sure what this meant. Was Shikamaru not mad at him anymore? Could they be friends again?

And did Naruto even want to risk it? What if Shikamaru got angry and decided to leave Naruto in the cold again? It had been heartbreaking the first time around, and he was feeling twice shy. Maybe three times shy. It had really, really hurt.

A lot.

And that was probably why Naruto said an “Oh, hey,” and pasted on a grin.

Shikamaru looked unimpressed. Or maybe sleepy.

Naruto continued grinning and not saying anything, but made it a point to shift mental gears, because for a non-Yamanaka, Shikamaru was kind of a little too good at mind-reading.

Shikamaru sighed, stuck his hand into his pocket, rooted around in there and then put an actual ryo on the desk in front of Naruto.
Naruto nearly fell over laughing. Once he got a hold of himself he pocketed the coin, propped his chin in his palm and admitted: “I’ve been contemplating the relative tolerability of our classmates.”

Shikamaru didn’t look unimpressed anymore. If anything, he looked pleased with himself. “Hm, isn’t it a little early to try and figure out team assignments?”

That was a logical leap, especially in light of what he had said to Shino earlier, and Naruto happily ran with it. “That depends on who’s talking, doesn’t it? It’s not like you have to worry.”

“Yes,” Shikamaru agreed, “No hope for me. Thrown into the pit of despair before I could say a word in self-defense.”

“Better you than me,” Naruto replied, even though he would actually switch with Shikamaru in a heartbeat. They both found themselves glancing to where Ino was presiding over her marionettes.

A moment later Ino signaled Sakura; Sakura elbowed Kenji in the ribs, making it seem almost like an accident; Kenji cried out and stumbled into the way of Hinata; Hinata tripped over her own feet and nearly took a header into the corner of the nearest desk.

Would have hit it, too, but Ino was already there and catching her. “Hinata-chan!” she cried, overwrought with concern. “Are you okay? You should be more careful.” Then she rounded on Kenji, who was rubbing his side. “Look where you’re going, dummy! Hinata-chan could have been hurt!”

Shikamaru sighed and shook his head.

“So over-acted,” Naruto agreed. “Ino still does not believe in moderation.”

The sad thing was that they could already see it working. Hyuuga-chan stammered, blushed and hunched in on herself, hopelessly embarrassed, but she let Ino’s grip on her arm guide her to her customary seat and accepted the subsequent fawning.

She didn’t even question in when Ino just took over the next seat – usually occupied by one of the fringe girls, who would of course let the President of their Club have whatever she wanted.


Naruto agreed, although not for the same reason. He wasn’t worried about what Ino might do to or with Hyuuga-chan. Ino was plain better than Naruto at the Clan teachings. It was a little flattering, too, maybe. Naruto didn’t doubt that his sister had picked Hyuuga-chan as her Project primarily to prove him wrong, but the fact remained that she had picked her because Naruto had suggested her.

The downside of this was that Naruto’s competitiveness demanded that he would pick someone just as damaged – or worse off. And there was only one such person in this class.

He looked over to where Uchiha Sasuke brooded in his personal cone of darkness and angst, and despaired.

“Why did you manipulate me into spending time with you?” Shino opened the conversation after Yamanaka Yoshi ran out of the Academy building and discovered the spot that Shino had deemed optimal for waiting. Here he was clearly visible and yet out of the direct path of the departing students.
“’cause you said no when I asked,” Yamanaka-san replied easily and, as far as Shino could tell, honestly.

Shino was well aware that both Yamanaka children in their class were liars, not so much by habit as by training. They were not quite flawless yet, but they had mastered techniques of emotional manipulation that allowed them to cover up small mistakes without detriment to their goals.

“I see,” Shino agreed. He accepted the suggestion conveyed by Yamanaka-san’s body language and fell into step with him, letting him lead the way up the street. “Why did you ask?”

“Uhm…” Yamanaka-san cast a short, fast look over his shoulder at Shino, revealing the rising of colour in his face. ‘It’s a little embarrassing. So I hope you won’t tell other people. Although, if you do, I’m sure I’ll survive.”

Ah. Shino understood. It was the investment of disclosing sensitive intelligence, with the sensitivity determined as mildly harmful yet not truly damaging. An offer of alliance, perhaps, or otherwise a test of whether trust was an option.

“I shall consider keeping the information you share in confidence,” he countered.

“D’you like dango? And your bugs? Do they like it?”

Shino blinked, although his spectacles prevented the lapse from being obvious. “I find several types of dango satisfactory. My kikaichu, however, only consume raw chakra.”

“Is it impolite to offer them me to feed on?”

Shino initially assumed that this was some form of jest. Yamanaka-san was not laughing, however, and all the usual markers for sincerity were present in his expression and posture.

“That is an unusual proposal. Why?”

Yamanaka-san continued smiling. “I’ve got a lot of chakra. It’s why I suck at genjutsu – it’s a lot harder for me to control small amounts. But if they’re hungry, they can snack on me while we snack on dango, yeah?”

Shino nodded, struggling not to display his present discombobulation. For the second time today, Yamanaka-san had thrown him off balance.

“Your offer is welcome. I will instruct them clearly and monitor them to ensure that you are not harmed,” Shino promised. Was that sufficient reassurance?

It seemed to be.

“Don’t look so stiff, Shino-kun!” Yamanaka-san bade him. “I’m really, really curious. I don’t know much about insects, except how to keep them away from flowers – that’s just part of business, don’t take it personally. Out in the nature they’re all welcome to eat whatever, but we really can’t afford to let them into the Shop. We’d lose customers.”

“That is logical,” Shino agreed, wondering how he had allowed his equilibrium to be stolen and whether he would be capable of recovering it in the near future.

“What was it like?”
“Really interesting,” Naruto assured the marionettes.

He had gotten a lot of the intel he had been after: the way Shino thought, what he imagined was the right way for a ninja to act, and even what especially annoyed him in his peers and thus made it difficult to control the bugs. It seemed like Shino hadn’t ever had the chance to talk about any of this to anybody outside of his clan, and once Naruto got him going the dam had burst. And a lot of intel Naruto hadn’t even been after had poured out, too.

“He knows all sorts of things about insects, and also about plants, so we’ve got a bunch of stuff to talk about. We’re going out again next week—”

“Eeek?!?”

Naruto flushed. Oh. Oops. He hadn’t intended this, but it was too good not to use. “Not like a date!” He waved his hands like he was panicking. “Just a friend-date!”

“They’re totally dating,” someone whispered in the crowd, loud enough to carry.

Ino’s Club was an odd mix of girls who pretended to like Sasuke to get closer to ‘Yoshi-kun’, and those who genuinely liked Sasuke and kind of accepted that Yoshi was ‘one of them’, although as of yet nobody commented on Naruto’s lack of interest in Sasuke.

That would soon change, he was sure.

He could already imagine the rumours of him cheating on Shino with ‘Sasuke-kun’. This was either going to be the most fun he had ever had or a complete nightmare.

“A-ano…” muttered Hyuuga-chan, “we could ask Ino-san?”

Hyuuga-chan was the exception to the Sasuke-or-Yoshi rule. She had already let Ino take her under her wing, and she seemed to think that Ino hung the Moon, but she wasn’t the type to fawn over anyone. Possibly did not have the confidence to put herself out there like that. She did, however, seem admirably dedicated to training and getting better at things that could save her life one day.

“What does Yoshi-kun see in him?” wondered Keiko.

“It’s up to us to find out,” replied Ami.

Fantastic, Naruto thought without a smidgen of sarcasm. He could use this. He could use this so well.

x

It first occurred to Sasuke that he had unexpectedly acquired room to breathe on Tuesday afternoon.

The last class ended, and Sasuke managed to exit the Academy without fielding a single request for a date or an inquiry about his personal habits.

This was unusual, but not unprecedented, so he enjoyed the small reprieve that life provided, and went home.

On Wednesday he was a little more aware of the phenomenon after he realised that he had arrived at class without being accosted. Odd. Whatever had gotten into Konoha’s water had lasted until today.

Against his will, he started paying attention. After all, a ninja couldn’t afford to be caught off guard. They were there. All of them. All the fangirls, led by the Head Fangirl and her pink-haired sidekick.
But for some reason they were congregating on the other side of the classroom from Sasuke…

…around Aburame.

Boy-Yamanaka appeared next to Sasuke, silent like a shadow and smiling that hair-raisingly friendly smile of his. He leaned down and said, very softly: “You’re welcome, Sasuke-kun.”

Sasuke’s head snapped around, and he stared at the girls and their new victim. Had Yamanaka done that on purpose? Why would he have?

…to get rid of the competition?

But, no, instead of asking for Sasuke’s attention, or acknowledgment, or favourite food, the blond just walked away.

Or, rather, he tried to walk away. Grinning toothily, Inuzuka called out to him: “Shino hates you! You ruined his life!”

“Me?” Yamanaka looked hurt and offended. “I just wanted to be friends.”

“Is that why Uchiha’s fans are suddenly all up on Shino?” Inuzuka inquired, in case anyone within earshot had not yet noticed.

Yamanaka widened his eyes. “I… I didn’t mean to do that. I was just being friendly…”

Inuzuka snorted. “Yeah, right. You’re full of shit, Bleach Boy.”

The dog barked in agreement.

Sasuke concurred.

x

Her brother was being secretive and elusive, so Ino had to resort to drastic measures. She gathered up a few of the girls that honestly believed Yoshi was made of sunshine, and set up an ambush for him while he was in the bathroom.

He walked into it blithely – had a moment of fight-or-flight indecision – and then pretended that it had all been his idea from the start.

Ino planted a hand on her hip. “Are you seriously ingratiating Sasuke-kun and reeling in Shikamaru just by screwing with Shino?”

“I’m not screwing with Shino. We’re just friends.” Yoshi winked.

The girls behind Ino made noises like they were about to faint. Ami squeaked.

“You glorious arsehole,” Ino stated admiringly.

Yoshi tugged on his ponytail. “Uhm, and what was that about Shikamaru?”

“Don’t even,” she shut him off, raising her free hand – he could talk to that if he absolutely had to talk nonsense.

Yoshi shrugged. “His own fault. He could have been my best friend, if he didn’t hold a stupid grudge for a stupid comment.”
And, whoa, Ino had thought her brother was long since over it, but apparently not.

Also, the look Keiko and Ami shared suggested that Shikamaru would soon come to regret ever having in any way displeased Yoshi. Civilian-born they might have been, but their viciousness had carried them this far at the Academy, and for their faithful service Ino would see them graduate – even if she had to tell Sakura to tutor them.

Chapter End Notes

Ino is considerably stronger and has a better discipline than in canon. The reason for this is the adopted brother/rival who is himself fairly talented and whom she, the Clan Heir and the Future Queen of the Universe (not that she has shared this ambition with anyone yet) can’t let outshine her. Not being an only child also makes her considerably less spoilt.

Conversely her best friend Sakura turns out a little… different.
“What is this.”

“It’s a bento box, Sasuke-kun,” Naruto said, smiling guilelessly.

Naruto blinked and raised his eyebrows, conveying ‘uhm, then why are you asking, Sasuke-kun?’ right back.

The Uchiha turned away and tried to ignore Naruto the way he usually ignored the fangirls who, as a matter of fact, had repeatedly tried to butter him up with all manner of cute packed lunches. Naruto’s advantages were that, one, he wasn’t emotionally invested in the bastard, and two, he wasn’t looking to become the bastard’s house-husband.

So instead of being crushed by the indifference, Naruto just sat up on Sasuke’s desk, deep enough into his personal bubble to be impossible to ignore but not so deep as to seem actively threatening. He placed his palms on top of the desk and leaned back, watching the ceiling (someone with a spitball launcher had used it as a target – with enthusiasm). “Mum travels a lot. Dad works hard, so he doesn’t have the time to pack us lunches every day and, anyway, he’s not a very good cook. We used to get the store-bought ones, but then Ino and I decided to learn to cook at least a little. It’s nothing special, but it’s definitely edible.”

Sasuke glared at the apparently very offensive box in front of him. “Did your sister make this?”

Naruto laughed. “No. I made that one. I made one for myself, too – I’m okay with switching if you’re worried about poison, but I warn you – mine is actually cute. I made yours plain.”

“Hn,” said Sasuke.

This was to convey that he did not care and hoped that his lack of encouragement would cause Naruto to go away. Naruto deliberately misunderstood. “You don’t believe me? I’ll show you. Prepare yourself for the onslaught of the cuteness!”

While Sasuke looked for any available escape routes – which were all handily blocked off by fangirls, strategically stationed around the class – Naruto pulled his own bento box out of his bag and opened it.

There was a cucumber toad sitting in between the onigiri. It was a little lopsided, but it made Naruto grin to see that it had survived the travel.

There was a thunk. Naruto looked down, and found Sasuke faceplanted into the desk, his hands covering his head. “Go away and die,” Mr Doom and Gloom muttered to the piece of furniture.

A lot of their classmates gave up pretending that they had not been watching the confrontation and burst into laughter (Kiba) and excited whispering (the Fanclub).

Once the bento gambit had fallen through – at least Shikamaru assumed that it had fallen through, although he still wasn’t sure what Yoshi had been after there – it didn’t take long for the Yamanaka to devise a new strategy.
Shikamaru had been watching Yoshi more closely than usual since his recruitment of Shino (was Yoshi trying to collect the boys into his private army the way Ino had done it with the girls?) and therefore noticed immediately when the signal had passed between the Yamanaka siblings.

Ino moaned loudly and draped herself over the blushing Hinata’s shoulder. “Ugh, so boring, why didn’t Dad let me graduate early?”

Yoshi grinned at Hinata and then rolled his eyes. “Don’t even try to pretend you’re not having the time of your life.”

Hinata’s breath hitched. She made an attempt to stammer something, but quieted when Ino stroked her hair.

“I could be having the time of my life in the field with the older Hyuuga. He definitely needs a lot more help than Hinata-chan—”

“But he doesn’t take seriously anybody who can’t beat him in a spar,” Yoshi pointed out, smiling apologetically at Hinata, “and, Ino, even I can beat you four times out of—”

“You’re on!”

They went on bickering, and segued into their typical dynamic so smoothly that Shikamaru was the only person in that room who had noticed that the argument had been staged. They had gotten better. Of course, they were always at their best when they could play off of one another. And Hinata, being touched in ways that skirted the line of friendliness and dipped into intimacy, took the focus away from the scam.

Kiba was drooling shamelessly, and even Chouji had gone pink.

Shikamaru had a little bit of homeground advantage, though; plus he had heard all the original variations of Ino’s complaints about being denied early graduation.

“Hey, Nara.”

Shikamaru raised his head from the desk, interested against his better judgment. “Yes, Uchiha?” Historically, Uchiha had only acknowledged Shikamaru’s existence when they were assigned to train together, and even that was about the same amount of acknowledgment one might give a training post.

“Are there… many in this class who could have already graduated?” asked Uchiha.

Shikamaru’s interest rose. Was this what the Terror Twins were after? Seeding the idea that there was a commonality between Uchiha and some of his peers?

“A few,” Shikamaru said truthfully. “The clan kids, mostly. Not Hyuuga, probably, but both Yamanaka, Kiba, Chouji... Shino could have done it three years ago.” Shino could also take Uchiha apart if they ever fought for real. Kikaichu were generally vulnerable to Katon techniques, but Sasuke wasn’t yet fast enough with his ninjutsu to seriously trouble a well-trained hive.

Uchiha seemed thoughtful – still an anthropomorphic abyss of yawning darkness, but a pensive one. “You?”

“Sure, but why would I?” Shikamaru shrugged and slumped over his desk again. “And why would you? By now we’d be chuunin and getting ground down by work. What for? Early burnout?”
“Early death, more like,” grumbled Kiba, hiding behind his dog when Uchiha glared him into silence.

Shikamaru sighed dolefully. “I’d stretch this out for one more year, but Pops said if I throw the test again he won’t let me become a shinobi at all. That would mean learning a trade from scratch, which would be a pain in the arse.” And it would have thrown a wrench into some of his long-term plans.

Just for an instance he glanced to the side, where Yoshi was currently hamming up some Aburame-related embarrassment for the audience of Ino’s bootlickers.

Uchiha nodded in acknowledgment – apparently having exhausted his quota of words for the day – and slunk off back to his seat.

Ino caught Shikamaru’s eye across the classroom and grinned. Yoshi, standing next to her, was a little too busy chattering with their following to even notice how Shikamaru had assisted them.

Shikamaru sighed again and closed his eyes.

Chouji patted his back.

“Spar with me.”

Shino did not know how to react to being approached by Uchiha Sasuke. This had never happened to him before, and he would have preferred if it had not happened at all.

“Why?”

Uchiha-san crossed his arms in front of his chest. “I heard that were strong enough to graduate years ago. It doesn’t show in taijutsu practice. I want to see how I measure up against you.”

Shino considered the proposal. While he suspected that the reasoning behind Uchiha-san’s offer was flawed, the suggestion itself had merit. “I find the Academy style of taijutsu limited, and unnecessary for my further career as a shinobi. My Great Uncle is pleased with my progress with the Aburame taijutsu.”

Uchiha-san nodded. “I’m learning the Uchiha Interceptor on my own time. The Academy style is basic. Simplistic. It’s easy.”

Shino suspected that, in the absence of acknowledgment at home, Uchiha-san had spared the time needed to master the Academy taijutsu for the sole purpose of earning praise from his teachers. Understandable. If the emotional payoff was satisfactory, it did not constitute a waste of that time.

“I will request permission from my Great Uncle for you to attend one of my lessons. If he grants it, I will spar with you under his supervision.”

Uchiha-san deliberated for a moment, and eventually conceded with a laconic: “Hn.”

“How did it go?” Naruto asked on the next day, shifting slightly as the bugs moving under his clothes tickled. He didn’t mind the sensation, but he wasn’t quite used to it yet. He wouldn’t mind getting used to it, and Shino was one of the few people Naruto wanted to be genuine friends with, so it was more than worth it to endure. It wasn’t like he even noticed the chakra they ate missing.
Besides, *ice cream*. Even if Shino had to be creepy about it and ordered *salted* caramel.

“We are closely matched in taijutsu prowess,” Shino said coolly. “It is difficult to judge – we had not established a system of evaluation.”

Naruto didn’t buy it as an honest answer. He did, however, buy it as an excuse to not commit to an answer Shino would have to defend later on.

“I guess it would be hard to tell objectively. So,” he wondered, “d’you feel like he won?”

Shino could not entirely suppress a smirk. “No.”

“Spar with me.”

Shikamaru had thought that his interaction with Uchiha would be a unique case. Apparently, Uchiha had other ideas.

“I know you’re not asleep,” said the irritant. He waited for a moment and then growled. “Nara.”

Shikamaru let his head roll to the side and blearily glared through one eye. “Buzz off.”

“Spar with me, Nara.”

Shikamaru raised himself upright, then decided it was not worth it and let himself sink against the backrest. “Troublesome…”

“Nara-”

“No.”

“Akimichi-”

“You’re a lot stronger than me, Sasuke-kun,” Chouji said with absolutely no doubt, and a fervent wish to avoid being beaten up. Uchiha had never bullied him about the big-boned thing, but that was probably because he couldn’t be bothered to talk at all usually.

Chouji had no idea what kind of bee had stung the guy, but he wished it didn’t have anything to do with him. And he also wished that he was a little more like Shika, and could just say ‘no’ and have it be accepted.

He knew that if he said ‘no’ Uchiha would insist, and they’d end up sparring and Chouji would lose and-

“Hey, what’s up?” Yoshi chirped. “Sasuke-kun, I didn’t know you’re friends with Chouji!”

“Jealous?” Uchiha asked, a little nastily.

Chouji expected Yoshi to laugh this off, but it didn’t happen.

Yoshi went stiff and lowered his head. When he looked up again, his smile was obviously fake. “Nah, of course not. What you’re talking about?”
Uchiha snorted.

Chouji watched Yoshi with wide eyes. Had this happened because Chouji and Shikamaru had stopped spending time with Yoshi? Had Ino infected him? Or maybe Ino had learned that horrible Yamanaka jutsu, taken over Yoshi’s body and was now trying to get at Uchiha this way?

“Ne, Sasuke-kun,” Yoshi said timidly, “if you want to-”

“Fine,” hissed Uchiha. “Training Field Six, half past four, Yamanaka.”

Chouji and Yoshi watched as he strode away brimming with self-satisfaction.

Yoshi was biting his lip.

Chouji cast about for something helpful to say, but he wasn’t clever like Shikamaru, or like Ino, and the best he could do was put his hand on Yoshi’s arm and lie: “I’m sure it will work out.”

Yoshi moved closer, seeking the physical contact. He turned his head to meet Chouji’s eye. Finally, he released his lip from the grip of his teeth.

And grinned, the exact same way Ino grinned when she had just ruined someone’s life. “Thanks, Chouji. You’re a great friend. But don’t worry, really. And if you need me to rescue you from Mr Gotta-Prove-Myself again, don’t hesitate to give me a shout. I’ll rescue you any time you need it.” He skipped away, far happier than he should have been after Uchiha had treated him like dirt.

Shikamaru – who was once again pretending to sleep rather than truly sleeping – scoffed and muttered: “What a pain.”

Chouji did not consider hitting him, because that was not the way he ever acted toward his friends – that was serious stuff, and he wasn’t willing to hurt anybody he cared about – but he definitely wasn’t going to share his chips with Shikamaru. As if it wasn’t enough that he had broken off his friendship with Yoshi, now he said mean stuff about him?

Chouji opened his textbook and tried to focus on the chapter about the causes of the Third Shinobi War.

It was less depressing than his friends.

x

The first words out of Sasuke’s mouth after they met was: “Spar now.”

Naruto wasn’t sure if this was supposed to be a dick-measuring contest to establish the pecking order, or if he had to qualify for being worth listening to, but he had zero problems with a taijutsu-only spar. Sasuke agreed to the condition, and they spent a rousing half-hour punching and kicking the snot out of one another.

Sasuke was better – by a margin – but Naruto was used to sparring against Ino, and Sasuke’s acrobatics-heavy style was quite similar to Ino’s, which gave Naruto an advantage he used mercilessly. He was pants at that style, so Dad had taught him something else, which he said he had picked up somewhere (Naruto burnt with curiosity, but so far had had no luck finding out any details of that ‘picking up’).

Sasuke, it turned out, didn’t have anyone to spar against regularly, although he more than made up for it with skill and bloody-mindedness.
The final balance was: Naruto black and blue, Sasuke with a broken nose and a spectacular bruise over most of his face.

“You’ll be my rival,” Sasuke decided upon catching his breath and draining a bottle of water.

“I’m not sure if I can make that kind of commitment,” Naruto protested and catalogued the guileless order (which Sasuke automatically expected to be obeyed) as a symptom. “I already have a rival… or do you not mind sharing?”

It was a simple question, and a potentially revealing one.

Naruto made a mental note to find out later what it meant that Sasuke had to think about it so hard.

Eventually, staring at his sandals, Sasuke demanded: “Who is this person.”

Wasn’t that completely obvious? “My sister.”

“Your sister,” Sasuke repeated incredulously, but at least it made him look up so he could treat Naruto to his ‘unimpressed by your shit’ expression. Which left a lot to desire, what with the huge, rapidly darkening bruise and the trail of blood from his nose to his chin, dripping down to his chest, soaking into his shirt. He looked like a civilian victim of mugging.

“You don’t see it because she annoys you, but she’s smart and strong,” Naruto assured him. It aggravated him, too; he could empathise. “Definitely better than me at most things. I’m just nicer than her.”

And most people couldn’t help but respond to that. Little kids loved Naruto, and so did old ladies. Even Sasuke was getting hooked by it, sort of, which Naruto decided not to point out to him just yet – the Uchiha ego might have been offended by it, and an oppositional Sasuke would have been even more of a pain to deal with than this self-defensively apathetic one.

“That… makes sense,” Sasuke allowed reluctantly, as if saying anything positive about Ino caused him physical pain. “You are trained in many of the same techniques, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I do not have a rival, but I have an enemy. Trained in the same techniques as I, over a longer time. And he was always far more talented than I.”

Holy Izanagi, relatability was happening! Naruto mentally punched the air.

“Then it’s okay,” he pointed out smoothly, as if he hadn’t just had his second great breakthrough. “Open rivalry, huh?”

“I am going to kill him,” Sasuke announced solemnly in lieu of shaking hands or nodding coolly or – perish the thought – verbally accepting the deal. He seemed to be expecting a response, too.

Naruto didn’t know what was so dramatic about it. Sasuke was an orphan whose whole family – whole clan – had been murdered. Naruto couldn’t even imagine his Mum and Dad and Inoue-ba-san and Ayaka-nee and Rikuto-nii and all the people who came in and out, tending plants and bugging Dad and all the cousins twice or thrice removed… just not being there tomorrow. He thought he would go crazy if that happened. Properly bugfuck crazy.

And here Sasuke was, five years later, still hanging onto sanity by his fingertips.
Naruto actually, honestly, admired that. He did not like Sasuke, but then, he did not know Sasuke. He might have liked the Sasuke that would have been if his Clan were alive (although, while he was being all honest, he didn’t think that was likely).

Whatever. Point was, Naruto totally supported Sasuke in his decision to kill the guy that had done it, and was prepared to help make it happen. “So, what have you got so far? Don’t make that face, I’m pretty good at strategy. What’s the plan?”

“Train until I am stronger than him-”

“Why?”

“So I can kill him, idiot!”

With superhuman effort Naruto managed not to roll his eyes. “Oh dear Izanagi’s flowering fields, whyyy? No, no, no, listen to me. Don’t walk away! Listen! You’re a shinobi. You’re the silent death. You come out of the dark and slit your enemies’ throats before they know you’re there. You lure them into traps or trick their own allies into stabbing them in the back! You don’t attack them head-on to compete! That’s what you’ve got rivals for. He’s not your rival! He’s your enemy! You literally just said so!” Naruto had to pause for a breath. And for dramatic effect.

Sasuke was standing frozen in the middle of the road.

Naruto waited for a moment and, when no reaction was forthcoming, he chanced walking up to him and around him to check on his face.

Sasuke was usually pale as chalk, but obviously it was still possible for colour to drain from his face. He looked ashen. His eyes were wider than they had ever been before.

But it didn’t look quite like an anxiety attack.

Naruto very, very slowly, at snail’s pace, put a hand on Sasuke’s shoulder. When it wasn’t immediately shaken off he dared squeeze a little. “Did you make this plan when you were seven?”

“Hn.”

“You realise you’re smarter now than you were at seven,” Naruto pointed out.

His hand was promptly swatted away and Sasuke strode off down the road toward the Uchiha Compound so fast he raised little clouds of dust.

“Plans can be revised, you know?” Naruto called after him (he, too, would have been embarrassed by such an oversight, and it was hurting him not to use this opportunity to mock Sasuke mercilessly). “Especially stupid plans! If you’re going on a mission, don’t start by discarding all your gear and weapons and charge in just wielding a blunted kunai-”

“Shut up!” Sasuke snarled and, after a second of breathless anticipation, ran.
Consultations

Chapter Notes

Thanks for your continued support! Kudos are love! The comments are all amazing and encouraging, and I appreciate you all a lot!

“Is this… um… really okay, Ino-chan?” asked Hinata-chan, looking around as though every other customer at the ice cream stall might turn out to be her Father in disguise.

“I promise, Hinata-chan,” Ino assured her, feeling sad and angry at the same time.

Hinata-chan pushed her fingers together while they waited in the line. It was a gesture Ino recognised – the girl did it all the time, which suggested that she was nervous all the time – and she catalogued it with other little quirks of interest.

“Is there anything that would make you more comfortable?” Ino had a working theory about her classmate, and it was bad form to try and get answers that would support it; it could end with bias and misdiagnosis. On the other hand, Dad always told her to trust her instincts, so she ploughed on: “A toy? Or a favourite weapon?” There wasn’t much difference with ninja children.

Hinata-chan clenched her fists in her hoodie and lowered her head in shame.

It was their turn at the counter, and Ino could already tell that she wouldn’t get any input from her companion on what to order, so she asked for a banana split for them to share. Surely that would contain some flavours Hinata-chan liked?

They were spoon-deep into the ice cream (preferred flavours so far were vanilla and yoghurt, apparently) when Hinata-chan whispered: “There was… a doll. From my… from Mother. But Father ordered Hanabi-chan to destroy it.”

Ino clamped her teeth tight on the very, very bad words that were about to come out of her mouth. So, regardless of whether she was right about her hunch, the final diagnosis would have psychological and emotional abuse tacked on.

“Have some more ice cream, Hinata-chan,” she said, wondering what there was you could say to someone whose precious gift from their dead Mum that she regarded as a substitution object was used against them like that.

It was a miracle Hinata-chan was even verbal after something like that. Nearly everybody Ino knew thought Hinata-chan was weak and a coward, when in fact she was apparently one of the bravest and strongest among Ino’s peers.

If Ino couldn’t help her, she was going to drag Dad over, because Hinata-chan was more important than just a project. But before she resorted to any desperate measures, there were still a few less radical steps to take.

“He’s pissed at me,” Yoshi whined, morosely chucking shuriken after shuriken into the target. He
was scoring well enough, but obviously not focused – he could do a lot better than that if he tried.

Ino had, of course, noticed that Sasuke-kun was upset.

That corner of the classroom was an arctic zone lately – so much so that even the Fanclub girls didn’t dare sit next to it. The teachers (except Iruka-sensei) had collectively decided not to call on Sasuke-kun in class. Sasuke-kun had not shared his woes with anyone, but Ino had just known it was somehow Yoshi’s doing.

“What did you do?”

Yoshi threw two shuriken at once. One hit an inch from the bullseye; the other went wide and struck the wall. “I might have… in not so many words… told him he was stupid.”

Ino whistled. Telling Sasuke-kun he was stupid was the equivalent of waving a red flag at a bull.

“That’s not the worst part,” Yoshi moaned.

“Oh?”

Yoshi went to collect the shuriken while Ino deliberated about whether she felt like joining him for throwing practice or giving up for the day.

“The worst part is that I can’t apologise. Because he is being stupid!”

‘Stupid’ wasn’t the right word, of that Ino was sure, because Sasuke-kun was smart enough for top marks. But Sasuke-kun was also the last person out of their class Ino would have wanted to rely on to cover her back, and there was a reason for that. And it wasn’t because she doubted his skills. “So, what’s the plan?”

“Are we consulting?” Yoshi turned to face her, spinning a shuriken on his finger.

Might as well, Ino decided. “Yup. I’m hitting snag after snag with Hinata-chan, too, so let’s consult, brother.”

x

“It’s too bad we can’t switch,” Naruto grumbled. Hinata was so nice, and quiet, and calm when she stopped being so anxious, and he understood that those were all symptoms of the problem, but it had to be good to have a moment without arguing now and then.

Ino seemed to agree wholeheartedly. It was probably just as frustrating to be getting no reaction (other than apologies) from her subject, no matter how she tried to provoke it.

“Yeah,” Ino agreed. “I really thought that was, like, the most useless rule of all those Dad gave us. Like, why would we ever want to.”

“I want to… Inooo, what if we Henge into each other?”

“Dad will figure it out in two seconds.” She crushed a walnut between her forefinger and thumb, and popped the core into her mouth. “Even if we only do it at the Academy.”

“Uhm…”

“You’ve got an idea?”
“I’ve got a Shino. And I’m not afraid to use him.”

Ino leered. “Details!”

“Not like that, you perv,” Naruto groaned, but he was grinning, too. If he had to pick someone from their class to date, Shino would absolutely be his first choice. “He’s a piece on the board, and he’s one of the good ones. But he needs a shield against Sasuke’s fangirls that’s not Sasuke, because that would end in bloodshed and possibly Dad disinheriting us. Or trading us for the Hyuuga like he threatened.”

“Hmm… I’ve got a Hinata that needs to feel appreciated-”

“Which Dad could totally do for her; Dad’s the best-”

“Let’s not plan on getting ourselves disinherited?” Ino suggested dryly. She crushed another walnut, ate the core, and then inquired: “So, how do we set up Shino and Hinata without you interfering directly in my Project?”

That one was easy. “By making it a double-date. Double-friend-date.”

“And ditching them.”

“And ditching them,” Naruto confirmed.

x

Hinata was so hungry it was a wonder her stomach didn’t growl; nevertheless, she would wait until the others started eating, taking her cues mainly from Ino-chan.

But Ino-chan didn’t reach for a stick of dumplings.

“Crap, is that the time?” she exclaimed with her customary unthinking – bold – crudeness.

Hinata had been initially appalled by it, but she also wished she dared speak like that.

Yoshi-kun frowned, and then his eyes widened in shock. “Was that today?!”

“Tuesday, idiot!” Ino-chan emphasised.

“Crap, crap, crap!” Yoshi-kun chanted, leaping over the back of the bench so he wouldn’t have to climb out over Shino-kun.

“I’m so sorry, Hinata-chan,” Ino-chan said, “I completely forgot, and my useless brother didn’t remind me-”

“Hey!” Yoshi-kun protested. “I forgot, too, and you didn’t remind me-”

“Stop arguing and move!” Ino-chan demanded. “We’re so late-”

“I’m so sorry, Shino, see you tomorrow – enjoy the dango for us!”

A moment later they were both gone.

Hinata stared after them and then, reluctantly, turned forward. There was a plate full of dumplings on the table in between herself and Shino-kun. It was too much food for two people. They would have to ask the staff to pack it for them.
Hinata could not do that. She hated leaving food, but talking to strangers made her nervous and she didn’t know what to do-

“It would be illogical to not eat,” Shino-kun pointed out.

Hinata nodded. And wished that her hair was longer, so she could hide behind it – that was the reason why Father had given the instruction for her haircut to be kept short. There were very few short-haired people in the Clan.

Hinata felt her lower lip tremble.

“If you find me intimidating,” said Shino-kun, “there is no reason to force yourself to endure my presence out of politeness-”

“No!”

Hinata realised it was herself who had shouted. She blushed and looked down at her hands. She had to explain that. She couldn’t just leave it at that. Shino-kun would think she was weird – ah, he probably already thought so, anyway – but Hinata didn’t want to offend him. “I… I… Shino-kun is… nice.”

She wished the earth would open and swallow her.

She felt Shino-kun watching her, and instinctively activated the Byakugan. Suddenly their eyes were meeting through Shino-kun’s sunglasses, and Shino-kun seemed to panic a little, which made Hinata panic a little and-

“Please stay and eat,” he said.

Hinata’s hands clenched around the edge of the bench. She took a couple of deep breaths, and then nodded.

She could do this. She could eat dango with her classmate, who was being nice to her. She really, really could.

x

“She’s staying,” Yoshi confirmed finally, withdrawing from the edge of the roof to join Ino in the hideout behind a weather station.

“If Shino’s bugs find us here, that whole performance was for nothing,” Ino pointed out tersely.

Her brother rolled his eyes. “Shino’s smart. If his kikaichu find us here, he’ll know the whole performance was for Hyuuga-chan’s benefit. And by now he’s already seeing why we’ve done it.”

“She’s really staying?” Ino asked incredulously. “I mean, I hoped, but I really thought she would run-”

“She’s staying,” Yoshi repeated reassuringly, and smiled. “And she’s already freaked Shino out. This is going great.”

x

Sasuke’s fangirls – if they still could be called that, of which he wasn’t entirely sure – were about evenly split, flitting around Aburame, Hyuuga and the boy Yamanaka. Girl Yamanaka was, as usual lately, sitting side by side with Hyuuga, and trying to get her to talk.
Sasuke sympathised. Having a Yamanaka bother you until you responded to them out of self-defence was a terrible experience.

On the brighter side, it meant that there were no fangirls left over to bother Sasuke. There was Inuzuka’s dog, whom Sasuke did not mind in principle – it was tolerable for a dog ever since it had grown out of the tendency to piss on everything – and Inuzuka himself, whom Sasuke minded very much.

He wished Iruka-sensei would come in already and save Sasuke from further (questionably) human interaction.

“…and Sis’ said they sat there for two hours and Shino even got her to talk – that’s so unfair, I thought Hinata-chan only talked to teachers and maybe the Yamanaka. ‘cause I don’t think you can really not talk to a Yamanaka if they want you to talk to them-”

It was a dark day when Sasuke agreed with Inuzuka on anything at all.

“-but it was all okay until she went and talked to Shino. Sis’ said she laughed. I haven’t ever heard her laugh. This is so unfair-”

“Bite him,” Sasuke muttered into his steepled fingers, “or I will stab him.”

“-why can’t she laugh when I do something- ow! Akamaru! Why??!”

The dog barked.

The classroom door opened; Mizuki-sensei came in and finally, blessedly, Sasuke only had to endure the mind-numbing boredom of trivial and oftentimes plain incorrect subject matter.

Since Sasuke usually gave the whole world a cold shoulder, it was a little difficult for him to inspire remorse from someone that offended him. He gave it a great try, though. Shockingly. Because if he truly didn’t care like he pretended, he never would have bothered.

Naruto mentally gave him five stars out of five for the effort, and after a week of the Ice Princess act tossed out “Half past four, Sasuke-kun,” as he passed the boy’s desk on his way out of the class.

It was a gamble, but it paid off.

Sasuke turned up at the Training Ground Six, still looking frosty, but perfectly willing to throw down.

Their spar resulted in a broken arm for one and a dislocated collarbone for the other, so they stumbled together to the Hospital, got yelled at by the attending medic nin and sent home.

Sasuke refused to participate in the social ritual of getting ice cream or dango, and Naruto wasn’t really surprised. Still, interaction was happening, diagnosis was coming along, and Naruto was going to hit the books, try not to fall asleep over them and figure out what the heck was that missing cogwheel inside Uchiha’s brain, so he could repair the clockwork and get that boy ticking again.

“So, not apathy after all?” asked his sister, pulling one of Dad’s books out of Naruto’s hands before he could chuck it at the wall in a fit of frustration.

Naruto tugged on his hair, harshly enough for it to hurt a bit. “He’s over-motivated, but in a horrible
direction!” Tunnel vision, definitely. Sustained. Over years.

Was Uchiha even salvageable?

Ino placed the book on top of the stack Naruto had removed from Dad’s office, flopped down onto the sofa and grinned. “It’s hot.”

“Ino, for most people ‘hot’ and ‘crazier than a bag of cats thrown into the koi pond’ are not synonyms.”

“Most people are stupid.”

“That’s a logical fallacy. Those statements may both be true, but that does not make them related -”

“The real question you need to ask yourself, brother, is if he’s too insane to feel fear. Is he? I mean, of course Sasuke-kun isn’t afraid of anything… but really.”

Naruto thought back to their spars and their brief and catastrophic conversations. “Inconclusive. Uchiha thinks he’s got nothing left to lose. On one hand, that means he’s not afraid of losing anything. On the other, it means he’ll have no problems cutting himself off at the drop of a kunai.”

“There you go. Show him there are things he has and doesn’t want to lose. Or, I guess, give him some, because there’s a good chance he’s right about this.” Ino raised herself on her elbow and pinned him with a glare. “And, Yoshi? If you kiss him before I get to, I’ll make Sakura make your life not worth living.”

Naruto grimaced. For all his prettiness, Sasuke was like a bloodthirsty porcelain statue, or maybe a sun-resistant vampire. Not something he wanted to touch, much less touch intimately. But if he had wanted to, this wasn’t much of a threat. “…Sakura-chan? The pink shadow with the bone-shattering left hook?”

Ino grinned, widely and toothily.

Naruto wondered what he had missed.

x

When she was younger, Hinata had imagined that she would prefer being a plant to being a human. She had daydreamed scenarios where she would have turned into a tree during the night, finally finding peace, and no amount of persuasion, threatening, or outright violence in the morning could make her revert to a clanswoman.

She wondered if these revenge schemes counted as suicidal fantasies at the same time.

“Are you feeling unwell, Hinata-san?”

“Sh-shino-san!” Hinata yelped. It was too early – the Academy gates were not yet open. She had not expected to meet anyone here at this time.

“There is no reason for alarm,” he assured her. “Why? Because I mean you no harm. If my presence is distressful.”

“No!” Hinata assured him. “No, Shino-san. I…” How? How could she put it to words? How could she say that she preferred silence, but silence from other people disconcerted her because she did not know what it meant?
How could she put into words that feeling where everyone who looked upon her found her wanting without sounding self-centered and like she was seeking reassurance?

“Ladybug,” said Shino-san.

Hinata stared, uncertain what it meant.

The boy extended his hand and touched a small red creature crawling along one of the folds of Hinata’s hoodie. She had not even noticed.

“Oh,” she said, watching as the insect comfortably traversed to Shino-san’s finger.

“She finds you likeable,” Shino-san announced nonsensically. “So do I. Please consider allowing me the privilege of friendship.”

Hinata had no clue what was happening.

Except that it made her want to cry.

She wished Ino-chan was here to advise her.

But she nodded anyway, because she did find Shino-san likeable in turn – quiet, calm, unlikely to shout, and very logical. And nice. Kami-sama, was Shino-san nice. Careful. Friendly.

“I…” Hinata tried, even as her hands shook and her throat constricted. “I would like that.”

x

October fell onto the village in the form of unceasing rain showers, but a few A-rank Fuuton and Suiton jutsu strategically released around the village cleared up the weather long enough to make a proper party of it.

Ino was going all-out. The kimono, the hairstyle, the make-up – she was on point tonight. She put on a vapid expression, checked in the mirror that nobody would expect her to have a functioning brain, and exited her room with a sing-song: “I’m going to knock Sasuke-kun dead!”

“Don’t,” her brother said dryly, joining her in the corridor. “At least not until I’ve completed my Project.” Ino’s discerning eye determined that Yoshi was nearly as pretty as herself, and she congratulated herself on having excellent taste – she had picked that kimono and forced it on him. It hadn’t been too much of a fight, because Yoshi didn’t honestly care beyond being allowed to keep his orange accessories, and she had counted on that.

Besides, blue was absolutely his colour.

Like it was hers.

The Yamanaka siblings did – as people had often remarked – look like movie-stars.

“Now, kids…” Dad trailed off when he spotted them coming down the stairs. There was a hint of a sinking jaw there – probably the uncomfortable realisation that his little children weren’t quite so little anymore.

Ino could pass for fifteen if she really tried, and Yoshi had jailbait written all over his wiry ninja muscles and in-trained grace and wide blue eyes.

“It’s our last Kyuubi festival as civilians!” Yoshi preempted, before Dad could bust out the
overprotective routine. “Let’s enjoy the heck out of it!”

For a moment Dad obviously deliberated. Then he gave in and decided to trust them. “Be safe.”

“Yes, Dad,” Ino replied with a bucketload of cheek.

He huffed. “Don’t ‘yes, Dad’ me, daughter, and just do it.”

“I will, Dad. No promises regarding Yoshi—”

“Yoshi can take care of himself,” Dad countered, but he did give Ino’s brother a cautioning look, too. “And he’ll be careful, right?”

“I will, Dad,” Yoshi promised, smiling like butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth.

It was unfair, Ino thought, falling into step with him. Stupid brother, with all that effortless pretty, when she had to work at it so hard and she'd still never achieve that sort of natural magnetism. Oh, well.

At least she would get to enjoy all the people making fools of themselves for him.

She was right.

An hour later Yoshi was play-acting that he was a mighty ninja fighting a fearsome monster, where the monster was Chouji’s squid on a stick. Chouji was trying very hard not to fall over laughing, because that would disrupt the performance. Shikamaru was totally transfixed.

Ino rolled her eyes. Who was he even kidding?

“How did you convince him to come out?” Ino demanded breathlessly, staring at where Sasuke tried to ignore Ami, Ami’s little sister and Ami’s cousin hard enough that they would leave him the hell alone.

Naruto chewed his chocolate-covered strawberry, enjoyed the explosion of taste on his tongue, and then smugly reported (just before Ino’s temper got the better of her): “I didn’t.”

And because Ino was on the verge of pulling a kanzashi out of her hair and cheerfully stabbing him to death, which would have been an awful waste of an expensive kimono, he added: “I threatened him into coming out.”

“With?”

“Transforming a clone into him and having it do something public and embarrassing.” Naruto noticed that his sister’s eyes began to glaze, and sighed. “Not streaking – I don’t want him to murder me in my sleep. Just, like, overeating on ramen and puking his guts out in front of some Council people or something.”

Disappointed, Ino went off into her happy place where Uchiha boys promenaded naked through the streets.

Naruto didn’t get it, but whatever. It was her business.

“Fireworks?” suggested Sakura-chan, appearing behind Ino like the faithful shadow she aspired to be.
“I guess they’ll start soon enough,” Ino agreed. “Let’s see if we can abduct Hinata-chan along the way. Yoshi, threaten Sasuke-kun into joining us.”

“It’ll be my pleasure,” Naruto assured her, and they parted ways.

Sasuke was – not quite glad, that was too emotional a word – but relieved to be rescued from his admirers, who had managed to multiply in the past two minutes. The tenth girl joined just as Naruto wound (and elbowed) his way through the gaggle, put an arm around Sasuke’s shoulders, gripped hard, and talked his way back out through the girls – loud voice, blinding smiles, honest compliments and assurances of a later meeting.

Once they were in the clear, he released Sasuke, who snarled and readjusted his clothes. He wasn’t wearing a kimono – that would have probably sent the girls into literal fits – but it looked like he had put on a clean t-shirt.

For a single stupid, shallow moment Naruto envied him for not having a sister to force him into fancy clothes. Then Naruto thanked all the gods and demons he could think of for having a sister, and a family, and a clan, and basically a whole lot of things Sasuke didn’t have.

“Fireworks, Sasuke-kun,” he said, and more-or-less dragged the other boy to the roof of the water tank. Ino, Hinata and Sakura were already there, sharing the structure with the ANBU on duty.

The first bright yellow flower bloomed across the sky with perfect timing, so that they didn’t have to talk to the girls.

And Sasuke… well, annoyed as he had initially been, there was something melancholy in him as he silently watched the sky and the bursts of colours across it. At one point he looked back over his shoulder and up, as if there was someone supposed to be standing there. Then his fists clenched and his teeth gritted, and he refused to look at the fireworks again.

Naruto nudged him and whispered an offer to buy some sweets to share from one of the stalls down in the street – which he knew would be refused, both because Sasuke didn’t like sweets and because Sasuke didn’t like Yoshi.

“Thanks for coming out, anyway,” Naruto told him in a fit of magnanimity. “And sorry for being an ass about it before.”

Well, he wasn’t really, but Sasuke left (without a word) for home with the reassurance that Yamanaka Yoshi was crushing on him hard, and would resort to unsavoury methods to get his attention.

They saw Hinata-chan safely to the gates of the Hyuuga Compound, handed Sakura off to her mother, and returned home to collapse in the living room, stuffed, full of impressions and maybe needing to decompress a little before they went to bed.

“I’ve got it!” Yoshi announced giddily.

“What?” Ino groaned and rolled over. She was beyond tired, but her brother, as always, turned out to be indefatigable.

“I’ve got a theory! But it’s completely crazy!”

“Well so is Sasuke-kun,” deadpanned Ino, too weary to censor herself. “So your theory might be
right.” She considered the possibility for a while and then decided that she was ready to be convinced by a convincing argument. “Show me.”

Yoshi made a clone – not one of the normal ones, he still couldn’t do those, but one of the special ones that Dad taught him and refused to show Ino. The clone transformed into Sasuke-kun, and reenacted a few of the moments of tonight, and then a few older scenes that Yoshi must have witnessed.

“Um,” said Ino, watching the delightful drape of the fabric over Sasuke-kun’s abdomen until the moment the clone dispersed.

“What do you think?”

Ino forced herself to let go of the fantasy and give a good, hard consideration to the evidence her brother had presented. “I think… we need to consult this with Dad.”

“But it looks plausible?” Yoshi was giving her the wide-eyed stare that begged for validation.

Ino was never sure anymore if it was real. It had been once upon a time – she was sure of that – but for years now Yoshi could fake that perfectly. Sometimes he cared about what she thought, sometimes he didn’t.

She wished it were always the first case.

She nodded. “Sasuke-kun looking at the world through a prism that distorts his every perception? You bet your arse, brother.”
Shrinking

With seemingly nothing to precipitate the reaction, Hinata-chan stiffened. A moment later she hunched until she was almost curled up, gritting her teeth – and then bolted.

Ino followed her without even thinking about it.

Class would start in a minute, but the teacher – Mizuki or Iruka or whoever would bother to turn up today – could kiss her arse. Her subject… her friend was more important.

She arrived at the bathroom on Hinata’s heels, and remained standing by the sink, listening and forming a theory. When Hinata came out, ashen yet with embarrassed splotches of red high on her cheeks, Ino knew.

“Are you in pain, Hinata-chan?”

Hinata-chan shrugged. “I… I can take it-”

“You’re not supposed to ‘take it’!” Ino insisted, a little harsher than Hinata-chan could really deal with in an already physically and emotionally vulnerable situation. “You’re supposed to figure out what helps.”

Hinata-chan trembled, and dodged when Ino tried to touch her. “I c-can’t talk to anyone about this…”

Yes, Ino guessed, what with the arse-backwards clan, the head-up-his-arse Clan Head, and the fact that her Mother had died when Hinata was little. She might have had a bunch of older female relatives, but she was kept isolated from them, too. Hinata-chan only knew what they were taught in the kunoichi classes at the Academy.

Unbelievable.

“Mum’s always travelling,” Ino started talking, hoping that Hinata-chan might relax, “but I went to Dad when I felt like shit. Even though I mostly just hoped I wouldn’t have to go to school.” She smiled, but didn’t get the hoped-for smile back.

Poor Hinata-chan was probably feeling too horrible for smiling.

“Dad was cool about it. Told me what helped Mum – showed me where Mum keeps her secret stash of chocolate. Dad keeps replenishing it on the sly. It’s sort of sweet – I just try not to think about the fact that it’s my parents. Anyway, he gave me a bunch of tips and then told me to ask Tomomi-ba-san if they didn’t work for me. Tomomi-ba-san’s a medic, so she knows-”

Hinata-chan started crying.

Maybe, Ino realised in hindsight, she should have found a more neutral topic. Something that wouldn’t remind Hinata that her own clan consisted of shitheads while other people had nice, loving families.

Too late now.

Ino gritted her teeth. “Come with me. I’ll take you home and hunt down Tomomi-ba-san for you. We’ll have a female talk, and she’ll write you an official note to cover the absence.” Because, yes,
Hyuuga-sama was the kind of dick that would have taken it out on Hinata if she missed classes due to being in agony.

Hinata-chan tried to protest, but Ino didn’t give her the room. She pulled her down the corridor and out of the building.

Yoshi would take care of their stuff.

x

A quiet knock pulled Ino away from her magazine. She checked on Hinata-chan – still asleep on Ino’s bed – and tiptoed to the door.

Yoshi handed her both school bags and raised his eyebrows in a mute question.

‘She’s okay’ Ino mouthed.

‘Dinner,’ Yoshi mouthed back, and raised six fingers.

Ino nodded and looked over her shoulder with a mixture of worry and disgust. There was no way to let Hinata-chan rest longer than that without alerting the Hyuuga that something was going on, which was the last thing Hinata-chan needed.

x

Sasuke didn’t understand what was happening.

It started with the rumours of a Council meeting being dismissed early because the Hyuuga Clan Head came down with debilitating cramps, but since Sasuke had been denied his own Clan Headship until he either passed his sixteenth birthday or achieved the rank of chuunin, he didn’t pay much attention to what happened to those windbags.

If they decided to have a free-for-all melee fight and killed each other, he would sleep better at night.

“Tsume-sama was heard recommending a hot water bottle,” Nara said to the attentive audience of the other Clan Heirs, who probably had a reason to care.

Hyuuga seemed to be trying to merge with the wall; girl Yamanaka cackled with disturbing schadenfreude.

“Tell the best part,” boy Yamanaka insisted breathlessly, face flushed.

Nara grunted, like the demands on him were far too big to contend with when he just wanted to sleep, but he did answer. “The Hospital made Hiashi-sama wait, because they were busy tending to the Hyuuga Elders, who had been admitted because… the floor collapsed under them during a clan meeting.”

“A clan meeting without the Clan Head?” Akimichi inquired suspiciously.

“Why would a floor collapse?” wondered Inuzuka. “I’ve seen those guys – they’re not fat. Stiff wind would blow them over-”

“Anobium beetle,” suggested Aburame. “Subsists on wood, and sometimes remains undiscovered for years, until the damage is so severe that the wood structure collapses.”

There was a while of silence while most of the group – including, surprisingly, Inuzuka – heard the
implication behind the offhand comment, and surveyed Aburame with new eyes. Sasuke found himself doing the same, although he at least was not surprised by Aburame’s capabilities.

He did not understand the boy’s motivation. Why would Aburame have expended such efforts and taken such risks against people who had nothing to do with him? Was it something the Yamanaka asked of him? Both siblings looked adequately surprised and amused, but Sasuke knew that you could not believe their faces.

Or was it Hyuuga herself? If Sasuke suffered an inclination to kindness, he might have described Hyuuga as unimpressive. A more honest assessment was useless.

She could not even speak for herself, much less fight. Why would anyone consider her so important? No, it was more likely that the Yamanaka were using her as an unwitting pawn.

Like they were trying to use Sasuke, as if he couldn’t figure it out. Morons.

“I have such a crush on Shino,” boy Yamanaka muttered to his sister just as they passed Sasuke on their way to their seats.

Girl Yamanaka nodded. “I think I’m beginning to see it. That stunt took huge balls. Of steel.”

…maybe Sasuke channeled a little chakra to his ears so he could hear what they said once they passed out of his natural earshot.

“So did yours, Sisterror.”

“…whatever are you talking about, Yoshi?”

“Hyuuga-sama in cramps? I may have ‘two green thumbs’ as Mum says, but you’ve got encyclopedic knowledge of poisonous plants and a vengeful streak to rival Sasuke-kun’s.”

Sasuke realised he had been caught staring. He might have been caught listening in, too, but that was harder to spot. By the way both Yamanaka beamed at him, they did not mind.

It gave him something to think over. If the Yamanaka understood the need for revenge, and if they were willing to help Hyuuga regardless of the inherent risks to themselves, and if they were approaching Sasuke similarly to how they had approached Hyuuga…

…perhaps he could consider the concept of allies.

x

“What is the status on your Projects?” Inoichi asked, still somewhat jittery from Shikaku’s interrogative hints (tough luck for Shikaku, though – this time Inoichi really didn’t know anything).

“Mine’s like a dream,” reported Ino. “Yoshi’s more like a nightmare, but at least it’s an interesting nightmare.”

Yoshi groaned theatrically. “You’ve got it easy. Hinata actually wants help, so she’s cooperating.”

Ino mockingly patted his shoulder. “Poor thing is completely touch-starved. I’ve started with an intense aversion therapy-”

“Is that what they call it?”

“Oh, fine-” Inoichi’s intractable daughter rolled her eyes. “-she’s a kitten. I want to pet her. I’ll teach
her to unsheathe her claws, and somehow convince her that she’s amazing along the way, and she’ll be perfectly fine. She’s genetically predisposed to that unnerving feline stare, anyway.”

That more or less confirmed for Inoichi that his children did have something to do with the Hyuuga disaster, although he had firmly decided to never learn anything incriminating at all. Plausible deniability was the name of the game, and also former Head of T&I (which translated to very few people being willing to question him).

And while Inoichi sympathised with Hiashi on great many occasions, he still agreed that Hiashi needed a few hard knocks to the head regarding his treatment of the Hyuuga Clan’s children, most specifically his own and Hizashi’s. Not now, though. Now was not the time to get angry.

“Excellent.” He pasted on a smile, content to see the relief in his children reduced from ‘obvious’ to merely ‘visible because he was watching for it’. “Ino, keep in mind that during the intense part of the therapy Hinata’s self-perception may be absolutely dependent on your feedback. Make sure you don’t break her with a careless comment. Or action. Don’t forget about the Byakugan for a second.”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Don’t ‘yes, Dad’ me, daughter. Just keep that in mind.”

“I will, Dad,” she promised, serious enough that Inoichi accepted it.

“Yoshi?” he prompted.

The boy tugged on his ponytail. “Still working on hooking the idiot. That’s where the nightmare gets real interesting. Dad, I think he’s actually got a whole liar’s palace constructed, and I think it’s been in place since the massacre.”

That was… unorthodox at best. Inoichi was stunned that his son even knew of that technique, much less that he would have the confidence to believe he had discovered it in a subject which could not have had the skill to construct it. But he was not going to dismiss the idea before hearing the logic behind it. “If you’re right, it might explain why therapy didn’t work for him.”

“Yeah,” Yoshi said with exasperation, nodding several times. “And I asked around a bit – Shino’s a well of useful intel – and Sasuke’s personality did a one-eighty after that night. Which, short-term, makes sense, but in the long term it should have normalised by now, at least somewhat. That kind of hyperawareness and intense grief can’t be sustained interminably. He’d run out of energy. But for Sasuke the shock hasn’t healed. At all. Shino was in the same class and watched it all happen. So, I think that instead of normalising, Sasuke locked himself up.”

“That’s a bold theory,” Inoichi stated as noncommittally as he could.

“It’s got another part,” Yoshi admitted, briefly meeting his sister’s eye (and receiving an encouraging nod), “but I might need some confidential information before I can flesh it out.”

Inoichi raised an eyebrow. He certainly wasn’t going to disclose anything sensitive; on the other hand, he hadn’t expected either of his children to try and salvage a case so hopeless that he had been written off by psych completely. He wanted Yoshi to succeed, and was prepared to fudge the lines of security levels.

“Uchiha were famous for two things,” contributed Ino. “Stealing techniques, and unbreakable genjutsu.”

“Not unbreakable,” Inoichi corrected. “But it is true that Sharingan genjutsu is extremely difficult to
counter. We used to use it at the Department.” Uchiha Shiori-san had never been cordial with her colleagues, which in an extreme environment such as T&I could be wearying, but Inoichi had respected her professional skills greatly.

She, too, had been one of Itachi’s victims.

“Was Itachi good at genjutsu?” Yoshi continued fleshing out his theory.

“’Prodigious’ is a closer word,” Inoichi assured him.

“So, I think he put Sasuke under one.”

Inoichi nodded. That could not get him busted for sharing privileged information.

Encouraged, Yoshi continued: “And I think Itachi might have started building the liar’s palace with that. And then Sasuke just learnt to live inside it, even though the genjutsu was over.”

“Interesting,” Inoichi agreed.

A liar’s palace was a spy’s technique, and only the best of the best managed to build one good enough to fool seals and trained shinobi. Nobody would have searched for one in an eight-year-old. But a genjutsu-enforced one, compounded with trauma?

Inoichi could buy it. “I want you to follow up on that.”

He was sorry for the Uchiha boy if it turned out that Yoshi was correct in his assumptions. At the same time, he would be disgustingly proud if his barely twelve years old son showed himself to be smarter than the bevy of therapists that had tried to figure the kid out.

Yoshi had an immense gift for out-of-the-box thinking. In fact, some days Inoichi wondered if Yoshi even had a box, or if he had gotten rid of it a long time ago as an unnecessary baggage that dragged him down.

x

“So,” Naruto said once Sasuke started flagging a little and the spar slowed down somewhat, “why is it so important that you keep to the original plan?”

The question, predictably, angered Sasuke into another spurt of energy, and Naruto just barely dodged a Katon jutsu that could have actually maimed him (or maybe not him, what with jinchuuriki superpowers, but definitely maim someone).

“Yeah, I get that it’s important,” Naruto assured him, “but we’ve also established, and you’ve agreed, that it’s not a rational plan.” It was stupid, but Naruto was trying not to use that precise formulation. “It’s a little inefficient, and it’s a lot more time-consuming than necessary.”

“Shut up!” insisted Sasuke, fingers flashing through seals for another Katon jutsu.

“Look, Sasuke-kun, I think you’re right. I agree Itachi- yowch!”

Naruto flattened himself on the ground, rolled over to dodge a kunai and only just managed to stop himself from scurrying up a tree. Talk about a berserk button! Was the liar’s palace trying to protect itself? Did it use Itachi’s name as some sort of trigger for its defense mechanisms?

“Look,” Naruto repeated, “I just don’t understand. That man-”
That was what Sasuke called his brother.

“-needs to be stopped. If you kill him, all the better. But all those things you’re doing and saying don’t bring you any closer to that goal-”

He dodged a barrage of shuriken, and deflected a kunai with his own.

x

Mizuki-sensei called Hinata-chan’s name.

Ino leaned closer to Sakura and whispered: “Let her fight the cool Sakura-chan today, please?”

Sakura thought about this request (order, really, although not one Ino was prepared to enforce if her natural leadership wasn’t enough) and then nodded. She smiled and walked sedately into the circle, cataloguing Hinata-chan’s tells.

There were many. The stance, the trembling, the pallor.

Ino didn’t say ‘let her win’. She didn’t even mean ‘let her win’. But she could tell the exact moment when Sakura decided to let Hinata-chan win, because even Sakura could see that Hinata-chan needed this.

And it was such a small, insignificant thing to give her.

Ino would have done it herself, except that no one would have bought it, not even Hinata-chan, and that would have defeated the purpose. Hinata-chan needed to believe that she could win by her own merit.

x

Another week, another spar.

Today was kinda easy. Sasuke’s nerves were so frayed that a lot of his hits and throws went wide; he didn’t balance his stances well enough, and his focus was shot.

He almost fell over when Naruto ducked away from a high kick.

“I get that you want to do it yourself,” Naruto assured him, “but why alone? Why not let somebody else hold his arms back, or tie him up for you? Why just throw yourself against him like it matters more which one of you is stronger than whether he dies?”

“Why, why, why?!” Uchiha shouted. “I don’t have to explain myself to you!”

“You don’t even have to explain yourself to yourself!” Naruto shouted back at him. “You don’t! But if you can’t, that means you’re just lying to yourself!”

“So what? What if I lie to myself?!”

“You’ll end up dead.”

“And?!?”

“You can’t afford to,” Naruto reminded him, hoping to Izanagi that this was just a case of Sasuke being too melodramatic and not honest to god suicidal ideation, although if it turned out Sasuke actively wanted to die, Naruto wouldn’t even be surprised. “You have a goal to accomplish,
“I won’t care when I’m dead.”

“I guess you won’t.” That was, frankly, the whole point of the Pure Lands. “But you care now. So let’s do what you can to further your goals.”

“How do you care?!”

Honestly, Naruto thought the absolute best thing he could say to the Sasuke right now would be the truth. It was something rational, something Sasuke would have understood and accepted and perhaps even be willing to exploit.

Unfortunately the rules forbade him. So what he said instead was: “The way you act now, you’re going to get your teammates killed, and probably not even care. I care about a lot of our classmates. I don’t want them to die because they had the bad luck to be on your team.”

“Not to mention it might be you?” Sasuke pointed out with something that almost resembled sarcasm. Which was a great stride forwards. Sarcasm was humour, after all, even if it was the lowest kind. Better the lowest kind than none at all.

Naruto shrugged. “Might be. But probably not if you’re the Rookie. They’ll pair you with… huh, Kiba? I guess. I mean, Shikamaru will probably score the perfect minimum passing score, ‘cause it’s a challenge, but his team assignment’s been determined for years and he just does it to rebel.”

Sasuke was soaking up this information – it was sad that he hadn’t known this. But it made sense. He didn’t have parents at home to tell him these things.

“The Ino-Shika-Cho will get reformed,” Naruto explained. “They’re not happy about it – except maybe Chouji – but it’s not something they can affect. Even our Dads – the current Ino-Shika-Cho – can’t.”

“Capture and interrogation, right?” Sasuke asked.

Naruto nodded. “Yeah. So, Shikamaru will be the dead-last just to be a pain, because it will make the administration break tradition – which is to pair the highest and lowest scoring gennin together with the best kunoichi – which, again, won’t be Ino even if she gets the rank. Right now it’s a toss-up between Hinata-chan and Sakura-chan.”

Sasuke frowned. “It’s not that hard to sabotage my results. If Nara does it, so can I. Not having to deal with Inuzuka is worth it.”

After a brief struggle not to react how he wanted, Naruto gave up and laughed.

“Got you something,” said boy Yamanaka, accosting Sasuke at the market on Saturday, when Sasuke had dared hope he might have been safe for an hour-long excursion.

Sasuke gritted his teeth and turned away from the stall selling noodles. “I will not date you-”

“Don’t be silly!” The blond grinned, and not for the first time Sasuke doubted that either of the Yamanaka had a real crush on him. The two yellow-haired piranhas simply used the notion as social currency, and thus got away with harassing Sasuke.
Sasuke was about to turn back to the noodles, when a book-shaped object was pressed into his chest.

“It’s sort of like a treatise. Or monograph. I don’t rightly know – anyway, it’s never been published,” explained Yoshi.

Sasuke took a closer look. The cover was faded dark grey with no writing whatsoever on it, and he didn’t even realise that he had given in to his curiosity until he had it open and was reading the front page: The Standard Operations Manual for the Capture, Interrogation and Neutralisation of S-class Nukenin.

“It’s from about a generation back, and I think one of the authors was an Uchiha – there’s a lot of first-hand knowledge of the Sharingan included and they seem to rely a bit too heavily on it for some scenarios but, anyway, I went to visit Ibiki-san at his work but he was busy, so Anko-san let me borrow this-”

“Who?” Sasuke snapped, on the verge of headache from the combination of hunger, bemusement and the avalanche of words.

“Ibiki-san is the Head of the Torture and Interrogation Department,” explained Yamanaka, so cheerful as if he were talking about the Shinobi Daycare. “I’m pretty sure we’re not supposed to know that book exists, so if you could, you know… not damage it and give it back before the ANBU notice it’s missing, that would be great.” He smiled.

Why did you give me this? Sasuke thought, but he did not need to ask. Yamanaka had told him before that he agreed with Sasuke’s personal mission in principle, only protested the methods Sasuke chose to employ. And this was the proof – Yamanaka had brought him a document formulated upon years of experience by some of the strongest shinobi who specialised in the kind of task that Sasuke had set for himself.

This was a declaration.

And Sasuke found himself accepting it. He put the book inside his basket, careful that it would not make any contact with the tomatoes, even if any suspicious stains could be easily explained away in a place such as T&I. He forced himself to look up and meet the Yamanaka’s eye.

Yoshi was waiting for a verdict, biting his lip.

Sasuke nodded. “I’ll get it back to you. This – I… What you said has merit.” That was the best he could say. It would have to be enough.

Going by the way Yamanaka beamed in response, it definitely was.
“Eleven graduating girls? Versus sixteen boys? This year is just plain weird.”

Iruka opened his mouth to protest that this was still just a projection based on the past three months, and it was very possible that any of these students might fail, or someone else might unexpectedly pass (Rock Lee did so last year), but the big-shot tokujou weren’t interested in what a lowly chuunin might tell them.

“Usually that ratio is more like one girl for every three boys,” said Anko-san, laughing like it was a great joke. “Did you put something in the water fountains at the Academy? Awesome job, though, snot-wipers.”

“Someone put Uchiha Sasuke and Yamanaka Ino into the class,” said Mizuki, shaking his head mock-ruefully. “Sasuke-kun’s presence motivated a lot of girls to compete for his attention, and Ino-chan steered that competition toward shinobi skills. They are fangirls – but they are competent fangirls.”

“Now that sounds like an oxymoron,” grumbled Genma-san – and dodged the sharp tip of Anko-san’s dango stick, aimed at his hand in retaliation.

Mizuki laughed softly, and pushed a dislodged strand of silvery hair behind his ear. “Just don’t put any of them on a team with Sasuke-kun, and they’ll be fine.”

Iruka had a sudden idea. “…hm… what if I…” He crossed out a few of the numbers by the kids’ names and rearranged them. It probably wouldn’t affect anything, but as the class’ primary teacher he had some slight input on the civilian-born students’ placement.

The civilian-born generally weren’t regarded as important, even though some of them had amazing potential. No one liked to admit that clan kids could be showed up by some ‘nobody’, and a lot of teams formed solely of civilian-born kids got dismissed out of hand by their assigned jounin-sensei. But, maybe, if he just found the right sort of teacher for them-

“You can’t form a girls-only team!” Mizuki laughed, clapping Iruka on the shoulder.

Iruka gritted his teeth. “Can’t I?”

“Nah. Nobody will be willing to take that on. And all three of them are fangirls. Who would.”

“Is that a challenge?” asked Anko-san, effectively shutting up not only Mizuki but the entire table. “cause I think Yugao might be interested.” She turned to Iruka. “You propose that team, bunny rabbit, and I will blackmail the Hokage into signing off on it. Got me?”

Iruka nodded, wide-eyed. He was not personally acquainted with Anko-san (who had invaded the informal teacher’s conference because she was passing by and the topic caught her interest, whereupon she dragged Genma-san after her), but he had heard a little about her form Ibiki-san.

And he was not going to argue with her. He liked living with all his appendages intact.

Besides, he was beginning to feel personally invested in that all-kunoichi team.

“Of course you can propose the team,” Mizuki said. He sighed. “But, Iruka, it will never pass scrutiny. You’ll just be wasting what little chance to affect things you actually have.” His eyes were
soft and understanding.

Iruka found himself smiling back. But with that easy, dry humour came also the realisation that whatever happened, even if Hokage-sama tore the paper into tiny strips, it was Iruka’s privilege to speak his mind. And his mind was made up.

Watch me, he thought.

“Say, Anko-san,” he said instead, “you would not be interested into taking some students of your own?”

x

“You’re getting a gennin team, Kakashi,” the Sandaime informed him a moment after Kakashi arrived inside his office via the window.

“With all due respect-”

“Let’s not start lying to each other now, Kakashi-kun. If you have any respect at all left for me, it’s in the knowledge that you would die yourself if you tried to kill me again.”

Kakashi blinked and transitioned from his slouched posture to a stance that still counted as loose, but only in that it allowed him to defend against attacks from unexpected directions.

The Sandaime sighed. “That was not a threat, Kakashi. That was a reminder that if you are three hours late to important appointments – and yes, I do realise that our respective ideas of ‘important’ differ – you can’t expected to be welcome without some form of frustrated backlash. I am managing over five hundred shinobi, and you are only one of them. Elite, yes. Invaluable, yes. Indispensable…”

‘No’, Kakashi thought. But the Sandaime did not fill the word into the stretching silence.

“I was detained at the hospital, Hokage-sama,” Kakashi informed his elderly leader. “I’ve got a doctor’s note.” He pulled the piece of paper out of his book and put it on top of the desk. It was, actually, a genuine note. For the treatment of the self-inflicted burns, classed as training accident without doubt of intention (because Momoka-sensei had a crush on him and he asked nicely). Besides, it had been a training accident. More or less.

“Gennin team,” repeated Sandaime-sama, skipping over the issue of lateness.

“That is an extremely inadvisable idea,” Kakashi pointed out, meaning ‘no’ but also meaning ‘really fucking inadvisable idea’. He tended to get his teams killed. With ANBU that was expected, but nobody wanted little kids’ names on the Memorial Stone.

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“That I know,” the Sandaime informed him cheerlessly. “You’ll thank me- no, shut up. You are taking this assignment. It’s an order. You’re retiring from ANBU. And I am delighted to inform you that you, indeed, have a choice in this. Decommissioning is always an option.”

“You’d have me executed even if I don’t try to kill you again?” Kakashi inquired, more out of genuine curiosity than funereal humour.

The old man shook his head. “No. I would have you retired on a medical pretext and chakra-sealed to prevent you from unintentionally harming yourself – or anybody else.” The look in his eyes said ‘I
know what you did’ and also perhaps ‘I have all the rope I need to hang you, so don’t make me’.

Put like that, Kakashi knew that his future had been determined. “So, who are these pint-sized death row inmates?”

x

Hiruzen thought these meetings would stop after Inoichi resigned from T&I. But here Hiruzen was, having a meeting with the Torture and Interrogation Department’s Head scheduled for the graveyard slot. Perhaps these things were a hereditary part of the position.

The young man looked grave – as he did nearly always, and with full rights to his gravity – but there was an air of nervous dissatisfaction around him, and that Hiruzen was not used to. Were it a different shinobi, it was likely that the yelling would have already started.

“What seems to be the problem, Ibiki-kun?” Hiruzen inquired with a solid semblance of affability, in return for the scrupulous politeness.

“You are giving my Yamanaka to Hatake to kill,” said Ibiki.

“…your Yamanaka.”

Ibiki disregarded the deadpan delivery and elucidated: “Yamanaka Yoshi. He will be an asset to the Department. If he lives to make chunin. Which he won’t, because you are putting him on a heavy combat team under Hatake, and Hatake kills his teams.”

“Kakashi-kun does not-”

“I have proof,” Ibiki announced. He offered a scroll.

Hiruzen didn’t take it. He knew what it contained – the statistics of Hound’s performance as ANBU Team Captain and the reasoning for why Hound had chiefly been dispatched on solo missions for the past few years.

“Kakashi is in therapy and-” he added when Ibiki scowled, since he had a point in that Kakashi being willing to die for his team had never been enough to keep those teams alive, “-I have personally ensured that he has additional motivation to succeed at this endeavour.”

Twice over. Once because he would rather murder his way through a line of child soldiers than have his chakra sealed, and the second time because of Minato-kun’s son.

Ibiki nodded. “Hokage-sama, giving Hound a team of rookie gennin is a bad decision.” He bowed and took his leave, not waiting for a dismissal, which Hiruzen wryly took as the ‘fuck you’ it was.

x

Yoshi watched Mizuki-sensei’s individual approach toward Sasuke-kun’s taijutsu training for a while, expression growing darker and darker until the first tremors of killing intent disturbed the otherwise mostly cheerful outdoors class.

Ino poked her brother’s shoulder. “Keep it in check, moron.”

“He’s interfering with my Project,” Yoshi hissed through clenched teeth. “Did you hear the crap he’s spouting? He’s reinforcing Uchiha’s delusions, and what the hell can I do against that when it’s coming from someone in position of power.”
“Discredit,” Ino pointed out coolly.

As if that wasn’t a basic lesson.

Apparently, her idiot of a brother had only needed that nudge before the grinding clockwork inside his head started working properly again. Within moments he went from annoyed to plotting.

“Need any help?” Ino inquired, watching Fuyumi-chan trounce Noriko-chan.

“Nah,” Yoshi assured her. “I’ve got it. If anything comes up, I’ll let you know.”

“I’ll be constructing alibis and gleefully awaiting the destruction,” Ino assured him, turning to the next spar. Keiko was also head-and-shoulders above most of their classmates. And she didn’t have any kunoichi relatives either.

Ino should organise a few bitching sessions, with very limited participation. This wouldn’t be like the Sasuke Fanclub. This would be for the girls that had the chops to really make it.

She had set out to take in a few protégés that would feel beholden later on. Maybe she should ask a real kunoichi to have a talk with them, too. Civilian lives were different from ninja lives, even in aspects girls wouldn’t normally think of – perfume, clothing, hair, hygiene, ambitions… the way they could tell their parents to fuck off and move out if they didn’t feel like getting married at sixteen.

In fact, Ino herself wasn’t entirely certain on all those points. She could benefit, too. “Too bad Mum’s off roaming the Elemental Countries.”

Yoshi hummed an agreement, but a moment later Iruka-sensei called his name, and he walked into the circle to face off against Kiba.

“I… can I have a moment of your time, Iruka-sensei?”

Iruka blinked, surprised to be sought out. He was a little shouty, and the children tended to be scared of him. While it was hardly the first time one of his students approached him for advice outside of class, Iruka still wasn’t used to it. Every time it caught him by surprise – doubly so if the request came from a clan child.

On the other hand, he had learnt to expect the unexpected from Yamanaka Yoshi, ever since that time they had met and spoken at the Hokage Mountain. Even this otherwise innocuous request was phrased with the sort of calculated politeness that pretended to be befitting of an Academy student.

The boy was twelve. He had no business dumbing himself down to pass for his age.

Iruka sometimes wanted to wring clan heads’ necks for training small children like they were ANBU cadets.

“Of course,” Iruka said after the awkward pause. He mentally pinched himself and beckoned to the boy. “Come in. Sit down – oh, right.” He removed a pile of homework from the other chair. “Sit, Yoshi-kun. What is the problem? Another philosophical question putting you to sleep?”

The boy chuckled, but whatever was weighing on his mind made him immediately return to seriousness. He folded his hands together and looked up at Iruka with interest. “I wanted to ask… What… what does it mean if someone does not really like you but pretends he does?”
Iruka’s first instinct was to assume that this was yet another of the Yamanaka games, and refuse to play along. But Yoshi-kun was not hamming up his naivety, and he wasn’t faking innocence like he sometimes used to. His eyes were narrowed and trained on Iruka’s face like he was giving a test rather than asking an honest question, but Iruka couldn’t imagine what was going on here.

Best just to go along with it. A lot of boys this age covered for embarrassment or insecurity with bravado; Yoshi-kun was undoubtedly a good enough actor to go beyond bravado and weave a more complicated mask.

“That they want to use you,” Iruka replied. Too easy; too obvious.

Yoshi-kun didn’t acknowledge the response, just tossed out another question. “But how can you tell? Friends ask friends for things all the time.”

“Friends ask,” Iruka repeated after him, “they don’t manipulate. And they offer things in return. Good friends do so without counting favours.”

This time there was a hint of approval from the boy (and Iruka realised with a surge of discomfort that he did actually feel as though he were passing an exam). “But how can you tell, Iruka-sensei? What is the difference? A manipulator will too do stuff to make you happy.”

Iruka frowned. That was right, of course, but also uncomfortable to hear from a small boy. Was Yoshi-kun having trouble with Sasuke-kun? Yoshi-kun had been provoking Sasuke-kun on purpose, although so far not with any noticeable harmful intentions. Perhaps that situation had slipped out of his control?

Iruka leaned back in his chair and briefly contemplated, eyeing the rushing clock hand and the pile of homework that he had to correct by Monday. He had no life, so he would have it all ready on time, but he couldn’t muster any happiness about that. “A friend will truly be sorry if they hurt you.” At least he assumed so.

He was friendly with a lot of people, but true friends… He wasn’t good at that.

“But,” protested Yoshi-kun, getting into the heat of the debate, “the manipulator will apologise if it fits his plans, and he will not have a problem with getting over his pride, like a real friend might. ‘cause he’s not apologising for real, so it doesn’t cost him.”

Iruka could see the logic behind it. An apology should be hard, because there should be emotion behind it – regret at the very least. Regret for causing pain.

“Don’t let someone like that hurt you again, Yoshi-kun,” Iruka insisted. He had known that Sasuke-kun was cold, and not completely right in the head. It was understandable, of course, and he kept hoping that someone would help where he couldn’t, or that Sasuke-kun would find a way out of the darkness by himself… but it didn’t seem to be happening.

“But, what if I like him?” implored Yoshi-kun. His eyes glistened with unshed tears; his face flushed with desperate hope. “And he’s done nice things for me… but he’s also hurt me. I mean, he apologised. He always apologises. But then he always does it again.”

Oh, this was not just friendship. This was a crush.

“Listen to me, Yoshi-kun.” Iruka stood from his chair and sank to one knee in front of the curled-up boy. He put his hand on the boy’s shoulder. His heart went out to him. “You are worth more than that. No one will be allowed to treat you badly – but sometimes it is up to you to say ‘no’. You just need to tell someone, okay? I will help – I’m sure your Dad will, too-”
Yamanaka-sama better would, or Iruka would have a few choice words for the man.

“And we will deal with any problem.”

Yoshi-kun sighed. He unlaced his fingers, and his hand came to settle on Iruka’s shoulder to complete the circle. “Sensei... I think he’s lying to me. I don’t have any proof, and then I feel so guilty about thinking that of him, because of course he wouldn’t do something like that to me, and I just feel like such a bastard.”

“Language, Yoshi-kun,” Iruka admonished, but took care to keep his voice gentle. He was almost there. Any moment now, Yoshi-kun would find the courage and share.

“Sorry, sensei. But I feel like such a heel for even suspecting him of anything.”

“You should follow your instincts, Yoshi-kun,” Iruka implored. “They will be invaluable to you once you become a shinobi – in the field, good instincts often mean the difference between life and death.”

“I see...” Yoshi-kun kept his head down and his eyes on his sandals for a while. Then he looked up. His expression wasn’t resolute or defeated – it was pitying. “Iruka-sensei?”

“Yes, Yoshi-kun?”

The boy slipped from touching distance and stood at the threshold of Iruka’s office, straight-backed and professionally cool. “In this model situation, I was performing the role of yourself. My hypothetical antagonist was Mizuki-sensei. Please, follow your advice before it is too late.”

He nodded in farewell and left, while Iruka was still too stunned to react.

What had just happened?

What did Yoshi-kun mean... about Mizuki?

x

Kakashi was drawn to the glade first by the killing intent, then by the yelling and finally by the chakra used.

Chakra was used every day, all day, all over Konoha by everybody and their elderly ninmen, so Kakashi would have passed an innocent spar in the woods without giving it a second thought. Even a non-innocent spar, because some shinobi (for a random example Anko) liked to spice things up and didn’t consider it a real fighting if it didn’t include death threats and offensive language.

Killing intent, too, was a weapon, and needed to be honed.

But all three at once? In a place that wasn’t an official training ground?

He burst through the canopy. There was a familiar chuunin facing off against an unfamiliar chuunin. Kakashi raised his hitai-ate-

-the Sharingan took stock of the scene, catalogued micro-expressions, predicted movements-

-and he body-flickered just in time to snatch the familiar chuunin out of the way of a lethal fuuma shuriken.

“Shit!” The unfamiliar chuunin didn’t stand and gawp; he jumped to the trees and tried to flee.
“Don’t let him-”

Kakashi didn’t care about what the familiar chuunin was trying to tell him. He had his own mind, had constructed a sufficient picture of the situation for the moment, and he was the ANBU Hound…

…so he had the unfamiliar chuunin paralysed, unconscious, bound and tagged within fifteen seconds.

He dropped his cargo back in the glade, and surveyed the bleeding young man that was actually sitting there and gawping. It would have been unattractive, were it not so unselfconsciously flattering.

“Let me guess,” Kakashi quipped, “you’re going to report me again.”

The chuunin finally shut his mouth, but instead of panicking or getting angry at the interference, he seemed to be relieved. “I’ll definitely mention you in my report, shinobi-san, but I think I’ll try to be complimentary this time.”

“Don’t hurt yourself,” Kakashi bade him dryly, and offered a hands-up.

It was accepted, although it resulted in some stumbling and swaying. “Ow! I guess I’m already hurt enough for one day.”

Kakashi was reluctant to take his hand away.

The chuunin was wounded worse than he had initially seemed; he was losing more blood than it was wise to lose.

“I’ll take you to the Hospital.”

The chuunin looked down at the package addressed to the T&I Department that Kakashi had ungently deposited on the ground. “Shouldn’t you-”

Kakashi shrugged, disinterested. “They’ve got it.”

“Who-”

Cat and Marmot jumped out of the trees and immediately gravitated toward Kakashi for a sitrep – this he provided with a few signs – suspected traitor apprehended, full report pending, arrest. The hand-off was utterly silent, and Kakashi didn’t feel the need to watch over his still-subordinates, so he grabbed the chuunin and body-flickered them to the Hospital before the charming moron could bleed out.

He noticed the tears only after they arrived in the lobby. “Are you in that much pain-?”

“No… no.” The chuunin shook his head vehemently, starting off a new wave of tears. “I’m… sorry. I’m just such an idiot.” He wiped his nose into the back of his palm, which he in turn wiped into his trouser leg. The trousers were a write-off anyway, so that made sense. “I trusted him.”


The chuunin snorted. “For a second there you almost seemed nice.”

Kakashi was prevented from further flirting by one of the medic nin finally noticing the bleeding shinobi in need of medical care and approaching them. “Sensei,” he addressed the woman, “one idiot
who let himself get stabbed in the back – both literally and figuratively. For you.” He nudged the chuunin into the cruel hands of the medic.

“What an arse,” the iroyoun rudely commented behind Kakashi’s back.

“You don’t know the half of it,” replied the chuunin.
Graduation

Kakashi got his chuunin back in a satisfactory condition a little over an hour later. An hour which he had spent very patiently staking out the lobby, looking perfectly inconspicuous behind his *Icha Icha*.

“What’s the verdict?” he asked, cheerfully insinuating himself at the chuunin’s side.

“Restricted from training, but ambulatory,” replied the young man, affably enough. “By which I mean, you can go away now and leave me be.” He made a shooing gesture with both hands.

Kakashi had expected some resistance, so he didn’t take this disheartening rejection personally. He put his first contingency plan into action. “I’m taking you to dinner.”

The chuunin did not even grace him with a look. “No, you’re not.”

“I saved your life.” That was worth at least a little consideration, wasn’t it? Would it be such a pain to let Kakashi buy him a meal? Or, admittedly, probably pay for the meal, because Kakashi had misplaced his wallet again.

“Which means we’re *quid pro quo* on that,” pointed out the man, looking at Kakashi with a shade of amused expectation covering a well of hurt. “And you still owe me for saving you from making the mistake of hurting children.”

Kakashi didn’t know what to do. He could have annihilated this man in hundred different ways within the next two seconds, but talking to him was difficult. And while *Icha Icha* might have had some advice on how to act in these situations, Kakashi’s underdeveloped and atrophied social instinct urged him *not* to follow it.

And, now that he thought of it, maybe this wasn’t the best time. The man had just been betrayed by a friend, and was probably still in considerable physical pain.

Kakashi nodded to himself. Rain check it was. “You’re still teaching at the Academy, aren’t you?”

The chuunin nodded-

“Iruka!”

-and suddenly his face lit up. “Ibiki-san!”

Kakashi watched in mute awe as the object of his unsavoury interest seemed to become genuinely happy at the sight of the most famous torturer in Fire Country. It was frightening – and perhaps shouldn’t have been unexpected – since Ibiki had reacted strongly when, years ago, Kakashi hinted at his interest in the then-teenager. Whatever the connection between these two ninja was, Ibiki being fond of – *Iruka*, apparently – meant that Kakashi risked his physical and mental integrity (or whatever thereof was left) just talking to him.

But Kakashi wanted to talk to him. And more. Definitely more. Did *Iruka-kun* have to be so relentlessly charming?

…and now he was walking away practically arm in arm with the Oni from T&I and leaving Kakashi behind without even a second glance and this wasn’t *fair*. 
“I was tipped off by one of my students,” Iruka explained, pulling the scrubs tighter around himself. His shirt, mesh and trousers hadn’t survived the surgery preparation, and his vest had not been returned to him. He got a receipt, but that did exactly nothing to keep him warm in this intentionally chilly underground room.

It was the nice one for the polite interrogations. Iruka guessed that one of the less nice ones was currently occupied by Mizuki, and reminded himself that there would be time for bawling his eyes out later.

Not in front of Ibiki-san.

Ibiki-san frowned at him. “Which one? What did they know? What tipped them off? We might have to bring them in—”

“It was Yamanaka Yoshi-kun, and he—”

“Oh, that boy,” Ibiki-san relaxed and sank back into his chair. “Right.”

“Err… what do you mean, ‘right’?!?”

Iruka’s acquaintance with Ibiki-san began when Iruka was still an Academy student, and one of his pranks had gotten a little away from him in the direction of property destruction. Iruka hadn’t meant to level that building, and either his genuine contriteness or the fact that he had had the skill to do it in the first place caught Ibiki-san’s attention. That first conversation had happened in the not-nice interrogation room, and while it had remained within the limits of a literal conversation, the effect it had had on Iruka was profound. And lasting.

He dearly hoped that Yoshi-kun hadn’t met Ibiki-san under similar circumstances.

“Inoichi trained him personally,” Ibiki-san explained – and, right, that made sense. It wasn’t widely known that Ibiki-san had succeeded Yamanaka-sama at his post, but Iruka had been aware, and of course these two men would be acquainted. “Boy’s got people instincts that I envy him, and is an absolute conditioning savant… and instead of Intel he wants to go into Psych. That would be a criminal waste! I’m not letting it happen—”

“Oh. Ah… Um.” Iruka especially didn’t want to imagine any of his little students in one of Ibiki-san’s specialised cells getting to work, but his mind forced the picture on him anyway, and it was sadly so very, very realistic. He could see it.

Yoshi-kun was a little scary, wasn’t he? Especially because he usually appeared so normal. Obviously, that was a façade, but it was masterful. Even Iruka had thought Yoshi was just a typical clan child – a little full of himself, somewhat aware of the realities of shinobi life and therefore sufficiently motivated to apply himself, and a little weird. All clan members were a little weird. It went with the territory.

“Quite,” agreed Ibiki-san, greatly amused under that smooth, cool exterior. “The moment he gets his chunin vest, I have an apprenticeship open for him.”

Iruka really, honestly, did not want any of his students to end up here, in this dark, bloody, cruel place. But if any of them had to, he believed that Yoshi-kun could take it.

“In the meantime I’ve got to make sure Hatake doesn’t get him killed. If you have any idea short of assassinating Hatake… or if you have any viable idea for assassinating Hatake—”

“Assassination is not exactly my specialty,” Iruka said dryly. This was not how he had imagined his
interrogation would go. “And I have full confidence in Yoshi-kun – he will twist his jounin-sensei around his fingers. Maybe it would be best to consult directly with him?”

Ibiki-san blinked at him. And then he smiled. “That is an excellent idea, Iruka.”

x

Years ago Inoichi told him to ‘go home and think about it’. At that time Kakashi had heard ‘unless you’re absolutely certain that what you might have together is worth ruining his life and getting him killed, don’t do it’.

He realized now that he had heard wrong. That what Inoichi had meant was probably closer to ‘don’t do it unless you can treat him like a human being and let yourself be treated like a human being by him’, and in hindsight Inoichi was right. Ibiki had been less solicitous about it, but he had also been Kakashi’s direct superior at that time, so he did have the actual authority to give Kakashi an order.

Kakashi was not sure he knew anything about feeling human or people treating one another like humans, but he was going to at least try.

That was the greatest difference between then and now: three years ago he did not have the ability to decide what he wanted.

Now he knew.

x

“Patsy,” Anko reported, pulling off the rubber gloves.

Inoichi commended Ibiki for managing to get her to use gloves at all. Anko liked working bare-handed. But gloves were easy to disguise with genjutsu for whenever the ‘personal’ touch was required, and it was much safer for the interrogator.

“How did we overlook him?” he inquired woodenly. The knowledge that there had been a traitor at the Shinobi Academy, in a position of power over children (over Inoichi’s children, although Inoichi’s children were trained well enough to recognise abusers and take just enough from them that they could collect proof of wrongdoing) shattered his self-control.

There was a reason why he had remained in the observing room and sent Anko to do the job.

Anko turned her head to the side; her neck cracked loudly. “He’s been recruited recently. The run-of-the-mill power-hungry idiot with an injured ego. Sensei took advantage of him with zero effort.”

Inoichi wondered how many days in a week he could get drunk before he had a problem. Today was going to end up with another long night of intoxicated commiseration at the Nara Compound, he just knew it.

“He didn’t actually manage to do anything except try to demoralise a handful of preteens,” Anko assured him. “And we don’t want the weaklings that fell for it in the Corps anyway.”

Inoichi quirked an eyebrow. “Speaking of, I heard you might be taking a team?”

“Yeah, right. After Sandaime-sama retires, and I stop being an in-your-face reminder of the Hokage’s failures, maybe? ‘sides, haven’t you heard? I ain’t got clearance from Psych to work with kids.”
Inoichi, who had let Anko personally tutor his own children and been the one to sign that particular psych report, simply looked at her. “If you want me to clear you-”

“Nope!” she exclaimed cheerfully. “I’m a dangerous dissident! Doubtful loyalty and a Cursed Seal and, oh, deep-seated feelings of resentment! What if I contaminated the next generation?”

Inoichi returned her smirk. “As you wish. Tell me if you ever change your mind.”

x

The dog barked.

“What?” Inuzuka’s head snapped up and his eyes fell on the door of the classroom an instance before Iruka-sensei walked in, closely followed by Daikoku-sensei.

Sasuke noted that their homeroom teacher looked tired – in fact, he must have been exhausted, because his attempt to cover up his limp faltered halfway to his desk.

“Class!” Daikoku-sensei snapped.

The chatter cut off, and after a quick shuffle the students were all seated.

“Yesterday,” Daikoku-sensei spoke as Iruka-sensei sat down and attempted without significant success to look calm, “Mizuki was apprehended on grounds of treason. Silence!”

This time it took the whispers a little longer to stop.

Sasuke took the chance to look around the room. Aburame, as usual, showed nothing. Nara seemed disconcerted, so that was a dead end. And Yamanaka…

Sasuke wished he could have been surprised. The Fangirl was leaning closer to her brother, sharing her observations. For just a moment, Yoshi looked smug, before he shifted back into a semblance of shock, mimicking the students around him.

“I urge you,” continued Daikoku-sensei, “to report any interactions you have had with Mizuki that have made you feel unsafe. Likewise, if he wanted from you information outside of taught subjects or if he asked you to perform any extracurricular actions-”

There was a creak and then a crash.

Haruno’s desk had broken, and was now lying in two pieces on the floor. Haruno blinked at the teachers, at least as bemused as they were. “Uh… sensei, I have no idea what just happened? I – I am so sorry?!” She seemed to be on the verge of crying.

Which in no way explained why girl Yamanaka tried to smother her giggles in boy Yamanaka’s shoulder.

Iruka-sensei covered his face with his hands and let his senior colleague manage this situation.

“Pain in the arse,” muttered Nara.

“’s not his fault!” protested Akimichi, while Daikoku-sensei snapped at Haruno to move to one of the empty seats.

“Silence!” yelled the teacher, nearing the end of patience. “You may submit your written reports to Iruka-sensei, Suzume-sensei or myself! Be ready to provide clarification as needed if your reports
uncover new information! This is a standard part of shinobi duties – if any of you have a problem with this task, you have no business getting a hitai-ate! Questions?"

There were none.

Sasuke pulled out a notebook, turned to a new page and started writing all that he remembered. He was not sure how much of it could be useful information to anyone, but seeing all those small instances of Mizuki’s non-standard and occasionally outright rule-defying behaviour written as a list was sobering.

Much of what he believed – many of his basic tenets – had been told to him by traitors.

First that man and now one of his teachers.

Yamanaka had warned him, hadn’t he? Maybe Sasuke should at least hear him out next time.

x

“Hi, Yoshino-ba-san!” yelled Ino.

Shikamaru scrambled off of his bed and fumbled for his trousers-

Wait, today was not Saturday. It was Tuesday. And it was late afternoon. Shikamaru was in fact wearing his trousers, because had just woken up from a nap, and Ino’s unnaturally perky voice had invaded a very pleasant dream.

He muttered a prayer for Ino to trip into a ditch, hit her head and suffer amnesia that would force her to be held back at the Academy while he and Chouji graduated, and then considered the objects within his bedroom. Tragically, all methods of barring the door and barricading himself inside involved far too much effort.

“Pain in the arse,” he concluded, and went to reconnoiter the situation.

The twitter hit him first.

It wasn’t just Ino.

There were girls – plural. There were a lot of girls, and no boys. Not even Yoshi, who was definitely a boy, but sometimes made the girls forget this fact (and Shikamaru would very much like to know how he did it, because engendering that sort of false kinship was indescribably useful). The initial assessment of ‘a lot’ resolved into ‘six’ by the time Shikamaru found a shadow on top of the staircase that he could blend into.

There were six girls in the living room of Shikamaru’s house, led by Ino, who was currently trying to convince Shikamaru’s Mother to host them for the evening.

Not just trying. Shikamaru realised with bone-deep horror that she was succeeding.

“…and these are the girls in my class that are definitely going to pass the graduation exam,” Ino explained. “You know Hinata-chan and Sakura-chan already, and these are Ami-chan and Keiko-chan and Fuyumi-chan. They are all like Sakura-chan.”

They were not. Haruno Sakura was (thank the gods!) a unique case. Shikamaru wasn’t entirely sure what was wrong with her, but Ino doted on the girl, so something must have been very, very wrong with her. The other girls were annoying but – as far as he could tell – sane.
“You two are such good friends,” one of the females said in that sweet tone that females used to express jealousy and spite.

Ino, proving that she was years ahead of them in this particular game, lowered her voice to a disturbingly intimate tone. “Sakura-chan and I could have been bitter rivals, but isn’t it nicer to just… share?”

Shikamaru shuddered.

Uchiha was so lucky he was not here to witness this horror.

“I see, Ino-chan,” said Shikamaru’s Mother. She was observing the invasion of females in her home and smiling. “When is Yuuki coming home?”

“Hopefully in time for the graduation,” Ino reported. It was only long-term acquaintance with her that allowed Shikamaru to see the hint of upset in her expression – to everyone else it would have seemed like Ino was used to her Mother not being around and treating it like it was of no consequence to her.

“Well, then it does fall to me, after all,” said Shikamaru’s Mother. “Let’s have us some serious kunoichi talk.”

Ino’s eyes closed in relief, but a moment later she had already wiped that emotion off her face, and was directing the girls to take seats on the furniture.

“Oh, let’s start with the first question each and every one of you will be asked after you graduate,” said Shikamaru’s mother, perching in Pops’ armchair like a queen presiding over her court. “What are your aspirations? And let me warn you: if I hear anything at all about boys, I’ll have you doing push-ups until your arms fall off.”

“So cool…” sighed one of the girls, awestruck.

Hyuuga-chan squeaked, but stopped trembling as soon as Ino pulled her into her side.

Shikamaru considered if any of the scarring information he might have heard forthwith would be worth it, and decided to flee while he could. There were always the woods, the deer and the clouds.

“How did you know about Mizuki?” Sasuke asked during their weekly spar.

Naruto back-flipped out of the way of a kick that almost shattered his jaw. “I noticed him being a dick to Iruka-sensei, and then I heard him say really suspicious stuff when he taught one-on-one.”

Sasuke sneered as he threw a barrage of shuriken. “When he taught me, you mean.”

Naruto sneered as well, but at the memory. “You, too. But he told Ami-chan that unless she specialised in seduction, she would never make it past gennin. Who the fuck says something like that to an eleven-year-old girl?!”

“Haraguchi?” Sasuke said, frowning as he tried to sweep Naruto’s legs from under him and followed up with another high kick to take advantage of Naruto’s half-directed jump. “That’s bullshit. She could do infiltration and sabotage, and maybe-”

Naruto fumbled a block and they ended up in an unintentional mutual headbutt.
They crashed to the ground, nursing their respective concussions.

“I totally agree,” said Naruto once the world stopped spinning so hard that he felt like he would puke if he opened his mouth.

Sasuke groaned from the grass next to him. “Why can’t I ever tell?”

Naruto sighed. “cause they’re trained for this shit, Sasuke-kun, and if they turn it directly on you, there’s nothing you can do.”

“How are you different from them, then?” Sasuke demanded.

That was actually a very good question. Naruto pondered this for a while, and then said: “I’m loyal to Konoha.”

Sasuke laughed.

Naruto hadn’t ever before heard him laugh, and he didn’t even mind that Sasuke was laughing at him. This was good. This was progress.

“Fine,” Sasuke snapped, a little breathless from the spar, the pain and the laughter, “fine, I’ll give this moronic idea a chance. It must be the concussion… Help me get home. I’ll return the book you lent me.”

x

“What is Shikamaru-kun doing?” Asuma asked, watching the crystal ball over his Father’s shoulder.

His Father sighed. “Protesting.”

Asuma looked at the wry tilt of his Father’s mouth, and then again down at the fish-eye view of Nara Shikamaru, a lazy twelve-year-old boy, chained to a tree in front of the Shinobi Academy.

“Protesting what?” Asuma asked obediently. He hated it when his Father led him like this – it felt patronising, like a blatant put-down – but in this instance his curiosity overrode his personal issues.

“The team assignments,” the Hokage replied wryly.

Asuma blinked. “The team assignments aren’t finalised yet. Aren’t there, like, five weeks until the graduation?”

His Father nodded. “There are. And Shikamaru-kun has worked relentlessly over the past three years to receive the exact borderline mark that would allow him to pass yet guarantee that he was the dead last of the class. By now he must know the subject matter and the grading system better than his teachers, to receive such an exact percentage.”

“Genius, huh?” Asuma replied, although they had both long since known that. Counted on it, too. Asuma had only one reason for returning from the Fire Daimyou’s court, and that was the team he was promised.

Nepotism? What nepotism? Well, he was entitled to some compensation for all the shit he had to deal with just because his Father wasn’t smart enough to say no to the Nidaime’s dying wish.

“Oh, yes,” agreed the Hokage, smiling around the mouthpiece of his pipe. “He had figured out the team assignments, too. And I agree that by convention he would be placed on a team with Uchiha Sasuke and either Hyuuga Hinata or Yamanaka Ino, but we are not breaking up the Ino-Shika-Cho
formation, regardless of final rankings.”

Asuma had counted on this. That team was his.

“Still, Shikamaru-kun does have a point.”

Asuma’s self-assured smile froze. His Father always did this. Always. He took perverse pleasure in letting people’s dreams build up and then bringing them crashing down.

“We speak of re-forming the Ino-Shika-Cho, but we have in fact two Yamanaka in that class. And of those, I dare say that the boy is a little more easy-going.” The Hokage moved his hand over the crystal ball, and instead of a little Nara chained to a tree with a snacking Akimichi by his side, there was a blond boy of the same age, stuffing a fistful of peanuts into his mouth and nearly choking as he laughed at the ‘Yoshi-Shika-Cho’ sign Akimichi-kun was holding up.

“I wasn’t gone that long,” Asuma grumbled.

His Father caught the inquiry, of course, and his smile widened. “No, no. Yamanaka Yoshi is assumed an extramarital child of the clan, and was adopted by Inoichi-san a… huh, must be about seven years already. How the time flies.”

Asuma stuck a cigarette between his teeth and lit it. “You mean I could have my dream team without the hassle of a girl?”

His Father’s expression darkened.

Asuma found himself wanting to take a step back. Damn it. Damn it all, that was such a stupid thing to say. And he didn’t even mean it!

He hoped Kurenai would never hear of this.

“No,” said the Hokage.

“Why not, Dad? Just switch them and give me the boy.”

“Not on your life,” Hiruzen snapped. Asuma had always assumed that just because he was the son of the Hokage, he would be allowed to coast on life. It was aggravating. “I am sure you would like a vacation instead of a teaching assignment, but the future of these children is more important.”

Asuma’s forehead furrowed. “Hey, there’s no call for that.”

“Asuma…” Hiruzen rubbed his temple and reminded himself that his son had never taught anyone, and he did not understand that the dynamics of gennin teams were very, very different from the dynamics of any regular team, and that the Ino-Shika-Cho combination should never have been enforced straight out of the Academy.

This was the idiocy of the public at work, and the best they could do to mitigate the consequences was make sure that there was a lot of personality clashing on the team.

How else could the children’s edges be rubbed off for future teamwork? If there was no friction, there could be no professional growth.

Explain, he told himself. Teach. Don’t expect this young man, no matter how smart, to just instinctively understand what you have had a lifetime-and-half to learn by observation.
“Asuma,” he said, “if I gave you these three calm, friendly, well-adjusted boys to work with, they would have perfect teamwork and a perfectly rounded-out skillset, and die the first time out in the field when they had to work with someone they didn’t know.”

And Asuma was very, very smart, so the next thing to come out of his mouth (discounting cigarette smoke) was: “…is that why you put me on a team with Gai?!”

Hiruzen smiled at the memory of those golden times. “It has served you well.” Also, the alternative had been Minato-kun’s team, which meant Kakashi. And, contrary to what Asuma seemed to believe, Hiruzen loved him far too much to risk him needlessly.

x

Yoshino had shouted herself hoarse before striding off to the kitchen where, judging by the banging noises, she was about to charcoal a piece of meat just so she could improve her mood by watching her unrepentant son and her poor husband try and swallow their dinner.

Shikaku knocked, waited for the requisite five seconds for his child to hide anything a Father would not wish to see, and let himself into his son’s room.

“How long have you been planning that?” he inquired, not hiding his appreciation for the plan.

It had, naturally, zero effect on the team assignments, but it had made a lot of people chuckle – including the Hokage and Shikamaru’s future sensei – so it had been definitely worth the effort. Not out of the Academy yet, and Shikamaru was already gaining a reputation.

“About eight years,” the boy admitted, turning over his homework sheet. He seemed to be filling in the answers at random, sometimes substituting stick-figure sketches.

Shikaku considered whether some measure of parental disapproval might have been called for, and then decided that it was all far too troublesome, and of course his son knew what he was doing. Homework sheets, honestly. Shikaku could absolutely see how nobody would take that sort of crap seriously.

“In other words, since you learnt about Yoshi’s existence,” he estimated. That was a long damn time, not even taking into account that Shikamaru was twelve.

Shikamaru shrugged. The homework sheet was folded in half and stuffed inside his bag. “I found out about of our future team and about Yoshi’s existence on the same day. Took me a while to figure out what it all actually meant.”

“A while, huh?”

Shikamaru shrugged again, like it wasn’t important. But it must have been, because otherwise he would not have carried it around for eight years without saying a word. Shikaku knew that his son was brilliant, and a procrastinator, and had an exceptional strategic mind, but it still shocked him that he was capable of playing this long a game at this young an age.

He wondered if the fight between the boys had featured in it – and hoped that it did not. That showed a level of callousness that Shikaku would prefer not to see in his own child.

x

“Look, Dad…” Yoshi scratched at his loose hair. “I know it’s unfinished. I’m sorry. I overestimated
“Shush,” said Inoichi. He rubbed his chin. He had observed both Hyuuga Hinata and Uchiha Sasuke over the past few weeks and what he had seen was perhaps not entirely satisfying, but in its own way astonishing. “You both picked cases that had proven too difficult for experienced professionals for your learning projects. That was a stupid decision. You let your pride overtake your common sense, and in the field that will be fatal.”

Yoshi wilted, and so did Ino, although she was a little less free with displaying it.

Yuuki watched impassively from her side of the sofa.

“But,” Inoichi continued, “you have consulted your choices of subject with me, and I have signed off on them both. Judged solely on your grasp of theory and performance within the field…”

Yuuki smiled.

The children’s eyes widened in anticipation.

“…you pass.”

They punched the air out of his lungs, throwing themselves at him and clinging with all eight limbs like a hairy, blond octopus.

And Yuuki, the evil woman, just laughed.

x

Iruka deposited the final class rankings, with complete, detailed scores, on Hokage-sama’s desk.

He could not quite describe the relief he felt at being rid of that document.

It had burnt in his hand. Not literally, of course, but his discomfort was real.

“Is this… a joke?” demanded Shikaku-sama from behind Hokage-sama’s shoulder.

“No,” Iruka said, having entered that area of dispassion that lay on the opposite side of hysterical amusement, “that’s the real results. To be accurate, that’s the result of having a Nara and two Yamanaka in class, and if you would be so kind as to excuse me, I believe that I urgently need at least a month of vacation-”

“Iruka-kun,” Hokage-sama stopped him before he could vamoose.

Iruka pivoted. His shoulders slumped. “Yes, sir?”

“How many of them underperformed on purpose?”

Iruka counted on his fingers, and finally settled on: “At least four. At most six. May I go-?”

“Which ones?”

Iruka solemnly scrutinised his sandals, and then looked up to meet Hokage-sama’s eye (pretending that he hadn’t noticed the murder of jounin gathered around the edges of the office and hanging onto every word of the conversation, and that he definitely had not noticed that one silver-haired, masked jounin lurking in a corner). “Nara Shikamaru and Aburame Shino have done so consistently for years. Uchiha Sasuke did it only for the graduation exam, and very clearly to avoid being placed on a
team with Inuzuka Kiba – presumably warned by Yamanaka Yoshi. Yoshi-kun can do better, too, I’m sure. Hyuuga Hinata does not test well due to anxiety. And I have suspicions about Haruno Sakura, but she may just be that physically weak for real.” Provided that she could instinctively use chakra to boost her strength, but Iruka considered that idea far-fetched.

“Well…” Hokage-sama allowed after three pulls from his pipe, “it seems that the best-best-worst team shall not go to Kakashi-kun after all.”
“To be honest,” Kurenai-sensei said after they all sat down around the table at the restaurant and gave their orders to the waitress, “this year’s team assignments were in question until the very last moment.”

The jounin left a dramatic pause there, clearly intending to continue, but when no further elaboration ensued, Shino surveyed his teammates. Hinata-san was, as he had somewhat expected, struck by anxiety. Shino was surprised and glad to be co-assigned with her; she would be a skilled and reliable ally, and he somewhat knew her. Likewise he dared hope that she felt similarly about him.

Inuzuka-san… was not quite a disappointment, in that Shino did not doubt the boy’s qualities, but perhaps a challenge, in that their personalities were predisposed to engender conflict. Presently, Inuzuka-san’s eyes were glued to the hemline of Kurenai-sensei’s dress, and he seemed otherwise utterly insensate.

Shino suppressed a sigh and turned to the jounin. “Why?”

“Because for the first time in the history of the Academy, the Rookie of the year was a girl. It nearly came to a fistfight.” Kurenai-sensei smiled. “Fortunately, the Rookie was Yamanaka-chan, so her prior team assignment took precedence, so Hokage-sama simply considered the rest of the class minus the Ino-Shika-Cho trio.”

“Ino-chan was the best in the year?” Hinata-san whispered, breathless. Awed.

Shino could admit to a certain amount of surprise. Everybody knew that Uchiha-san would be the Rookie.

“That’s right,” Kurenai-sensei confirmed and shrugged, still smiling.

Inuzuka-san – as a quick glance confirmed – was still speechless. Presently salivating.

“And, as it seems, several of your classmates have decided to throw the exam, so it happens that the second in the year is Shino-kun-”

Shino felt his eyes widen. This was a very improbable result, given that he had intentionally geared his results toward the average for years.

“-the second-best kunoichi is Hinata-chan-”

That Shino could see happening. Haruno-san would have been a competition for the spot, but given Hinata-san’s skills, the ranking was deserved.

“-and the second-to-last was Kiba-kun.”
Inuzuka-san seemed to awaken with a jerk. “What? Uh… sorry, I drifted off for a bit… sensei?”

His dog barked derisively; Inuzuka-san’s face turned progressively redder as he listened to the ninken’s rendition of the events.

“They all threw it,” Hinata-san said plaintively. “All of them but Ino-chan. And Shino-kun did, too.”

“Ladybug,” Shino implored. He briefly lowered his head in confirmation and a mute request for amnesty. He had never been interested in the appearance of excellence. The fact that his peers – led, presumably, by Yoshi-san – had managed to negate his efforts was galling.

“So,” concluded Kurenai-sensei, folding her forearms on the table, “it looks like your class is stranger than the wartime years. Congratulations. How about you start with giving me honest appraisals of your abilities?”

“Let’s start with Ino-chan,” said Asuma-sensei.

Ino pulled her shoulders back to display what little chest-padding she had managed to grow yet. “Yamanaka Ino, which you already know, sensei, and can I just say this is redundant? I knew these guys since before they were toilet trained.”

Chouji whined on the edge of audibility.

“Look, Ino-chan,” said the jounin, “I gave you a really simple order. If you can’t follow that—”

“I like my Clan and my Clan techniques. I dislike stupid Council decisions that result in stupid team assignments. My hobby is mindfucking—”

Asuma-sensei nearly choked on his cigarette. He pulled it out of his mouth and dragged his hand over his face.

Ino smugly relaxed her shoulders. “And I’m going to be a kickass kunoichi that’s known all over the Elemental Countries for her beauty and her skill and her mindfucking mojo. People will tremble in fear just hearing my name! Ho-ho-ho!” She stopped laughing maniacally and reverted to the cute-and-innocent persona, clasping her hands together in her lap the way Sakura sometimes did. “And I guess, I’m waiting for a really cool ninja to walk into my life.”

‘Really cool’ in this context, Shikamaru suspected, meant ‘really messed up in the head’. Ino’s tastes in people were particular and not really a secret.

“How… interesting,” deadpanned Asuma-sensei. Not ten minutes with them yet, and he was already obviously regretting taking a team at all. “What about you, Shika-kun?”


“And your dream?” Asuma-sensei inquired fatalistically.

“A dream, huh?”

“‘To be allowed to sleep in until noon for the rest of your life?’ Ino suggested pithily.

Asuma-sensei tsked. “You had your turn, Ino-chan. Let Shikamaru-kun speak for himself.”
Shikamaru’s dream, huh? To have a moderately successful career as a shinobi of Konoha, to take over as Clan Head for his Dad and then foist off the hassle onto one of his cousins… and to marry the person of his choice and maybe have a family of their own one day. He shrugged. “Neh, Ino’s right.”

Asuma-sensei was beginning to look depressed. “And you, Cho-kun?”

“I am Akimichi Chouji,” Chouji said, looking several times between Ino and Shikamaru, probably deciding which one he was going to emulate and whether he was going to self-censor, too. “I like my friends. And, yeah, food. I dislike people that call me fat, and people who give up on their friends.”

Shikamaru accepted that dig as his due. Even though he had partially remedied that situation from Chouji’s point of view, and made fairly good progress from his own.

“My hobbies are training and hanging out with my friends, and my dream is to master the Akimichi techniques and be a dependable teammate.”

Their sensei looked at Chouji like he was a gift from the gods (at least they had a smart sensei that could see the value of what was right in front of him). “Oh, thank you, that was a great introduction, Chouji-kun! Now, let’s talk about the real test you have to pass to become gennin-”

x

“Let us start with introductions,” said the jounin. “Why? Because-”

“Or we can spare ourselves this whole farce,” Keiko bit out. She couldn’t help it. She was just so angry about this set-up. If they wanted her to fail out, why did they string her along until the very bitter end? She could have been learning something useful for two or three years now-

“Please,” said the jounin, like it didn’t bother him that she cut him off, “clarify.”

Ami-chan pulled a handkerchief out of her bag and blew her nose. She tried to keep it quiet, but failed.

Fuyumi-chan patted her back. This situation had made them friends, even though they did not know her well; she was very quiet.

So it was up to Keiko to stand up and raise the stink in all their names. So she did. She stood tall, taller than their sitting fake would-be teacher, and put her arms akimbo like she had watched Ino-chan do for years whenever she felt the need to confront an authority figure. “You think we’re stupid-”

The jounin’s face didn’t move at all – at least not the part of it they could see around the sunglasses. “No, I do not-”

“’cause there’s never been a girls-only team!” Keiko snapped. “Never! I looked it up! Boys-only? Sure. But girls-only? You could have just told us we weren’t good enough and spared us this… this…”

“Game of make-believe,” Fuyumi-chan helped her, glaring over Ami-chan’s hunched shoulders. “It’s just plain cruel.”

“Ah,” said the jounin.
There was silence while Keiko stewed and Ami-chan sobbed into her knees, devastated by the humiliation.

Then the jounin rose to his feet. He wasn’t the tallest man around, but he was still pretty tall. And creepy. The way you couldn’t tell where he was looking was just ugh. He was worse than Shino. Shino at least made a semblance of a facial expression once in a while.

“You are mistaken in your assumption,” said the man. “Why? Because I intended to give your team a fair trial. However, if you are determined to fail, it is acceptable-”

“Wait!” Fuyumi-chan yelped. “You mean that? You’d be willing to actually lead a kunoichi-only team?!”

“Willing?” repeated the jounin. He might have, perhaps, tilted his head a little, but it was hard to tell. “I would be honoured, provided that it was a team worth leading. However, I am reserving judgment regarding this team’s worth until after the trial.”

“I… I… am Haraguchi Ami,” gasped Ami-chan, knuckling away her tears. “I like… my friends and Sasuke-kun and Suzume-sensei’s lessons. My dream is… I want to be a… a demolitions expert… a real kunoichi, not like… like Mizuki said…”

Keiko watched the jounin. She still didn’t believe that this wasn’t a cruel hoax, but apparently the only way to disprove it was to give it a chance. She would. For Ami-chan’s sake. And Fuyumi-chan’s. If they failed, they would know it was because they never had a chance – not because of any lack of merit.

They would make damn sure of that.

x

Kakashi opened the door to the classroom.

Three faces looked up at him with varying levels of annoyance and intrigue. The pink-haired girl rose to her feet immediately and bowed.

The dark-haired boy didn’t move.

And the blond…

…was Minato-sensei’s son.

Kakashi blinked and took a closer look. The features didn’t match. The eyes, yes, they were right, but the hair was the wrong colour – dyed, obviously – and where were the whiskers?

Minato-sensei’s son, he repeated to himself, incredulous. It had been years since he had dared hope. He had been absolutely, hundred percent certain that the Sandaime had let Danzo take the boy and brainwash him into one of those ‘special’ ANBU and then lose him on some off-the-books mission, even though there was no evidence to support it.

Only here was a smiling (that familiar, heart-stabbing smile), wrong-blond Yamanaka boy, and the sudden relief that welled inside Kakashi made both his eyes well.

“My first impression of you,” he drawled, “is that I’m going to enjoy making you regret all your life choices.”
And then he was going to do the same to the Sandaime.

Sitting down on the roof of the Academy like a proper team offset the first impression a little bit, but Kakashi-sensei immediately remedied this by offering a pathetic non-introduction.

Naruto, as a ninja training to be a specialist on dissemination, took offense. And he was going to express said offense by demonstrating how to do it right.

“Ooh, can I start, sensei? Please let me start! I want to talk about myself! My name is Yamanaka Yoshi!” He punched the air. “I like hot chocolate with marshmallows. Like, really like it. I mean, I know I shouldn’t tell you, Dad keeps harping on about it, but I can’t sleep if I don’t get my chocolate with marshmallows just how I like it.”

Sasuke stared into the distance, a little less absent than he had been a while ago, and a whole lot more long-suffering. Oh, yeah. Right track, check.

Sakura puffed up her cheeks and crossed her arms in front of her chest, tragically wrong in assuming it made her look superior to her silly blond – the kind of blond that blond jokes were made about – classmate.

“I like zebras,” Naruto continued, because at this point it was obviously a challenge. “They’re so tall! And so cute! And those ears! Have you ever seen zebra ears?”

“Zebras are not even native to this continent!” Sakura snapped. “And you’re talking about giraffes!”

Naruto shrugged. “Doesn’t make them any less cute. It just means that I didn’t get one for my tenth birthday, even though I really, really begged. I spent two weeks begging Dad. He was really, really annoyed.”

“I am really, really annoyed,” hissed Sakura.

“You…” Sasuke said, before he remembered that he was going to be all aloof and untouchable by earthly concerns such as his new team assignment. Right path, double check.

“Yes, Sasuke-kun?” Sakura piped up, with attentiveness so intense it would have been mocking coming from anyone half-sane (and yes, Naruto was aware that this was not a proper term and that he wasn’t qualified to diagnose anyone, but these were his thoughts, and Dad had yet to figure out how to get inside them past the nine-tailed guardian – ha!).

“…are kidding?” Sasuke concluded his long and unnecessarily wordy inquiry.

Naruto shook his head. “Nah. Really broke my heart, but then, Ino-chan begged for a pony for her birthday, and she didn’t get one either, so I guess it’s fair. We got to ride a couple of the Nara deer, though, that one time, and that was really cool!”

Sasuke must have figured out what Naruto was doing, because he was looking at him with a hint of respect. This, Naruto admitted, was a new and interesting development.

Sakura humphed. Her lower lip stuck out.

“Maa,” said Hatake-sensei, “I gave you a task, kid. If you can’t focus, you’re not ready to be a gennin.”
“Right!” Naruto exclaimed, and grinned widely. “Likes! I also like it when Dad takes us to a restaurant, because-”

“Dislikes?” Hatake-sensei cut him off.

Naruto was glad that he had been grinning, because otherwise he would have grinned now, and that wouldn’t have been the correct response. Default grinning to the rescue yet again! Yosh! “Oh, crapbuckets of them. I guess crapbuckets would be one. You ever had to clean out a busted septic tank? I mean there was this one time when I was, like, eight, and-”

“Eww!” yelled Sakura.

Sasuke remained silent, once again staring (melo-) dramatically into distance, but there was a hint of disgust on his face, too.

Naruto’s palms itched with the magnetic force that tried to make him rub them together.

“Hobbies?” prompted sensei.

That one was tricky. Mostly because it was far too easy to verify. Naruto couldn’t really get creative with this one. But Sakura created a great stepping stone for him here with the impression of her Sasuke-fixation, so he just thought about some of his privately spent time and let the blush imply everything. “Um,” he said.

Because Hatake had been an almost-thirteen-year-old once upon a time, and probably had discovered his dick, too, this came through clearly.

Sasuke didn’t catch it, though – and that was honesty a little worrying. Naruto very much didn’t want to have to be the one to clue him in.

Sakura naturally misunderstood and then promptly took it personally, but that was expected. “You-”

“Nah, don’t be like that, Sakura-chan, I didn’t even get to talk about my dreams yet!” He leered.

“Not dreams as in what you see when you sleep,” the jounin said with the kind of patience that suggested he was imagining doing very painful and potentially fatal things to Naruto’s body. “Dreams as in your aspirations for the future.”

Now this was a tricky one. The trickiest part of it was that Naruto honestly did not know. “I want to be a shrink.” That was true enough without giving away anything too private.

Kakashi-sensei seemed relieved by the brevity, but made a show of checking his watch anyway. “Oh, look at the time. Maybe we should wait until tomorrow before we continue with introductions, if we don’t want to be stuck here past midnight.”

Sasuke turned away from the fascinating horizon and, with his customary unimpressed-by-your-shit expression informed the jounin: “That might have worked, if you hadn’t personally stolen four hours of my life today. Yoshi’s right.”

Naruto had to fight very hard not to smile.

“Yes,” Sakura agreed demurely, although whether with Naruto or with Sasuke was anyone’s guess. “I am sorry, sensei, but-” She pressed her hands together in her lap. “-we have been waiting for you for a really long time. A really long time.”
“Kid,” the jounin said dryly, “if you think four hours is a long time to wait, you have no business being a ninja.”

Naruto guessed that the man was losing interest in the game, and at any moment now the semblance of joviality would be gone. He touched Sasuke’s elbow and mouthed ‘go’.

“Uchiha Sasuke. I don’t like anything, and I dislike a bunch of things – fanclubs, for a random example. And people who switch personalities like underwear.”

Naruto took this as a compliment – but for some reason Sakura went pink to match her hair.

“I train. It is not a hobby, but it is probably the closest thing. I don’t have dreams. My ambitions are seeing the bastard that murdered my family dead and taking revenge by living well. Happy?”

“Ecstatic,” replied the jounin. “Compliments to your coach.”

“I shall convey them,” retorted Sasuke. “Sakura, get this over with fast so we can move on.”

“Yes, Sasuke-kun. Um,” she spoke to her knees, “my name is Haruno Sakura. I like my friend Ino and Yoshi-kun and, um, I like S-sasuke-k-kun a lot, too. I dislike rude people.” Her glance up at the jounin and back down was so quick that Naruto nearly missed it. “My hobbies are reading and learning. My dream is to, um, find something to be really good at, and um…” This time the lightning fast glance was directed at Sasuke. “…deserve the love of someone I admire.”

“Love is not deserved, Sakura-chan,” Naruto said, smiling at her. “Love is given freely. But if you want, we’ll help you get strong, so you can catch the eye of anybody you like.”

Sakura smiled back at him. And, huh, behind all that hair, she was really pretty-

“Your actual gennin test is tomorrow,” snapped Kakashi-sensei, standing up. “Training Ground Three, five o’clock—” and he rattled off a set of instructions before disappearing into thin air.

The three apparently-not-yet-gennin stared at the empty space with a trio of nearly identical are-you-kidding expressions. Then Naruto finally exhaled, inhaled, and used that air to inquire: “What lit a fire under his arse?”

“I fucking hate you,” Kakashi said wetly.

Hiruzen did him the courtesy of not replying ‘you’re welcome’ out loud.
“What is this,” demanded Inoichi.

Hatake looked from the gift basket he had just deposited on top of Inoichi’s counter (in between the display of cacti and the stack of orders Inoichi was about to fill and send out) to Inoichi and shrugged one shoulder, like he didn’t understand the question.

Inoichi momentarily missed the days when he could order Hatake around. This was, he was sure, revenge.

But he maintained that sending the suicidal young ANBU to therapy had been the right choice, even though both sides of the resulting psychological war had hated him afterwards. At least so he assumed from the fact that the psych guys had stopped inviting him to the poker tournament. He missed that, too. Nobody played poker like psych-trained ninja.

Speaking of, he should teach his kids. They could make family nights of Inoichi fleecing them for D-ranks’ pay.

“Any particular reason why you’re delivering gift baskets now, Hatake-san? I thought D-ranks were for gennin-”

“No delivering,” Hatake cut in. “It’s from me.”

Oh.

Well… that explained a lot.

A shiver came down Inoichi’s spine as it occurred to him that with the precarious mental state of this shinobi, his reaction might well have swung to the other side of the emotional spectrum, and Inoichi might have woken up short a few organs today.

He should have known that even with all those precautions he took, Hatake would recognise his teacher’s son.

“That’s nice of you,” he said blandly, trying to suppress the urge to kill in the name of his child’s personal security.

Hatake kept standing there, like he was still expecting something. Well, Inoichi was not going to thank him, and he was not going to apologise, and he absolutely was not going to explain himself, even though the intense one-eyed stare was making him very uncomfortable.

He preferred Hatake behind a porcelain mask.

Finally, without any particular impulse to trigger it, Hatake smiled so widely that his visible eye narrowed to a slit. “It’s good that Sasuke-kun came to me with an in-built psychiatrist. If anybody needs it, it’s that kid.” Of course he wasn’t going to mention himself. “Good job, Inoichi-san.”

A moment later all that was left of Hatake was a huge, ridiculous gift basket and a handful of leaves on the shop’s floor.
exercise.

If not for Yamanaka Inoichi’s actions, Minato-sensei’s son would have been alone, hated, probably bullied – and there for Kakashi to watch over. This way the boy was content in the midst of (what seemed after some observation to be) a good family, confident, accepted by his peers, skilled in his (adopted) clan’s techniques and… just… happy.

Kakashi had spent the past eight years in despair, and it had driven him to several unconscionable (if retroactively sanctioned) actions. But, maybe that was his purgatory? Maybe that despair helped wash off some of his guilt?

“You might as well come in,” said the voice from the room in front of which Kakashi had stopped to reflect upon his life.

He did as bidden, and then enjoyed watching his chuunin’s eyes widen as he identified his visitor.

“Hat-take-san…”

“Don’t do that. It’s Kakashi.”

The young man – definitely no longer a teenager and, dear Inari, did he wear adulthood well now that he wasn’t injured – capped his pen, set it on top of a pile of paper, and leaned back against his desk.

“You are an Academy teacher,” Kakashi pointed out. It was supposed to be a conversation starter but, sadly, it came across sounding somewhat stupid here in the teacher’s office at the Academy.

“Correct,” said Iruka-sensei, with no small amount of sarcasm.

Kakashi catalogued the existence of a heretofore unknown kink, and moved on to the reason for his visit. “So you know Yamanaka Yoshi.”

“I taught him,” admitted Iruka. “Or, it would be more accurate to say, I had him in my class. I can’t even guess if he learnt anything from me personally.”

All Kakashi remembered of the Academy was an embarrassingly easy kiddie test that he had ripped through, and that time when his Father had brought him along to pick up his hitai-ate, so in his very subjective opinion it was probably standard for most clan children to perceive Academy teachers as prison wardens at best.

“Tell me about him,” Kakashi asked – or, now that he had heard himself, he might have unintentionally ordered that, and what did people do in these situations? “Please?” he tried with just a tinge of exasperation directed at his complete lack of people skills. He had not needed any for ten plus years, and he was now keenly feeling the lack of practice.

“I have work to do,” replied Kakashi’s chuunin, cool like the Land of Snow, but on the positive side at least he did not get offended by Kakashi’s tendency to subconsciously divide people into superiors, subordinates and unimportant extras.

Kakashi would have to keep a better check on that.

“So,” the sensei added, “I’ll give you a more detailed report if you pass him – don’t make that face. It’s not a bribe. I just don’t have so much time I’d waste it on your idle curiosity. If that information would be useful to you in the future, then that’s different.”
Kakashi had to admit that it made sense. He couldn’t explain about Minato-sensei and lost legacies and the weird buoyant feeling in his chest whenever he looked at the grinning Yamanaka boy. The jounin Hatake Kakashi had no conceivable savoury reason to ask after Yamanaka Inoichi’s adopted son.

“I’ll be by,” Kakashi assured his chuunin, and hoped that the children were better than the usual detritus he got to gleefully dismiss.

The teacher waited until Kakashi was out of the office before he stood, crossed the room to the door, and said: “I get hungry this late in the afternoon.”

The door slammed shut.

Kakashi sardonically saluted it, while most of his insides went ‘mine!’ in cacophonous unison.

“Ibiki-san?” Iruka spoke from the threshold of the office. It was nothing like his own – child-safe, inviting, time-worn, cheap – office, but it was still warm, and there was a framed photo on Ibiki-san’s desk. The family in it was large; Iruka knew that Ibiki-san was supporting his elderly, invalided parents, but the man had never mentioned any other surviving relatives.

Ibiki-san raised his head from the paperwork and the tension around his eyes eased somewhat. “Iruka. Can I help you?”

“I might have an idea regarding Hatake-san,” Iruka said, one corner of his mouth rising without permission. “If you were asking seriously.”

Guessing from how the tokujou brightened, he must have been at least semi-serious. “Sit down. Talk to me.”

Iruka took a seat on the ratty settee with the washed-out stains and accepted a cup of tar masquerading as coffee with profuse and heart-felt gratitude. “It has come to my attention that Hatake-san is interested in pursuing me. Definitely sexually, but probably also romantically. I could… take advantage of his interest.”

Iruka felt so… divorced from himself. He couldn’t believe he was suggesting this. It was not as though he needed some kind of excuse to go out with Hatake-san and do… whatever he felt like doing. And still here he was, looking for validation. For sanction.

Maybe, if he was instructed to do it, it would feel less like undeserved self-indulgence and more like a goal he could legitimately pursue.

Ibiki-san watched him with a worried scowl. “This doesn’t sound like you, Iruka-kun.”

Iruka nodded. Of course it didn’t. He couldn’t believe he was suggesting this. It was not as though he needed some kind of excuse to go out with Hatake-san and do… whatever he felt like doing. And still here he was, looking for validation. For sanction.

Maybe, if he was instructed to do it, it would feel less like undeserved self-indulgence and more like a goal he could legitimately pursue.

Ibiki-san watched him with a worried scowl. “This doesn’t sound like you, Iruka-kun.”

Iruka nodded. Of course it didn’t. He made it a point not to sound like himself whenever he could avoid it. Nowadays when he said something too personal, no one ever took him seriously. People laughed the real him off as a joke.

It was safer that way.

“How far are you willing to go for this?”

“For the lives of my students?” Iruka spread his hands. “I’ll date him to keep tabs on Team Seven.”
From Kakashi-sensei’s scare tactics (telling them the percentage of failure) and ridiculous instructions (do not eat breakfast because you will throw up? really?) Naruto figured out that Kakashi-sensei was a mindfuck kind of person.

Instant kithship!

Then Kakashi-sensei arrived four hours late and presented them with a mindfuck instead of rules for the test, and Naruto decided that he might as well have fun with this.

“Sasuke-kun?” he said, hopping from another the tree to Sasuke’s perch.

“What?” Sasuke scowled, but after a moment he seemed to get an idea. “There’s two of us and two bells.”

“And a mindfuck of a test,” Naruto pointed out. He wasn’t sure if Sasuke was up to understanding how much of everything was a lie, and that it was Sasuke’s own responsibility to decide what was real and how much suspension of disbelief was prudent at any given moment.

This might have been Hatake Kakashi’s strategy for dismissing them, but Naruto didn’t think so, what with the strained clan politics it would result in. But if this was a legitimate gennin test, it was probably testing for something completely different than what the instructions mentioned.

Never mind, though. He used his skills to accomplish his given mission as best as he could. Only it was hard to explain that sort of thing to someone who wasn’t trained to think that way. “What’s our objective?”

Sasuke’s scowl deepened at being questioned like a child, but he had known Naruto for a while now, and he knew how likely Naruto was to take silence for an answer, so he did grumble: “Getting a bell.”

“Wrong,” Naruto assured him.

Sasuke scowled some more.

“Our objective is for Team Seven to be accepted by a jounin-sensei.”

“We’re on a time limit, Yamanaka,” growled Uchiha-kun. “I don’t have time for your philosophy-”

“You don’t even know what you’re supposed to be doing, but you’re going to do something just to be seen doing anything?” Naruto asked, instead of saying ‘oh dear Izanagi, I thought I broke you off of running blindly toward the red flag you bull-headed moron’, which he thought.

“I’m supposed to get a bell!” Sasuke snapped.

Naruto, thankfully, had a lot of practice with talking to this talking upright log, or he would have started hitting his head on the tree trunk any moment now. “Just like you were supposed not to eat breakfast? Just like you were supposed to be here at five in the morning?” Just like you were supposed to hate everybody and then hunt down your brother alone?

This, at least, gave Avenger-kun a pause. He reconfigured himself on the bough and sat so that he could converse without twisting his neck. “I thought that was a simulation of field conditions.”

“Then he’d have ordered us instead of ‘recommending’ or – more likely – isolated us for the night so
that we could not cheat.”

Sasuke nodded.

Naruto took a deep breath like an inverse sigh of relief. “Let’s start from the beginning. Our objective is…?”

“For Team Seven to be accepted by a jounin-sensei,” Sasuke parroted, rolling his eyes. But he must have found merit in the discussion, or he wouldn’t have played along.

“To do that Team Seven needs to…?”

“Pass the test,” Sasuke filled in, but the scowl was back, and he seemed distracted.

“Which is…?” Naruto held his breath and crossed his fingers.

Sasuke blinked. “Impossible.”

Naruto grinned. He couldn’t help it. He was proud – of himself and of Sasuke both. “Let’s go get Sakura.”

Kakashi had in the past ‘tested’ several cast-off teams. None of them were expected to pass, and none of them did, but those experiences gave him a basic template of what he could expect to happen with three Academy children.

It wasn’t happening.

Not a single one came at him to try their solitary, doomed luck.

He watched as one of the boys hunted down the other. They talked – and at this point Kakashi fully expected that they would agree to work together and throw their female teammate (statistically weaker, and automatically the outsider based on her gender) under the bus.

His shadow clone popped and its accumulated memory flooded his mind.

The clone had put the girl under a genjutsu, and she… snapped? Too bad the clone wasn’t using the Sharingan, because having that memory clear would have been extremely helpful. Regardless of what exactly had happened, the girl went from falling onto her butt to stabbing a kunai through the clone’s foot and following with a stab upwards toward the groin that – Kakashi thanked his lucky stars – never connected, because at that point the clone had already burst.

That was one memory Kakashi was happy to have avoided.

And… the boys were gone.

Fuck.

Kakashi didn’t actually have any difficulty tracking them down, but by the time he found them they (all three of them, since they had picked up the girl on their way) were seated around a table at Anko’s favourite dango shop and badmouthing him.

“I’ll put you down as a fail then,” Kakashi said.

At another time he would have enjoyed how they all jumped. Right now, though, he was just
disappointed and worried and, well, a little bemused. He didn’t think children that age could actually defeat the test, but he had hoped for them to at least show some potential.

Not just give up.

“You gave us a suicide mission, you cunt!” Sakura screeched.

The entire restaurant fell silent and motionless. Kakashi was too busy collecting his jaw from the floor to notice much of their audience, except that some of the other customers were clearly taking the statement for the truth, and killing intent was rising from several directions.

“Let’s reconvene at the training ground and talk about it,” Kakashi said and then – just in case – added: “That’s an order.”

As he flickered away, he heard the Yamanaka say: “That’s what I meant, Sasuke-kun.”

They let him wait. Of course they did. Not too long – not so long that Kakashi would have gone and hunted them down again – but long enough that it was obvious they had finished their dango without hurrying. They ambled up the path to the Memorial Stone, where Kakashi was sitting and pecking at one of the bento that were supposed to be for them.

“Sit,” he ordered. He wasn’t sure what to do now. All his strategies for teaching children were based on keeping his air of superiority, the confidence and skill differential, and intimidating the kids into getting along with everything (it had always worked for ANBU recruits). “Report.”

They obeyed. Kakashi was honestly surprised, but he understood over the course of the individual reports – first the girl’s (he was sure they were actually twins, and this was the nice one), then Uchiha’s, and finally Minato-sensei’s son’s.

“The test was supposed to determine if you were capable of teamwork,” Kakashi explained eventually. “You did not pass it–”

“We busted it,” Yamanaka muttered subversively.

“-but you did show off teamwork, and you also showed off that you were a group of insubordinate, unreliable loose cannons.”

“I was not allowed to use my personal training at the Academy,” said Yamanaka, like that was an excuse. He grimaced, most likely thinking of some past circumstances that either involved unpleasantness he might have avoided with his expertise, or punishment he received for disobeying those orders.

Kakashi hoped it was the former. Inoichi had never struck him as the violent kind of perfectionist – but the sort of proficiency Yoshi showed at a relatively young age was not usually achieved without a motivator as powerful as pain (or perhaps the threat of banishment – he was adopted, after all).

“If the point of this charade was to have a legitimate-looking reason to dismiss us, just say so,” said Uchiha. “I have things to do.”

“If you were genuinely testing our teamwork, Hatake-san,” added the girl, “then have we not done well?”

“And if the point was humbling us…? Sorry,” concluded Yamanaka. He actually looked like he was sorry, which was probably the loudest warning Kakashi would receive about what he was dealing with.
“I will pass you,” Kakashi offered, “but there will be ramifications. Usually gennin teams get a grace period to acclimatise themselves to being on the force. Smaller mess-ups will be overlooked or used as teaching moments.”

Yamanaka nodded, aware where Kakashi was going with this.

Uchiha just continued looking disdainful.

“We won’t have that,” guessed the girl.

Kakashi shook his head. “You refused to play along – fine by me. No more games. If you’re insubordinate, I’ll write you up.”

They put their heads together and whispered for a while. Kakashi could have listened in if he had tried, but he wasn’t interested enough. Eventually they looked at him and Yamanaka nodded: “Fair enough, Hatake-san.”

“It’s Kakashi-sensei,” Kakashi corrected-

And whoa. *That* was a mindfuck.
“I wasn’t abused,” Yamanaka – Yoshi – said out of blue.

“Eh?” Kakashi had dismissed the kids, and the other two were since gone. He needed to have a 
good, long talk with his past teammates, but he couldn’t really do that until he was left alone with the 
Memorial Stone.

And this sparkling new gennin wasn’t going away like he was supposed to.

Yoshi rolled his eyes. “Don’t even front, sensei – I know what you were thinking.”

This, Kakashi decided, was getting a little creepy. And even more worrying than it had already been.
Yoshi met his eyes, and it was like playing ‘who blinks first’ with Morino Ibiki. Liminally terrifying.

“Do you?” Kakashi inquired faux-absently.

“I was not abused. I was not threatened with abuse. Or neglect. I never doubted my welcome within 
the Clan.”

Yoshi might not have been a blood Yamanaka (Kakashi might have only found this out eight years 
after Inoichi picked up Naruto, but it still added up to about five life-debts he owed the Yamanaka by 
now, which was a whole separate worrisome issue), but he was one by training, and he was great at 
it. Too great. Suspiciously great.

Yoshi grinned. “The thing is, sensei, that I just really, really enjoy fucking with people.”

As the boy leapt to his feet and ran off in the direction of the village centre, Kakashi reconsidered 
that last statement. The boy even used strategic profanity as an offensive weapon (which made 
Kakashi wonder if Sakura had said that thing at the dango shop of her own accord or because Yoshi 
told her to do it).

Oh, he didn’t doubt that Yoshi’s assertion was true in its general version but Kakashi understood the 
core of it now. He knew. He knew enough to pity his future self.

Because Yoshi – the Yamanaka-trained Namikaze-Uzumaki child – enjoyed fucking with Kakashi 
specifically.

x

“Why didn’t you tell me!!” Yoshi yelled, barreling into Ino’s room and then ducking under a barrage 
of shuriken.

“What did I tell you about barging in here!!” Ino yelled back and reached for another handful of 
sharp weapons.

“That you’ll shave my head in my sleep and tattoo something embarrassing on the back of it, but you 
refused to tell me what it would be, so that I would have to ask people to tell me and so make it even 
more embarrassing!!” Yoshi reported, completely ignoring the real issue.

“I could have been naked!!” Ino spat.
This seemed to have an effect, finally.

Yoshi blanched. “Uh… sorry? Please don’t make me see you naked.”

“Learn to knock and wait for an invitation, dumbass!”

“Do I need to come up and break you apart?” Dad yelled from downstairs.

Seeing Yoshi’s pleading look, Ino rolled her eyes and replied at the top of her lungs: “No! He dodged and I’m out of killing intent!”

They sniggered together at some of the half-heard threats and curses coming from the kitchen.

Ino flopped onto her bed and stretched, idly watching as her nail polish changed colour depending on how the light hit it. So pretty. “What did you even want?”

“Oh, right! Sis’, why didn’t you tell me Sakura’s so interesting!”

“Isn’t she just?” Ino grinned, self-satisfied.

She had done some of her best work on Sakura-chan – better even than on Hinata-chan, if she was honest. Only she had never pretended that she had ameliorated Sakura-chan’s psychological disorder. She had just helped stabilise it somewhat.

The rest was up to Yoshi now.

Yoshi was walking up and down the length of Ino’s throw rug and wildly gesticulating. “She’s so crazy! Half the time she’s completely out of touch with herself! Does she have actual full split personality or is that just an extreme case of bipolarity?! Which complete cretin even let her graduate?!” He was grinning excitedly over the course of his rant, so it was obvious that he saw in Sakura exactly the same things Ino did.

“Do you have a handle on her yet?” she asked. She wasn’t going to give him hints, of course, but she liked Sakura and wanted to be reassured that her new keeper-of-functionality could take care of her sufficiently.

“No, because somebody didn’t clue me in in advance. I only just figured it out today. And why the hell does she keep the meek half out all the time?”

Ino shrugged. “More practical for the Academy. Can you imagine Iruka-sensei’s reaction if she cheerfully destroyed his classroom with somebody’s face? Because Inuzuka did ask for it a few times.”

Yoshi halted and practically vibrated in place, overflowing with excitement to the point that he didn’t know what to do with all the joyous energy. “I got a team with three headcases on it! It’s like an all-you-can-eat buffet. Ino, I’m in mindfuck heaven!”

Because Ino did, after all, grudgingly care for her brother, she did not stick him with anything sharp while she kicked him out of her room.

“It’s not fair!” she whined and punched her pillow. “Why does he get the cool team?”

The Hatake that came by Iruka’s office in the early afternoon today was very different from the one that had come yesterday. He looked as though he had felt someone walk over his grave.
He placed a bowl of take-away ramen on Iruka’s desk and said: “Have dinner with me.”

“Okay,” Iruka agreed, smiling down at the rosters for next year’s classes. “If you’re late, Hatake-san, I will never say ‘okay’ again.”

“It’s Kakashi,” Hatake corrected, still shell-shocked under the thin veneer of apathy, and left.

Iruka appreciated the late lunch. He also appreciated a man that could be trained.

“Team Seven?” Hiruzen asked, not actually in doubt of what he would hear.

“Pass,” Kakashi-kun replied petulantly.

Someone laughed, but the young man ignored them, seemingly intent on his book. It was only the second ‘pass’ granted in this age group, after Team Three. But two more were coming, and Hiruzen could not squash the self-satisfied smirk. Even though none of this was the direct result of his actions, he was the one sitting in the centre of the web.

“Congratulations,” he said. “Team Eight?”

“Hello, Kakashi-san,” Iruka said dryly.

The elite jounin with excellent situational awareness pretended to be startled out of his literary zone; his one bared eye squinted at the horizon, and he quite overplayed the supposed surprise. “Is it that time already?”

Iruka guessed that this was one way how he could be punctual for their rendezvous while at the same time keeping the illusion that it wasn’t intentional. And he did put the book away immediately, dropping the full weight of his attention on Iruka.

It was about as heavy as an anvil.

“I heard you like Ichiraku’s Ramen,” Kakashi remarked with the nonchalance of an unrepentant stalker by profession, “which is fortunate, because I like Ichiraku’s Ramen, too.”

“I see you’re going all out,” Iruka noted dryly. He did not mind. In fact, he preferred this to some place where they would be stared at and gossiped about. He did not think ramen for two meals a day was survivable in the long run, but just this once should be okay.

Kakashi shrugged one shoulder, somehow managing to suggest in that one tiny gesture that he knew all that had just gone through Iruka’s head. “Maa, it’s just the first date, sensei. Let’s eat food we both like, talk about things we have in common, and see where we go from there?”

Iruka could tell exactly where Kakashi wanted to go from there.

And was definitely going to make him wait at least until the third date. Just for the principle; not because it would be a hardship; he wouldn’t have volunteered for this assignment if he had been repulsed by the jounin.

“Excellent suggestion.” Iruka grinned. “And we do have things in common. So, how do you like your students?”
“They’re still breathing, aren’t they?” grumbled the beleaguered newly minted jounin-sensei.

Iruka laughed so hard his belly ached.

“Hmm,” mused Yuuki, while Inoichi tested the integrity of her knots and found them to be beyond reproach. “I feel like one of these days Hatake will make someone very exhausted, but also very happy to be so exhausted.”

Inoichi recited the list of deadly plants in Greenhouse Thirteen inside his mind, and tried not to beg.

He only had himself to blame, anyway. Why in Izanagi’s name had he kept Hatake’s gift basket? He should have incinerated it at the first opportunity! There was Icha Icha merchandise and novelties of the sex-shop variety in there (oh merciful Izanagi, Hatake needed so much help), and Inoichi had made the strategic mistake of not destroying them immediately, which resulted in Yuuki finding them and subsequently initiating two conversations.

The first one was very, very uncomfortable.

The second one was…

…being rewarding.

“Poor Hatake,” Yuuki mused, shaking her head mockingly and caressing Inoichi’s vulnerable stomach. “He will know exactly what hit him, and it will hurt a lot, and he will be so, so grateful.”

“Just get off your fat arse and start doing something!” Ino cried, so frustrated that she was about to start ripping out her hair.

She had not imagined team training like this. It was just the third day, but she was already contemplating poisoning Chouji’s chips and smothering Shikamaru with his pillow. This was not training!

“Lay off Chouji, Ino,” grumbled Shikamaru, not even bothering to lift his eyes from the go board.

She had not even mocked him when the first thing he did after they were confirmed as gennin was get his ears pierced! She thought they would be a real team now – but, no, it was once again Ino against the boys. But instead of Yoshi, whom she had trained to think, the third guy here was Asuma, who had a tobacco-burning stove instead of a brain.

Asuma-sensei did look up, but it was anyone’s guess how much he could see through the veil of smoke. “Hey, lighten up, kunoichi-chan. You can play the next game-”

“I’m going to train!” Ino announced. “You stay here and just grow fatter and lazier and don’t expect me to carry your corpses home when you die on our first mission.” She spun around and strode away.

Yoshi was with his own – so much better! – team, but she could beat up a training post or something.

“…she’s gonna drive us crazy, I can just tell,” Asuma complained behind her back.

If only. Maybe then they wouldn’t be useless. Or if they still were useless, at least they’d be interesting.
“Good work, Team Three,” said Shibi-sensei. “We will proceed to report for our first mission.”

Keiko couldn’t reply; her jaw had to remain clenched to trap the scream that wanted to rip out.

Fuyumi-chan was clutching her kodachi in both hands and taking deep, calming breaths through her nose.

Ami-chan’s breath was hitching; her hands were bundled up in the folds of her tunic, exposing a sliver of a pale but toned belly. She, at least, managed a feeble: “Y-yes, sensei.”

They were trying not to slap at themselves. The crawling feeling had penetrated Keiko’s dreams by now, and guessing from the bags under her friends’ eyes, they had similar problems. They itched. All over. It was impossible to tell what were actual bugs and what just phantom sensations, so they couldn’t risk scratching.

After the first time Ami-chan had reflexively slapped her calf and killed a kikaichu…

…well, they did not want to risk a repeat of that. But it was exhausting, and yesterday toward the end of the training even Fuyumi-chan looked like she was about to cry, and she never cried.

Keiko had considered repellent, but she was scared, and also that was not something she could use on a mission.

Surely, with more time, they could get used to it? Shino at the Academy had been creepy, but nothing like this!

Shibi-sensei led the way; Fuyumi-chan, Ami-chan and Keiko trailed behind him as far as they could without making him stop and wait for them to catch up. He never looked back to check on them, but it was like he had a bug-sense of where they were. Where they and everyone and everything was.

“The Hokage Tower is the other way…?” Ami-chan spoke up.

Shibi-sensei slowed down a little. “For the purposes of minimising unnecessary traffic and greater efficiency of security, the office responsible for the assignment of D-ranked missions has been relocated to the Academy building.”

“Oh,” said Ami-chan.

Keiko kept her jaw clenched shut.

Fuyumi-chan walked stiffly, kodachi in her hands, her eyes moving around. Under her breath she muttered curses.

Keiko would not dare do that. What if she accidentally swallowed a bug?

“Hey, Hinata!”

Shino’s concentration lapsed. He missed the last throw, but did not watch the shuriken’s inevitable trajectory toward the bushes. He was already spinning and moving forwards.

Startled by Inuzuka-san’s uncouth yelling in her ear, Hinata-san flinched away and overbalanced.
Inuzuka-san proceeded to exacerbate the situation by grabbing for her—presumably in an attempt to prevent her fall.

This resulted in another flinch, and also in Hinata-san curling upon herself and giving up on the attempt to regain her balance.

Shino considered staging an accident. Even a training accident. With the customary Aburame taciturnity, he would not even be expected to fake grief for his tragically deceased teammate.

Inuzuka-san stepped closer and leaned down. “Jeez, Hinata! Are you okay?”

Shino traversed the distance so fast he might as well have body-flickered. He planted his feet and channeled his chakra through his body in one fluid moment together with extending his arm. His palm hit Inuzuka-san’s stomach.

Inuzuka-san himself hit a tree some ten yards away, but Shino had not bothered to watch his trajectory any more than he had bothered with the shuriken before. He might, later, go and search for the shuriken. He would not bother searching for Inuzuka-san.

A quiet gasp came from the curled-up body at his feet.

Shino sank into a squat and offered his hands, palms up, like he might have approached a frightened animal. “Are you injured, Ladybug?”

“Ju-just startled,” replied Hinata-san. She sat up; her face was a picture of misery. “I am so sorry, Shino-kun!”

“There is nothing to apologise for-”

“I am an embarrassment-”

“Among the members of Team Eight, you are not the embarrassment,” Shino announced loudly and honestly. There was some slight chance that Inuzuka-san was sufficiently concussed to break his focus on Kurenai-sensei’s décolletage and allow him to interpret the insult—although Shino was not entertaining much hope.

“I will try to do better,” Hinata-san promised.

Shino nodded. He would be pleased if she stopped overreacting and coming to unnecessary harm, and he would be ecstatic if she learned to stop putting herself down unnecessarily. Sadly, he did not know how to help her. Perhaps the Yamanaka siblings would have ideas?

For the time being, however, the best he could do was give a promise in return: “You may rely upon me for anything you need.”

Sakura knew that sooner or later her ‘condition’ would be revealed. She had been worried about her teammates’ reactions—doubly so once she found out that one of her teammates would be Sasuke-kun. He just seemed so… critical.

But the other one was Yoshi-kun, and Sakura knew Yoshi-kun a little (better than she should have, perhaps, because Ino-chan spoke of him in private often, with a mixture of exasperation and fondness), and Sakura could not imagine him being anything but kind and understanding and perhaps excited.
“So,” Yoshi-kun said as they waited for Kakashi-sensei, “there’s polite-Sakura and violent-Sakura?”

“I… I guess?” She cast a look to the side and upwards at Sasuke-kun, trying to gauge his reaction, but he looked on with barely a detached interest. “Ino-chan calls us cool-Sakura and hot-Sakura—”

“She would,” Yoshi-kun lamented (with the same exasperation and fondness as his sister felt for him).

Sakura smiled. Inner’s opinion was something that could not be repeated in polite company, but so far these reactions were not bad.

Sasuke-kun nodded and then sat down onto the grass on Yoshi-kun’s other side with a quiet: “So long as you only go homicidal on the enemy, that sound useful.”

Sakura nearly floated off of the ground, but then she had to stuff all that emotion away again, because there was some slight chance she might attempt to ravage Sasuke-kun, regardless of whether he meant that compliment as a proposition or not.

Inner was way too forward for Sakura’s good. Which was why she mostly stayed inside.

Ino was… drunk?

“Don’t look at me like that!” she insisted, flopping over from her bed to the carpet with a thud. She didn’t seem to feel any pain. A book tower toppled over; one of the books fell right on Ino’s arm, and this at least deserved a glare and a quiet ‘ow’. “I can legally get drunk.”

“You can get reamed out by Dad,” Naruto pointed out, crouching next to her. The other possibility was getting laughed at by Dad, which would probably be even worse for Ino. There was also the concern of a hangover when she had to get up for a team training tomorrow.

“Drink with me,” she suggested, pointing out the bottle sitting on her nightstand on top of a book. “Then we’ll both get reamed out.”

She wasn’t in too bad a state, Naruto determined. She would probably sleep it off with little to no consequences – shinobi had strong constitutions. Also, once he checked the bottle he found that it was the chocolate liqueur that Inoue-ba-san put into her coffee, and really not strong enough to get Ino properly plastered even if she had drunk the whole bottle, which she hadn’t.

Proof positive that even when she was pissed, she was smart about it.

Naruto took a swig. It was too sweet for his tastes, but he might have liked it mixed with something else. “Want to tell me what drove you to early onset alcoholism?”

Ino laughed. Naruto sat down by her side on the floor, both resting their backs against the bed.

“Brother,” she stated, “if you make Sakura normal, I will never forgive you.” Then she stole the bottle from him and gulped down enough liquid sugar to glue her esophagus shut.

“I’ll strive to keep her functional, mainly in the interest of my continued survival, but I don’t think you have a reason to worry there.” Naruto fully agreed that Sakura was unique and potentially amazing, and anybody who would try to re-integrate her in some idiotic attempt to make her ‘normal’ deserved to be used as practice target for Naruto’s fuuinjutsu experiments. “They key is not to integrate the split personality, but to strike a balance and help her keep it, so she doesn’t cheerfully
slaughter a clan or two on one fine night.” Which seemed to be Sasuke’s chief concern – very understandably.

Ino reflected for a while, drank again, and then laid her head on Naruto’s shoulder. “Let’s break Chouji and Shikamaru. I want to have cool teammates, too.”

Naruto imagined Shikaku-ji-san’s, Yoshino-ba-san’s, Chouza-ji-san’s and Mayu-ba-san’s reaction to such an endeavour, and hoped that by morning Ino would forget the idea.

x

Kakashi demonstrated the summoning jutsu for his team’s education and, frankly, because the ninken had been nagging at him for the past forty-eight hours, and he was fed up with them. He had a second date today, and while he thought that Iruka-kun would get a kick out of a complaining dog, Kakashi wasn’t so pathetic that he would need to humiliate himself to keep Iruka-kun entertained… just yet.

“Team,” he announced, “this is Pakkun. He’s one of my summons. Pakkun, this is Team Seven.”

“Team Seven, huh. Hello kids…”

There was sudden silence as the pug padded closer to the trio of children standing at a passable semblance of parade rest.

“Kakashi, is that-?”

“Yes.”

“Holy dog-do on a dango stick,” Pakkun concluded.

“Yes,” Kakashi agreed cheerfully.

“I thought he was-”

“Yes.”

“Huh, what do you know.” The ninken turned to the blond boy. “Hi, N-”

“Yoshi!” exclaimed the boy, punching one fist in the air. “Yamanaka Yoshi!”

“Yamanaka, huh…?” Pakkun held on for a moment and then dissolved into laughter, just short of rolling on the floor.

Yoshi-kun’s initial friendly smile widened into something far less friendly, and he raised his hands to form a seal. “Shintenshin no jutsu.”

Pakkun stopped laughing.

Yoshi slumped, but did not fall, because Sakura was right there, holding him up.

“Good catch,” Kakashi praised. He had not expected that sort of reflexes from the kunoichi.

Sakura shrugged. “Ino-chan trained me. In hindsight, she might have expected that Yoshi-kun and I would be assigned to the same team. By now, catching Yamanaka is instinctive to me.”

While she was explaining, Yoshi figured out how to use four legs; Pakkun’s body turned around,
clumsily hopped onto the railing of the bridge, and jumped off in the opposite direction.

Just before the splash sounded, Yoshi straightened and gave Sakura a bright, grateful smile. Sasuke stood to the side, hands in his pockets, and watched how teamwork improved a shinobi’s quality of life.

Pakkun climbed out of the brook a few yards downstream, wet, spluttering, and mad about it enough to rival any cat. “He’s an asshole.”

Kakashi nodded, smile safely hidden behind his mask. “Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

Regarding Naruto and Yamanaka jutsu. I may be wrong, but as far as I know the Yamanaka do not have any actual kekkei genkai. They just keep their techniques exclusive. So Naruto shouldn’t have a problem learning them...?

If I am wrong about this, please refer to the 'forget canon' warning.
“Dad?” Yoshi inquired from the threshold of Inoichi’s office. “Did you know that Kakashi-sensei knows? About the wasabi peanut thing, I mean?”

Inoichi nodded. He was not any less nervous about Hatake’s knowledge than his son appeared to be, but he put on his confident face. “I have reasons to believe that he will keep it secret. But do keep an eye on him.”

Yoshi smiled and nodded. “I was going to do that anyway. Ibiki-san sort of went out to get some coffee and left me alone in his office with Kakashi’s latest psych eval open on his desk, so I took a hint.”

Inoichi leant back in his chair, still a little nervous, but not actually worried. Between Ibiki, Yoshi, and Hatake’s devotion to his deceased teacher’s legacy keeping the man’s mouth shut, the greatest danger of a leak was once again the Sandaime. “And the rest of your team?”

Yoshi laughed. “I’ve actually come to get you. They’re downstairs. I thought you might want to check them out for yourself.”

Naruto liked living in a clan compound. There was family everywhere, and even if you didn’t get along, you weren’t nasty to one another. If you ever felt lonely, it was easy to find someone to spend time with. It was good.

He was determined to share it with his teammates, because if anyone needed the warmth of being surrounded by family, it was the rest of Team Seven.

Sensei included. But that was an extremely difficult case and would have to wait until such a time when Naruto didn’t have his hands full with these two.

Sasuke’s reception by the Yamanaka Clan was as cordial as Sasuke himself. Namely, not at all. But Sasuke was nonetheless issued a standing invitation (especially after Naruto pointed out that Sasuke lived alone and his lack of grace was largely due to the savageness of his upbringing, which was to say lack thereof), and no one ever harassed him, even if some people found reasons to vacate the room when he entered it.

He did not come by often, and continued eschewing socialisation that did not directly include Naruto or, rarely, Sakura.

Sakura, on the other hand, was immediately taken into the female fold, and within three weeks of team assignments had been semi-adopted by Tomomi-ba-san, who decided to take advantage of Sakura’s amazing control (not limited to chakra) and start her on studying medical ninjutsu.

“It is not the team I would have wanted for you,” said Dad, observing the interactions from the armchair in the corner, “but it’s not at all bad. You will have to keep a close eye on them both.” He paused to reconsider. “All three of them, that is.”

“Sasuke hasn’t given up on his goals,” Naruto admitted. “But now he understands the ramifications,
and has the ability to take a step back and look at his decisions a little more objectively. It makes him about hundred times more dangerous than he was before, because he used to be a bomb waiting to go off uncontrollably at any time, and now he’s more like a poisoned senbon. You won’t see or hear him coming; he’ll strike precisely where he needs to, and make sure his target dies.”

“Then make damn sure you’re never his target – you, or anyone in this family.” Dad’s eyes were cold and dangerous, and for once he looked enough like the former Head of the Department that it made Naruto shiver.

“I’d kill him first,” Naruto promised. And meant it.

But he trusted his skills, so he was sure that that situation would never come to pass.

x

Out of sight of authorities, Sakura unexpectedly turned out to be a lot of fun.

“Did you really ride the Nara deer?” she asked with bated breath after Naruto described what little he remembered of Team Ten Saturday meetings when they were little kids – as an aside over the course of planning strategies for their own teambuilding.

Yoshi grinned at the memory, and suppressed the twinge of melancholia that rose when he remembered that he had not been to the Nara Compound in years. “Yes. When we were… maybe five? Then we grew and it’s not worth the risk that they would get hurt.”

He had still visited, on non-Saturdays, and he was friends with a lot of the deer, but it didn’t feel right to return after Shikamaru got so angry with him. So he had just… stopped going. He saw Shikaku-ji-san and Yoshino-ba-san once in a while, at home or at the Akimichi’s. He wasn’t… sad. Exactly. Alright, maybe he missed it a little… or a lot? Never mind, though, they were talking about fun stuff to do with your friends. Fun! Yosh!

“Oh,” said Sakura, reacting to his shifting mood.

Naruto grinned to reassure her.

“If you want to, we could get you horse riding lessons?” he suggested. Horse riding sounded interesting. And horses were so beautiful!

“No,” Sakura refused vehemently, shaking her head. “Animals don’t like me. I think they can tell.” She wriggled her fingers around her temple to indicate what the animals could tell. “What was it like?”

“Great!” Naruto grinned. “I fell off and broke my wrist, and the stag refused to let me get back on. He made me walk out of the forest on my own two feet, even though the wrist was all healed by the time we came back. Ino laughed at me. Shikamaru…” He felt another twinge of melancholia, and suppressed this one, too. “He was all worried and panicky – have you ever met his Mum? He was like her in a little-boy version.”

Sakura automatically leaned into his side, as if her mind just decided to substitute him for Ino (Naruto had zero compunctions about taking advantage of this). “Once. Ino-chan introduced us. She gave us a sort of a lesson on how kunoichi were different from civilian girls. But it was all very professional. I wouldn’t say I know her.”

“She’s… um…” Naruto sniggered. “Imagine Shikamaru with his hair down, being energetic and cheerful and a little shouty, and drinking a lot of alcohol.”
“Energetic Shikamaru,” Sakura repeated, wide-eyed and incredulous. “I don’t think I can imagine that.”

“It’s okay. I’ll introduce you to her one day, proper-like,” Naruto promised. That was something that needed to happen, but only after he had Sakura read and could predict her better.

“Don’t break my brain any more than it already is broken, Yamanaka.” She pouted, and the calculating look in her eyes was all violent-Sakura.

“I think your brain is amazing, and you would make half of our Clan want to tear their hair out, because the Shintenshin just does not work on you.”

The change was not overt, but when she next spoke, she was clearly polite-Sakura again. “Thank you, Yoshi-kun.”

Naruto liked her bunches more than he had expected to. A lot of fun, indeed. It wouldn’t be nearly as hard as he had worried to get Sasuke to accept her either.

x

Keiko was ready to drop from exhaustion, and her teammates didn’t look any better. They had been apprehensive about Team Three from the start, but Keiko knew for a fact – because they had all moaned about it – that it never occurred to them to worry about the thing that tripped them up so badly.

Keiko didn’t even really use to mind bugs. They just were there. If one got on her nerves, she killed it. What was the big issue?!

And now, bugs were the single biggest problem in her life.

“Hi, Keiko-chan, Ami-chan, Fuyumi-chan!”

“H-hello, Y-yoshi-kun…” Ami-chan replied, mustering a smile.

Keiko looked over, and even she felt a little buoyed. Her mouth twisted in an exhausted half-smile – but it really was impossible not to smile, looking at Yoshi-kun. He was like a ray of sunshine.

“Are you okay?” he asked, worriedly, and it was like he projected this complete willingness to take on anybody or anything for them. This was why Keiko had always liked him so much better than she liked Sasuke-kun, even though Sasuke-kun won all the spars and acted so cool and mysterious.

“I… um…” Ami-chan pulled out a handkerchief and blew her nose.

Fuyumi-chan patted her shoulder, doubly tired (from training and of their friend’s tears), and muttered: “Ami-chan, stop crying, please.”

“I can’t help it!”

“You’ve been crying for days now, and it’s getting a little old.” Aside from everything else, she had to have a horrible dehydration headache.

“What’s the problem?” asked Yoshi-kun, sitting down next to them on the park bench. “Maybe I can help? Or ask Dad?”

“It’s our team, Yoshi-kun,” admitted Keiko. “But Ami-chan’s being a little dramatic. I mean, Shibi-sensei did pass us, and-”
“Bugs!” wailed Ami. “Bugs everywhere!”

Keiko clenched her jaw for a moment and then said with unshakeable determination: “We’re tough kunoichi—”

“Uhm, hey, Ami-chan?” Yoshi-kun slowly, carefully put his arm around Ami-chan’s shoulders (and Keiko wished for a moment she were a crybaby too, because she was so jealous). “I think, one thing that’s always helped me stop being scared or, like, grossed out by stuff, was finding out more about it. There’s this plant that’s all sticky and super gross and, like, eats flies, and when you understand how it all works, it becomes sort of neat. Even if it stinks, you know why. And you can get sort of weirdly fond even of the stuff that you previously thought was horrible.”

Something that ate flies did not sound horrible at all. In fact, Keiko wished to have one. She would have to stop by the Yamanaka’s flower shop on her way home.

Fuyumi-chan was thinking the exact same thing, Keiko was sure – they could both tell just by looking at one another.

“So… we should study bugs?” Ami-chan inquired, breath hitching, although this time it was probably due to Yoshi-kun’s closeness.

He smiled again (it did terrible things to Keiko’s stomach). “Yeah… It’s worth a try, isn’t it?”

“Will that stop making me feel like they’re crawling all over me?” Keiko asked (not at all because she wished to have that smile redirected at her).

Fuyumi-chan shuddered. “I think we’ll stop feeling like they’re crawling all over us when they stop crawling all over us.”

Ino guessed she should not have been surprised to find Inuzuka on the doorstep of their house. Between the two of them, she and her brother had already collected all the other gennin of their class; Inuzuka was probably feeling left out.

“Man,” he said instead of a ‘hello’, “how can you stand this? All those flowers make my nose itch like Hell and—"

His dog sneezed.

Ino moved to close the door.

“I need your help!”

Ino shut the door with a satisfying bang.

“It’s about Hinata!” Inuzuka yelled from outside, interspersed with pitiful barking. “You care about Hinata, right? C’mon, Ino!”

Ino did care about Hinata-chan, and so did Yoshi, who turned up to investigate what all that barking was about, and that was how Inuzuka ended up sitting on the floor of their living room, eating wasabi peanuts by the handful and trying – badly – to explain what the issue was.

Mainly, it seemed, the issue was the entire rest of the Team Eight. In between complaints about fleas – or threats of fleas? – and a random accosting on the street by a little girl with Hyuuga eyes, who
had apparently kicked Inuzuka somewhere unmentionable without saying a single word to him, it did actually sort of sound like Dog Brain’s teammates were bullying him.

But Ino maintained that he deserved it, since his latest complaint was: “And Kurenai-sensei’s dress is amazing! She’s sooo… pretty…”

Akamaru made a disparaging sound.

“What would you know?” Dog Brain snapped at the dog. “But I get kind of… you know, around her, and she thinks I’m a weirdo!”

Ino exchanged a look with her brother.

Yoshi made a sympathetic grimace, turning back to the Inuzuka. “Look, Kiba, I don’t know how to tell you this, but—”

“Yeah, I am a weirdo, ha-ha, you’re making fun of me. You try concentrating with such a total babe playing the strict sensei—”

“I’ve got things to do,” Ino announced and moved to leave.

“Wait! Sorry, Ino, look…” He took a deep breath, clenched his fists at his sides and tried, as hard as such a little horndog’s mind could, to be serious. “You two are friends with Shino and Hinata, right?”

Ino put her hand on her cocked hip and raised her eyebrows.

“How do you talk to them?”

“I think,” Yoshi said, “the question you want to ask is how do we get them to talk to us?”

“That too. They’re so…”

“ Weird?” Yoshi suggested so innocently that Inuzuka almost fell for it.

“Ye- oh piss off. No, wait, don’t! Look, guys, they’re my teammates, and I thought this would be easy ‘cause Shino never talks, just goes along with everything, and Hinata is strong and smart, and I’m me! But it’s all gone wrong!”

“Because Shino-kun doesn’t go along with everything and Hinata-chan is shy?” Yoshi guessed.

Ino found the use of the word ‘shy’ almost humorous in its inadequacy, but chances were that Dog Brain wouldn’t have understood anything more complicated anyway.

“And they’re already friends,” Inuzuka added, “and they don’t like me.”

“Because you shout, try to order them around, harass Hinata-chan and leer at your sensei a lot?” Ino suggested.

“What?!” Inuzuka exclaimed. “No! I don’t…” His voice trailed off and he scowled, realising that he was shouting. And quite possibly that Ino was correct on all the other accounts as well. “Guuuys, how do I get them to talk to me?”

“Ino?” asked Yoshi.

She shook her head. “You’re better at this. I’ll be the hot sensei. C’mon Dog Brain, we’re giving you
a crash course on acting like a decent fucking person. And your dog can come to, as long as he sits quietly. Understood?"

Akamaru looked up at her, tucked his tail between his legs and nodded.

x

Inoichi dragged himself home, feeling dead on his feet. Finding three children in his living room instead of the usual two wasn’t exactly unexpected – they were ‘sociable’ like the Wind country was ‘balmy’ – but the identities confused him.

“Eyes up here!” snapped Ino, who was wearing what Inoichi dearly hoped was just a Henge. There was no way she could have acquired Anko’s body type since yesterday, right?

“S-sorry, sensei!” cried the boy. Tsume’s son, obviously, although Inoichi had never seen the Inuzuka Clan Head cry, so the resemblance seemed to be limited to physical appearance. Also, there was a little white dog cowering under the coffee table and whining very softly.

Hyuuga-chan flinched away when the boy raised his voice. “P-please, K-kiba-k-kun—”

“Oh shit- H-hinata … I didn’t mean to scare you.” He paused and threw his hands up. “I’m never going to get this!”

“You’re just not trying hard enough!” Ino yelled back (Inoichi interrupted his chakra flow to prevent the image of jiggling from being seared into his retinas), while Hyuuga-chan trembled, tried to become one with the sofa, and still kept flinching at every loud noise.

“What is going on here?!” Inoichi demanded.

His daughter, who at this point had Inuzuka in a headlock, looked up and grinned. There was blood on her hands, but it seemed to be related to her illusionary bust and the Inuzuka boy’s sudden proximity to it, rather than an actual broken nose.

Hyuuga-chan also looked up and grinned. “Hi, Dad! We’re doing intense friendship therapy!”

Inoichi stared at the girl whom he had barely ever seen smile, and that was out of obligation and politeness, grinning at him very widely (and oh dear Izanagi, why hadn’t the kai dispelled this too?).

“After Ino’s through with him,” the cheerful Hyuuga-chan continued, “I’ll teach him about porn and taking care of it himself!”

Inoichi mechanically raised his hand to ward off the evil and announced: “This never happened. I’m not here. I’m at the Nara Compound, getting drunk.”

And because the best lies were those with some measure of truth in them, he turned on his heel and went to make this a very, very good lie.

x

Kiba-kun was acting oddly.

He was pale, and nervous, and several times he had started saying something only to stop himself a moment later.

Hinata was worried, but if she asked him about it, he would have invaded her personal space again, and she preferred it when he was standing at least on the other side from Shino-kun. Shino-kun was
conscientious about respecting her personal space. He, too, preferred his own un-invaded, but he dealt so much better than she did when his space was disrespected.

“You have noticed as well,” Shino-kun said quietly while Kurenai-sensei picked one from the available D-rank missions.

Hinata cast a nervous look sideways at Kiba-kun and nodded.

“I believe it is prudent to investigate,” suggested Shino-kun. “Why? Because our teammate is volatile even without unknown additional concerns.”

Hinata nodded again. Kiba-kun did not seem ill. A quick Byakugan check confirmed that there was no jutsu affecting him and there was nothing wrong with his chakra. They would have to ask.

Hinata could not make herself do it.

“Would you prefer—”

“Please!” She pushed her fingers together. “Shino-kun is less likely to be accosted.” Hinata understood intellectually that Kiba-kun liked her, but his manner of being friendly required excessive tactility and thus was extremely uncomfortable for her. “I will cover Shino-kun, in case Akamaru-kun redirects his violent impulses.”

“Inuzuka-san,” Shino-kun spoke with truly unnecessary amount of passive aggression, “have you displeased your ninken?”

Kiba-kun stared down at his calf; Akamaru-kun had bitten him every time that morning when Kiba-kun tried to speak. Akamaru-kun whuffed at Hinata and with his paw nudged the bruise he had given Kiba-kun as a reminder.

Kiba-kun cleared his throat and spoke so quietly that Hinata had to strain her ears: “Akamaru believes Ino is watching us. I think she has team training, but I’m not willing to risk it.”

Akamaru-kun nodded.

“That does not explain why he bites you,” Shino-kun pointed out, tilting his head to the side.

“Ino-chan…” Hinata whispered.

Shino-kun nodded thoughtfully. “Ah. That makes sense. Why? Because if the Yamanaka decide to reeducate you, only defecting from the village carries a slight chance of escaping your fate.”

Hinata had to bite her cheek to stifle a giggle.

“I got us something Kiba-kun will enjoy!” Kurenai-sensei announced, smiling and waving a mission assignment scroll. “We’ll be catching Tora, the Fire Daimyou’s wife’s cat—”

Kiba-kun and Akamaru-kun whined in unison. Then Kiba-kun leapt, snatched the scroll from Kurenai-sensei’s hand in midair and ran away, calling over his shoulder: “I’ve got this one; just take the day off or something!”

Kurenai-sensei sighed. “Just when I thought that boy could not become more of a headache… Oh, well, at least he stopped drooling.”

x
Iruka hadn’t been explicitly instructed to date Hatake Kakashi, although it was implied. Ibiki-san did not actually want Iruka to date Kakashi, and had made his reasons clear enough while skirting around the issue of village secrets and the ANBU itself.

Iruka definitely had the maneuvering space to keep his acquaintance with Hatake friendly.

The option was gone after their fourth date, because at some point during the evening Iruka had decided that he wanted to have sex with the man, and was going to take what was on offer here. He wished there had been alcohol involved, so he would have something, anything, but himself to blame.

Now the sun was rising, and he had just woken up next to a cold dent in his mattress, and wondered if he had just failed the mission. If this had been what Hatake was after, he would have no reason to come back.

And Iruka would have to report this all to Ibiki-san. With enough details included that he would not be able to look the man in the eye for the next ten years.

x

A harried ninja fell through the door in a panicked state.

Hiruzen looked up from the paperwork and braced himself for the bad news. Was something on fire? Gai’s and Kakashi’s latest competition grew destructive? Did someone piss off Tsume?

“S-sandaime-s-sama!” the poor man wailed.

Hiruzen sighed. “What is the matter, Keiji-kun?”

“It’s Hatake Kakash-shi!”

Apparently Hiruzen wasn’t far off with his guesses. It did pay to know the most likely sources of trouble in one’s village, and after his students, Kushina-chan, the Uchiha and Danzo… well, ceased occupying the top positions… the standards for trouble lowered somewhat. Which he appreciated in his advanced age.

And speaking of advanced age, it was what he blamed for not immediately remembering that Keiji-kun was the latest in the long line of long-suffering therapists assigned to Kakashi-kun’s case.

Keiji stared at the world through his askew glasses as though he wasn’t recognising it, sported a disarrayed hairstyle possibly owing to a Raiton technique, and wore a lightly smoking coat, looking as though he had just returned from a battlefield. “S-sandaime-s-sama,” he spoke softly, “he s-seems relatively s-stable…”

Hiruzen did not let his jaw fall, since that would have made it seem as though he didn’t actually know everything that happened in Konoha. Instead he put on his omniscient expression and steepled his fingers in front of himself. “Well, how about that?”

Chapter End Notes

(Not really stable, just flying high on endorphins.)
Inoichi followed the booming sound to the location of its source, and wished he could have been surprised to see his children and assorted cohorts congregated around a huge crater where a few training posts used to stand.

The smell of melted clay hung heavy in the air, and this was probably going to take more than a couple of mid-level Doton jutsu to sort out.

“What… is going on here?” he demanded, wishing he could go and get drunk with Yoshino again instead of investigating.

“Training, Daddy!” Ino chirped, fluttering around her tame Hyuuga this way and that, so that she eventually ended up bodily shielding her from Inoichi’s potential wrath. She transformed her face from innocently enthusiastic to overwrought within a blink of an eye. “Daddy, did you know that there’s a dangerous international criminal after Sasuke-kun? Sasuke-kun is so brave!”

She looked about ready to act out a whole love-struck rant, so Inoichi flicked a hand at her. She shrugged and shrank into the background, pulling Hyuuga-chan with her.

“Hn,” opined Uchiha-kun, but did it so quietly that Inoichi could plausibly pretend to not have noticed.

“Son, you want to tell me something?”

Yoshi spread his hands. They looked pinkish; his sleeves were completely scorched off, and had Inoichi not known about the healing factor provided by you-know-what, he might have had a mild fit of panic at the possible injuries.

“Uhm, Dad, remember how when I was littler you had me training with Hideyoshi-san?” He turned to the crouched and scowling Uchiha next to him to explain in stage whisper: “That’s the guy I told you about. The one that divorced Tomomi-ba-san ‘cause she seduced his secret male lover away from him in revenge for him cheating on her… or something…”

Inoichi pressed his palm over his eyes. That was not… what had happened there… at all. At least… not really.

Also, it wasn’t the point. Yoshi was good at dissembling. Good enough that one day soon Inoichi might have to start worrying.

“Yes, Yoshi, I do remember when I asked Hideyoshi to train you,” he announced loudly.

Ino, somewhere off to the left, was practically crooning to the Hyuuga to keep her calm. Inoichi was tempted to retroactively fail her on her final project, but then decided that if Hyuuga-chan’s jounin-sensei found her acceptable, he had no leg to stand on.

“Yes,” Yoshi said, nodding to emphasise his point, “Hideyoshi-san trained me. For a while. About how to make seals. The basic ones, anyway. Storage and stunning and maybe a teeny-tiny explosive ones. And then he sorta might have found a new lover and not have much time for me, so he turned up in the middle of one night, dumped his entire library on fuuinjutsu on the floor of my room and left. And I never saw him again. I think he left the village.”

Inoichi stared. He wished he had kept his eyes covered. There was a certain humiliation to being
looked at judgmentally by a thirteen-year-old Uchiha boy that barely passed for sane on a good day.

“Continue,” he pressed through his teeth.

Was Ino-no, there was no kissing happening. Just whispering. And excessive touching. But, Ino was a kunoichi well-versed in conversion techniques, so Inoichi bit his tongue and focused on his son instead, no matter how much he yearned to kill something.

“So,” Yoshi drawled, “I studied a bit on my own. It wasn’t as boring as the Academy textbooks, and if I switched the covers the teachers never noticed…?”

“And that lead to your tectonic efforts how?” Inoichi inquired, dramatically looking over the crater. Yoshi could have read *Icha Icha* at the Academy and, as long as he hadn’t gotten caught, Inoichi was fine with it. What was the point of sheltering the children? They would find out about these things soon enough, and it was better that they be forewarned.

“So, Sasuke-kun and I got talking,” Yoshi said, touching the Uchiha’s shoulder – the contact resulted in a flinch but wasn’t immediately rejected, which Inoichi recognised as the miracle it was, “and started thinking of a more viable plan of dealing with *that man*.”

Inoichi nodded to confirm that he followed.

“I suggested that if that was an actual danger, Sasuke-kun should have a reliable way of extraction, but he’s the ‘kill ‘em or die trying’ kind-”

The Uchiha sent Yoshi a glare that smouldered more than the crater behind them.

“-so we’re working on a seal that can be slapped on the enemy mid-fight.”

“Which does… what?” Inoichi was intrigued – and also retroactively terrified. How had he not known that his son was self-studying seals after his tutor had done a runner?

“How much has he self-studied?”

“I suggested that if that was an actual danger, Sasuke-kun should have a reliable way of extraction, but he’s the ‘kill ‘em or die trying’ kind-”

Inoichi nodded to confirm that he followed.

“The Uchiha sent Yoshi a glare that smouldered more than the crater behind them.

“-so we’re working on a seal that can be slapped on the enemy mid-fight.”

“Which does… what?” Inoichi was intrigued – and also retroactively terrified. How had he not known that his son was self-studying seals after his tutor had done a runner?

“Uhmm, Dad, you know the Hypo-Hypothermia Cell at the Department?”

Inoichi didn’t like hearing his child refer to the Torture and Interrogation so familiarly – *the Department*, indeed – but he nodded anyway, because he only had himself to blame, and he was well-familiar with the mentioned room.

It was kept at minus five degrees Celsius, and everything inside was made of steel. Including the steel-plated door. Inmates were scarcely ever allowed such luxuries as access to their chakra or shoes.

“Reverse-summoning?” he guessed.

Yoshi nodded, proud of his old man figuring it out after he had been led to the conclusion step by step.

And Inoichi did not like that Uchiha had, honest to Izanagi, *smiled.*

It only took a few weeks for Sakura to realise that she liked being honest. By which she meant that she liked dispensing with the illusion of politeness, using words that made people turn chalky or purple in offense, and speaking her mind.

It helped (or alternatively did not help, depending on whom you asked) that Yoshi shamelessly
encouraged her. Sometimes Sakura suspected that Yoshi was even worse than Ino-chan, but was better at playing nice.

“Just admit it,” Sakura grumbled at her blond teammate after yet another of their schemes fell through. The door in front of them stood unmarked, like it was mocking all their efforts. “We can’t prank Kakashi-sensei if we can’t get inside his apartment!”

Yoshi looked at her with exaggerated pity. “Oh, ye of little faith.”

“Prove it, then,” Sakura challenged. They weren’t getting inside that apartment today, but with additional motivation Yoshi might actually be able to find a way and, well, Sakura really, really wanted to make Kakashi-sensei’s life uncomfortable.

Doubly so since Ino-chan clued her in that Kakashi was dating Iruka-sensei – which, why would Iruka-sensei? He could do so much better! But, anyway, at least that meant that Kakashi’s apartment was unguarded for the length of a date about twice a week. Sakura was content to sacrifice Iruka-sensei for a window of opportunity.

“Cheepskate,” complained Yoshi. “Would you bet I can’t do it?”


Inner wanted to lick it.

“Hn,” opined Sasuke, but it was a weak defense. He was here, after all, participating in a non-mandated (unsanctioned, in fact) team activity, simply because Yoshi made the eyes at him and suggested that waging a psychological war on their jounin-sensei would be good training for future confrontation with Sasuke’s brother.

It was a solid argument, sure. Sakura just hadn’t expected Sasuke to fall for it… But, looking at him now, he probably wasn’t here because Yoshi had persuaded him. He was here because he wanted to be here, and Yoshi gave him a valid-sounding excuse.

“He’s grateful,” Sakura told Yoshi, glad that she had known Ino-chan well enough to not be surprised by the depth of Yamanaka deviousness.

“Hn.”

Sakura grinned. “Appreciative, too.”

“Hrm,” Sasuke emphasised, with a hint of a frustrated growl in the sound.

Sakura fluttered her lashes at him, the way the polite self sometimes would. “My name actually contains vowels, too. But that was a good effort. I wonder why I never realised you were calling out to me whenever you said ‘hn’, just having trouble articulating-”

Sasuke launched himself at her, right there in the corridor of Kakashi-sensei’s building. Sakura used Yoshi to propel herself out of the way of the strike and punched Sasuke in the side of the head. Polite her whined inside her head, but Sasuke had a thick skull – he could take it.

Chances were he might even respect her a little bit.

“Oh dear,” drawled Yoshi with patently fake sympathy, “Sakura-chan, just so you are aware, boys don’t find emasculating attractive.”
Sakura snorted. “I don’t find *incompetent* attractive.”

They both watched as Sasuke gingerly sat up, braced himself with his hands and squinted around, apparently waiting for the world to stop spinning like crazy.

“Sasuke-kun’s not incompetent,” Yoshi faux-chided. “And you were a member of his fanclub.”

Sakura shrugged. “So were you.”

“Just technically. Also, I was just in it to de-brainwash him.”

“Meek me was just in it so that your sister would pull us through the Academy,” Sakura admitted. Not that she didn’t think Sasuke would make a damn good husband one day, with all the money and the clan name and the political influence and the really fucking pretty face. Good genes.

Yoshi was grinning at her even as he offered Sasuke a hand to pull him up from the floor. “This calls for a toast. Lemonade, anyone? I’ll pay.”

“Sure. Sasuke-kun?” Sakura asked in that sweet voice that made old ladies and shop-keepers of any age smile at her.

Sasuke let Yoshi keep an arm around his ribs, because he wasn’t stupid enough (anymore) to insist he could walk on his own with a concussion. “You were more tolerable before you let your true personality out in public.”

“Right back at you, Sasuke-kun,” Sakura assured him.

x

“Ino, I love my team.”

Ino was going to kill her brother. She was going to tie him up with ninja wire, bleed him a little until he begged for mercy, and then she would slit his throat, smiling serenely all the while, because she was going to suffer a psychotic break, and as they all learned from Uchiha Itachi, the best psychopaths started with their own clan.

Granted, Itachi had left his brother for last, so maybe Ino would tie up Yoshi with ninja wire, then let him watch as she killed everybody else and then… “Shut up before I gut you! I fucking hate my team-”

“Dad’s going to kill whoever’s fouling up your language,” Yoshi cut her off before she could get creative. “Still, you’ve got to hear what happened today while Kakashi-sensei-”

“If it was exciting, I’ll split your stomach open and-”

“You’ll try, you mean-”

“-let your intestines spill out and not even care about my carpet, because I spent today in a state of mind-numbing stupor. Chouji ate. Shikamaru and Asuma played shogi instead of go. That was *all* that happened.”

There it was. Out. Ino already felt a tiny bit lighter.

Yoshi stared at her with a genuinely appalled expression. That made her feel a little bit better, too. At least he wasn’t laughing at her. “You poor thing. Want to go a few rounds?”
“Yes!” Ino leapt to her feet and threw her book onto the sofa, where it sadly flapped over and landed wrong on half of its pages. “Or I’ll kill someone for real!”

Yoshi clapped her shoulder hard enough to almost knock her into the table. “Let’s go spar.”

The door to the Shop opened two minutes before closing time.

It was actually Taimei’s shift, but Taimei was off having a ‘secret’ rendezvous with a half-dressed special jounin who was, apparently, special in many ways, so Naruto was left to man the counter. He didn’t mind. A major favour was definitely worth it, and he could spend the time crunching through Senju Tobirama’s monograph.

It had never been published; there were only handful copies of it, and this one had been lent to Naruto by Sandaime-sama himself after Naruto had asked him about how he had stayed awake writing that super-boring philosophy book (a question which, incidentally, the Hokage had not answered, although Naruto personally suspected that it had to do with chemical substances).

Tobirama-sensei’s monograph was called ‘Yes, People Really Are That Stupid’, and only got better from there. Naruto was already determined to copy it, even if he had to rewrite it word for word by hand.

He was reading the chapter titled ‘Yes, Even Ninja Are That Stupid’ and realising that this wasn’t an actual book – some arsehole had swiped Nidaime-sama’s diary. The author had been filtering his stress rather than writing a manual-

A customer entered.

Parting from the book was painful.

But then Naruto looked up, and there was Hinata-chan, looking like she had gone three rounds against a bear and then gotten whisper-shouted at by her dick of a Father in front of her peers (yes, that had happened at the Academy, and Ino had helped Naruto set up a prank that involved a lot of fertiliser and resulted in an explosion that claimed half the length of the bastard’s hair). It looked like it was time for another prank: Hinata-chan’s shoulders were hunched, her head bowed, and what little remained visible of her hands in the overlong sleeves was swathed in bandages.

“Hinata-chan!” He was on his feet before she even forced herself to look up.

She flinched at his sudden movement, but when he slowed down and approached her more carefully, she let him draw her into a half-hug.

“D’you want Ino? We can definitely find Ino for you-”

“Yes please,” she breathed almost soundlessly.

Naruto decided that shouting for his sister – loud noises in general – was a terrible idea, and steered Hinata-chan toward the back door of the store that led to the garden, along the engawa and into the kitchen.

Ino was, of course, in her room, so they had to trudge all the way upstairs, hoping no one would come in and rob the Shop while he was babysitting. Closing time came and went just as he hammered on his sister’s door with his fist.
She ripped the door open with a snarled “What-” and then spotted Hinata. “Oh my Izanagi-sama!” she cried out, pulled Hinata inside and slammed the door shut in front of Naruto’s nose.

“You’re welcome,” he said to the empty corridor, and went back downstairs to lock up the Shop and continue his reading.

x


No, not incredulous, Hinata reminded herself. Ino-chan believed her. It was awed. Perhaps stunned or surprised – that did not automatically imply doubting Hinata’s words.

She recited the reasoning to herself and felt a little better. Also, Ino-chan was warm against her side, and she did not even so much as imply that Hinata was making anything up.

“Yes,” Hinata confirmed, feeling a little buoyed by her friend’s attention and faith. “Well, at first a B-rank, when we encountered two C-class shinobi. They were hidden inside a genjutsu and… uhm…”

It’s not bragging if it’s true, Hinata reminded herself, just speak plainly. “I saw them. I alerted Kurenai-sensei. She let Kiba-kun and Shino-kun fight, and they won easily. Kurenai-sensei determined that Tazuna-san was lying, and suggested that we discontinue the mission, as good faith was broken on the client’s side.”

“But you didn’t,” Ino-chan said, certain of Team Eight’s bravery.

Hinata blushed. She wished Ino-chan would stroke her hair – that always calmed her down – but did not know how to ask. “Kurenai-sensei put it to a vote. Kiba-kun wished to continue with the mission, and Shino-kun agreed. I… I think…”

“You think?” Ino-chan pulled her in a little tighter.

Hinata sighed. She briefly closed her eyes. But there was a story to tell, and she made herself get on with it. “I think Shino-kun should be a chuunin. He is strong and smart, and he is a good leader when Kurenai-sensei is not available, even though Kiba-kun does not like to take his orders.” The truth was that Kiba-kun needed to be a leader, and something inside him howled when Shino-kun put him in his place.

“That sounds like Kiba,” Ino-chan agreed. Her knuckles moved up and down over Hinata’s shoulder-blade, digging in a little too hard.

“Uh… Kiba-kun is strong. But he’s a little hotheaded. He charges in before he thinks things through.”

“Mhm. So, what happened to push your mission up to A-rank?”

Hinata gathered her courage and leaned into Ino-chan, half-burying her face in Ino-chan’s shoulder. “There was another missing nin. Momochi Zabuza. He was probably A-class. He had this jutsu when he made mist rise and used his hearing to locate his targets unseen and kill them.”

Ino-chan laughed. “Mist? Against you?! Oh, Hinata-chan, did you dismember him?”

Hinata’s blush worsened. She felt like her face was on fire. “Uh, that, I… Kurenai-sensei put him in a genjutsu. One of the auditory ones. So he thought that we were in different places than we really were, and when he attacked he hit a tree.” Hinata took several deep breaths and paused a bit before releasing each of them. Once she felt like she could speak without mumbling again, she admitted: “I
closed several of his tenketsu. The one over the throat, too. The one that stops you breathing. Then
Kurenai-sensei killed him.”

Ino-chan pulled away, but before Hinata could truly despair at the loss she exclaimed: “You are so
awesome! Hinata-chan, that’s fantastic! You helped your sensei bring down an A-class ninja!”

“Uh, and uh-uh…” Hinata pressed her hand over her mouth. Just stay calm. Stay calm, she told
herself. It’s okay. It’s Ino-chan, and she believes you, and she won’t say anything mean. “Zabuza-
san had an apprentice, too. Kurenai-sensei said he was a B-class, but before he could attack, Shino-
kun’s kikaichu had already drained most of his chakra.”

“So you protected the drunk and battled scary missing nin and collected the rewards?” Ino-chan
paraphrased, smiling like she was proud.

“Uh… the reward money is property of the Clan,” Hinata explained. “But, yes. We did all of that.”

“Well, that’s not fair,” grumbled Ino-chan. “Does that mean you can’t go out tonight and spend your
well-earned cash on great food and an even greater dessert?”

Hinata shrank. “I don’t need-”

“Nonsense!” Ino-chan jumped to her feet and offered her hand. “Let’s go. My treat! Because you’ve
done so great, and you totally deserve to be treated like the great kunoichi you’ve proven yourself to
be!”

Hinata feared she might catch on fire. But, like always, she followed Ino-chan without a care for
where Ino-chan would lead her.

x

“You need to cut her loose,” Shikamaru proclaimed, as though he had any say in anything about
Ino’s life. His hand moved mechanically up and down, even though there was no paint left on his
brush. That fence was doomed.

“This coming from you?” Ino snapped. Her part of that damn fence was going to be perfect.

Shikamaru faced her head on, letting the brush plop into the bucket and – yep, disappear entirely
under the surface of the paint. Shikamaru so rarely bothered to make eye-contact that at this moment
Ino’s attention snapped to him and remained on him. “I know what I’m talking about.”

Ino blinked. A few past events rearranged themselves in her head, and while Shikamaru was still
mostly incomprehensible, she began to fathom the reasoning behind some of his more dubious
choices. It had never made sense to her why Shikamaru would have cut Yoshi out of his life – but he
was as good as drawing a parallel here.

“My brother never needed you,” she pointed out. Because it was true. Yoshi hadn’t needed
Shikamaru. Yoshi had liked him and cared for him and respected his opinions, but there was nothing
nearly as powerful and dangerous between them as Hinata-chan’s dependence on Ino.

Shikamaru shrugged. “Yoshi’s better – stronger – than he would have been if we had stayed that
close.”

Ino opened her mouth to argue – and then closed it. Because Shikamaru – damn him! – was right.
After The Ditching, Yoshi had gone through the annoying crying phase, and emerged on the other
side a little more jaded. He and Ino grew closer, learnt to work together, and since then they were
always better together than apart.

If Ino had a problem, Yoshi was the first person she would ask for advice or help.

If Yoshi had a problem, he came to Ino.

“You bastard,” she hissed, turning away to him under the pretense of focusing on the objective of their D-rank mission.

Their parents had tried to strengthen the ties of the Ino-Shika-Cho team by excluding Yoshi from Saturdays. Fair enough. But it was actually Shikamaru’s arseholeness that had managed to enforce any kind of closeness between anyone, and it was between Ino and Yoshi, who were never ever going to be partnered together in the field, because their skills had almost seventy-five per cent overlap.

“You’re such a fucking sap,” she grumbled.

Shikamaru just shrugged, untouched by the accusation. “If you care about Hyuuga, make her stand on her own two feet.”

Ino dipped her brush in the paint and straightened, feeling the first stirrings of pain in her lower back.

Shikamaru didn’t know everything, and he hadn’t had the same training Ino had. Maybe she should have failed her project. Maybe. But she didn’t think so. Most of the sane-ish ninja in service had something or someone they depended on for the motivation to crawl out of their bed (or futon, or sleeping bag) in the morning, and that was a perfectly acceptable coping mechanism.

Hinata-chan had the trauma of a ninja three times her age because she was high-functioning autistic and her Clan Head had tried to beat it out of her.

It was bullshit.

She was a little too empathetic – sure, that was a handicap – but she could work around it, if somebody took the time to guide her and let her develop her tools. And, aside from the emotional fragility, she was an enemy’s nightmare in the field. Fast as lightning, precise as a surgeon and able to see through appearances to what was really there.

Basically, Hyuuga Hiashi was a narrow-minded idiot, Shikamaru was an overconfident busybody, and Ino was right.

x

“Inooo…” Yoshi whined, stretching decadently on the sofa. “I want to make out with Nidaime-sama’s miind.”

Ino laughed so hard she had to stop reading for a moment, reflexively marking her page with her middle finger. “I think you just joined a very large club, brother.”

x

“Are you okay, Ino?” Chouji asked quietly, while Ino re-wrapped her hands in preparation of another taijutsu assault on the training post.

Somewhere on the edge of the training ground, in the shadow of a tree, Asuma-sensei and Shikamaru slept around a half-set shogi board. Apparently, getting back from their first C-rank
yesterday meant that today was for resting.

“Yoshi and Sakura are on a mission, and I’ve got no one to spar with,” Ino hissed. “Unless you’re volunteering…?”

Chouji cringed. “Ah, um… can’t we, like, practice throwing instead?”

Ino needed to hit something. Throwing did not work as a substitute. And if Chouji was too chicken-shit – he could go and join the sleeping pile of uselessness.

“Hey Shino-kun,” said Yoshi-san, casually sitting down on the other side of the table. “How’s things?”

Shino decided not to let Yoshi-san’s force of personality and lack of respect for other people’s privacy disconcert him. He knew that Ladybug had gone to the Yamanaka for comfort, and under the circumstances Yoshi-san’s concern might have been warranted.

“Team Eight has recovered well,” Shino assured him. One unexpected positive consequence of the disastrous mission was conciliation with Inuzuka-san. They still had a long way to go, but now the grounds on which future cooperation might be built were established.

“That’s good.” Yoshi-san smiled, but despite his effort to appear contented, his exhaustion was apparent. He had not ordered any food, either; he seemed to have simply sat down to gather the strength to continue on the next part of his trip.

The walk from here to the Yamanaka Flowers took a couple of minutes – in civilian terms.

“How are you?” Shino asked, putting down his chopsticks. This was a new experience – he did not think he had ever before been concerned for Yoshi-san.

Yoshi-san’s smile intensified. “You’re so nice, Shino-kun. I’m fine, thanks for asking. Just tired. See, our mission didn’t get bumped up to A-rank, but on our way back we walked through an ANBU mission that spilled from Grass into Fire and I’ve kinda been running for like, a day straight. And carrying Sakura part of the way, after she dropped of chakra exhaustion, while Sasuke scouted and Kakashi defended flank – and we still got paid for just a C-rank. It’s like the worst of both worlds.” He laughed.

Shino realised that he was seeing more of Yoshi-san’s true personality than he ever had seen before. He felt privileged for the trust extended to him.

“Ne, you won’t tell anyone I mentioned seeing you know whom?” asked Yoshi-san. “I think that part was actually secret. Oops?”

“I will tell no one,” Shino assured him. He hastened through consuming the rest of his meal, stood, and offered his hand. “Come. I shall accompany you home.”

The way Yoshi-san looked at him made him feel uncomfortable – he did not believe he had done anything to deserve such regard. Nonetheless, he insisted on seeing his friend safely to his family’s house, if his jounin-sensei had neglected to do so.

Iruka let himself into the hospital room, telling himself for the twentieth time that if Kakashi didn’t
want him here, he could just say so and Iruka would take his leave. They were dating, after all… at
the very least until Kakashi told him they were not anymore.

“Come in, sensei,” said Kakashi’s voice just as Iruka was pressing down the door handle.

Iruka stepped inside. To his surprise, Kakashi seemed uninjured, even though he was lying placidly
in bed. He must have shown his bemusement, because Kakashi was moved to explain.

“Chakra exhaustion. The kids, too.”

Iruka had noticed Sakura and Sasuke, of course, but he had been most immediately concerned with
whether he would be welcome to visit while they were incapacitated. Despite being bed-ridden,
Kakashi was still obviously in mission-mode, and he would not have allowed anyone inside whom
he did not trust with his students.

Iruka smiled. “I am glad you will all be well. Yoshi-kun?”

Kakashi snorted. “That kid is indefatigable. I think he could have carried all of us with shadow
clones if I let him. I sent him home.” He tilted his head to the side, and then raised an arm. “C’mere.”

Iruka went, even as he felt that he was crossing some kind of line. When he had suggested that he
would date Kakashi, he had not expected that Kakashi would come to genuinely trust him.

He would have to think about this.

“I’m so glad you’re back,” Ino gasped, and fell into the grass to just stare up at the pretty colours of
the sunset and try to catch her breath.

Yoshi sat down next to her and handed her a water bottle. Attempting to drink would have been too
ambitious at the moment – and she would probably puke it up – so she just poured the water over her
face and hoped to absorb it by osmosis.

“Happy to beat you up any time, Sis’,” Yoshi assured her.

“Don’t be smug. You train with Sasuke-kun. My training partner is a fucking upright log.”

“Yeah, I think you should tell Dad,” Yoshi suggested, grimacing. “Or at least tell Asuma that you’re
going to tell Dad. I’m not sure how easy he intimidates… but if he’s neglecting your training Dad
will skin him alive, and after that the point will be moot.”

Ino smiled at the vision of Asuma-sensei being slowly, meticulously skinned. She wanted to be like
Daddy when she grew up. Maybe she should start training skinning? Oooh, she should train
skinning during team training, with rabbits, or maybe cats or something. That could convince the
useless trio to get off their arses and avoid pissing her off.

Yoshi wriggled in place. He finished drinking his own water and finally resolved to talk about what
was bothering him. “Kakashi-sensei hinted – and by hinted I mean told us straightforward – that he’s
recommending us for the Chuunin Exams. I think we’re getting on his delicate nerves. That man
can’t accept constructive criticism. He takes everything so personally.” He rolled his eyes, but it was
at best contrived.

He seemed genuinely worried.
“I hope Asuma-sensei will put us forward, too,” Ino grumbled.

“You think you’ll pass?” asked her brother, and he was lucky Ino was too comfortable to bother raising a hand, else he would have been digging a shuriken out of somewhere uncomfortable.

“Depends,” she admitted. “With me it’ll be about luck. Shikamaru could pass blindfolded, but there’s nothing in this country that could motivate him to do it. And Chouji… I don’t know. I’ll strangle you with your small intestine if you tell him so, but he’s just not there yet.”

“Why aren’t you sparring with him?”

“He refuses. Too much of a gentleman to hit a girl, apparently.”

Yoshi groaned and flopped backwards to lie alongside Ino and watch the slowly darkening sky with her. “That’s a major weakness in the field.”

“I know!” Ino’s exasperation with her team seemed to reach new and amazing heights with every passing day. How had this happened? Weren’t they forced together despite class rankings because they were supposed to be the most functional team ever? This was a damn farce. “So does Asuma. He claims it’s the reason for at least two of his cigarettes a day.” Ino didn’t need anyone to tell her – she knew Asuma had expected to have it easy, with the ready-made team of home-trained clan heirs who knew each other since early childhood.

Now he didn’t know what to do and instead of – kami forbid! – asking for some advice, or trying to talk to them or anything, he just went through the motions and waited for something to happen.

Yoshi looked equally pissed. “He’s trying to emotionally extort Chouji into hitting girls? Is he brain-damaged?”

“Conclusion pending. Why can’t I have a good teacher – like Kurenai-sensei? Or at least a hot one like you?”

Yoshi rolled his eyes. “I keep telling you, sister, mental illnesses are not attractive. But I agree on the other point. Why can’t we have a teacher like Kurenai-sensei?”

x

Shikaku for a long while watched out of the window as Shikamaru assaulted the training post. Eventually he sighed and folded himself onto their bed. “That confirms your theory.”

His wife sat cross-legged next to him, massaging the tense muscles in the back of her neck. “I had hoped for some embarrassment out of that kid, but most of the time he just seems coldly terrified.”

Shikaku did quite strongly empathise with his child. He, too, wanted to punch something a lot. “Far too aware of the realities of shinobi life. Far too damn young.”

“He’s your son,” said Yoshino and, because she loved him, it was an explanation rather than an accusation.

“Not just mine.” He put his arm around her and buried his face in her hair. “Before you, I never had so much to lose that I would know that special kind of terror.”
“No,” said Shibi-sensei. “It is illogical to risk one’s hive on a dangerous mission if one knows the hive does not have the skills to accomplish the objective.”

“Except as a distraction for a more skilled hive?” suggested Ami-chan, looking up from her chemical equations.

Shibi-sensei conceded this exception with a nod, but pointed out: “Do you wish to be the distraction so that one of the other teams may pass more easily?”

“No, sensei,” chorused the girls.

“A wise choice,” said the jounin.

Keiko shook her head. “I can’t believe we’re fine with using ‘hive’ as a description of our team.”

Ami-chan shrugged. “I can’t believe it either.”

Fuyumi-chan scratched at her mussed up hair. “You honestly don’t mind that everyone except us got entered into the Chuunin Exams?”

“I mind that they got entered, not that we didn’t,” specified Keiko. “That situation wouldn’t be improved by us making idiots of ourselves begging for something we don’t really want…?”

At least, that was how Ino-chan had presented it to her. Keiko did agree with the sentiment, even though it didn’t entirely squash the roiling envy. She reminded herself that she was in this to become a strong, solid kunoichi, not to crash and burn trying to show off for… well, anybody.
“Beautiful young flower of Konoha! After our flames of youth prevail in the Chuunin Exams, go out with me!”

Sakura punched the green weirdo in the head.

Or, well, tried to. He dodged so fast he turned into a green blur, and swept Sakura’s feet from under her, so she ended up sitting on her butt and staring upward with a mixture of homicidal rage and reluctant admiration.

“I joyously accept your challenge to a spar, fair maiden!”

“Don’t waste your time on the losers, Lee,” said the androgynous teammate of Sakura’s admirer, walking past them toward the stairs.

Ino let out a quiet but distinctly keening sound. “Why couldn’t I have been born a year earlier?” She watched the byplay wistfully. “A dishy bundle of complexes and a completely fucking whacked weirdo…”

“I’ll trade you,” muttered the kunoichi of that team, who was busy sorting through scrolls. Not medical ones, surprisingly, as Ino would expect from any kunoichi on a team with two potential powerhouses.

“In a heartbeat,” said Ino, and pointed behind herself at Chouji, who was stress-eating his third packet of chips, and Shikamaru, who seemed half asleep and half tired of living.

“Um,” said the kunoichi.

Ino nodded. “Yes, I thought so.”

“We’re only missing Team Three,” Naruto said cheerfully, once Hinata-chan joined their huddle – going straight to Ino for her obligatory cuddle.

“Oh, right.” Kiba stood more or less in one place and didn’t invade anybody’s personal space, which was an astounding and unexpected personal growth. Not to mention his honest-to-Izanagi indoors volume. “Why aren’t they here?”

Shino pushed up his glasses. “Father thought that the decision to nominate rookies was at best risky and at worst amounted to criminal negligence on the part of the teachers. Why? Because the likelihood of death is not negligible. Father chose not to endanger his students needlessly when it was plain that they were not ready for advancement yet.”

“It’s exactly what Gai-sensei did a year ago,” said Tenten – the older kunoichi Ino had dragged along after they had bonded over terrible team assignments. “Boy, I hope we kick arse this time.”

“Tenten,” said a deep voice in a deeply-offended-by-your-existence tone (a tone that Sasuke had also perfected and overused with relish), “do not lower yourself to conversation with lost causes.”

Tenten drooped. When she looked up, her face was twisted with secondhand embarrassment. “Don’t mind him, guys – Neji’s always like that. Just make sure you don’t die, okay?”

“…prove the superiority of hard work over genius and win your love!” sounded across the room.
Tenten sighed. “That’s my cue.”

Naruto watched Ino watch her go with sympathy.

x

The written test was a joke. In hindsight Sakura could see how it was funny if you were in on it, but from her point of view she had just made her wrist hurt and wasted brainpower only to be told that the whole objective was for her to sit, mind her own business, and wait for further orders.

That scarred proctor could go fuck himself dry, the arsehole.

Yeah, she had switched, which Yoshi had asked her not to do until the written test was over, but she had limits, and a long acquaintance with the Yamanaka gave her a bit of a trigger when it came to mindfuck.

“You may call me The Glorious Anko-sama!” announced the new proctor.

Sakura liked her despite herself. Polite cringed, but that was all social conditioning; this woman walked around like she was constantly giving everybody two birds, and Sakura could respect a bitch like that.

“Hey, it’s Snake Princess!” Yoshi called out cheerfully – and that was it.

Signed, sealed, delivered: Sakura had found her future mentor. Notice me, sempai, she thought, and ignored polite, who had mostly just fallen silent due to mind-numbing incredulity.

“That’s Snake Queen to you, Yamanaka-too,” the proctor tossed out, and surveyed the half-empty room.

“More like, snake creep,” muttered Kiba.

Ino theatrically pushed her chair further away from Dog Boy, making a loud scraping sound that ensured everybody was watching her for the moment. “I would say it was nice knowing you, Inuzuka, but I don’t want the last thing you’ll ever hear to be a lie.”

“Wha-aaaargh!”

“He did it to himself,” Yoshi remarked, as the rest of the room watched Kiba being nearly perforated with several kunai, scared into trembling like a rodent in sights of a snake, and then mildly molested.

“Note to self,” Tenten said dryly, “don’t piss off the proctor.”

The proctor let Kiba pour back into his seat and grinned first at Tenten and then at the other gennin she recognised. “There’s a smart one in the crowd. Kick butts, Yamanaka-squared. I’m not allowed to cheer, but I’m totally illegally cheering for you. The Department’s too drab without a blond terror to lighten it up, so hurry up and get those chuunin vests.”

As they filed out of the classroom, Yoshi turned back and waved. “Bye, Anko-san! We’ll tell Dad you miss him!”

x

Ino thought she would hate the Forest of Death. She might, in a couple of days, when she would have to wash her hair in a brook, but right now she was happy to have a great many things to kill, so she enjoyed herself and did not even mount a protest when Shikamaru determinedly dragged them in
the direction of the gate that had been assigned to Team Seven.

Boys, honestly.

“Hey, brother,” she said as they approached. She formed a handsign.

Yoshi relaxed from the ready-to-attack stance. “Sisterror?” He in turn signed to the trees, from whence the rest of his team appeared. “I thought this was a team exam. Emphasis on team.”

“Don’t look at me.” Ino shrugged. “I wasn’t the one who made the suggestion to team up with you and then insisted on doing it.” She turned to Shikamaru.

So did Chouji. So did the entire Team Seven.

Shikamaru went stiff under the weight of the scrutiny, but pretended that he was too busy watching the flight patterns of the carrion birds flying overhead. “It was the optimal strategy.”

x

Sasuke judgmentally looked over Team Eight, member by member, ending up looking downwards at Akamaru.

“Hinata insisted,” Inuzuka explained helplessly.

Sasuke wasn’t impressed.

“And we’ve got a spare Heaven Scroll, because Hinata did not like one of the other Konoha teams. And Shino…”

“My kikaichu informed me that those persons were contaminated by suspicious chakra. I found merit in Ladybug’s proposal to neutralise them.”

“Neutralise,” Inuzuka repeated to emphasise how inadequate he thought that word was.

Sasuke thought they were all weak and indecisive. If they thought the other team was a potential threat, they should have eliminated them.

“They were all alive when we departed,” reported Aburame. “Why? In deference to possibly being Konoha shinobi after all.”

“Possibly,” Inuzuka mouthed incredulously behind his back.

Akamaru barked, but he sounded like he was agreeing more with Aburame than with Inuzuka.

“Um, S-sasuke-san…” Hyuuga tried to speak.

Sasuke put her out of her misery. “Whatever. It’s not like Ino-Shika-Cho are not riding our coattails, too.”

x

They had expected battles, of course. But…

…not like this.

“Uhm… that wasn’t Itachi,” Naruto pointed out.
Sasuke, still trembling and staring blankly at the spot from which the ninja had disappeared, hollowly said: “Do I look like I care, Bleach Boy?”

“More importantly,” Sakura cut in, “do you have another of those seals? Just in case – I might be having a crisis of faith in the competence of Konoha’s security.” Blood dripped from her knuckles; there were a few broken trees lying around the clearing.

“Hear, hear,” muttered Shikamaru somewhere in the background. “Such a pain…”

“…in the arse,” Ino and Chouji finished in practiced unison.

“T-that was…” Hinata-chan spoke, nervous but determined, “a very good use of Shadow Manipulation, Shikamaru-kun.”

“Your destruction of the summon was also impressive, Ladybug,” said Shino.

Akamaru barked in agreement.

“Yeah, easy for you to say. You’re the one not covered in snake guts,” grumbled Kiba, who had helped his ninken rip apart several of the smaller summons.

Once Naruto was fairly sure that Sasuke was not going to have a shiny new psychotic break, he turned to Sakura and answered her question: “Give me five minutes. Keep watch.”

He dropped to the ground and opened his fuuinjutsu kit. He knew the seal by heart, and with the use of shadow clones he could have a ‘reverse-summoning for the Hypo-Hypothermia cell’ scroll for every member of the Rookie Nine ready within that time limit.

Because fighting a Sannin as part of the Chuunin Exams was fucking ridiculous, and he was done relying on other people to protect him.

x

Ino had broken Hinata-chan off of that self-destructive fixation on being fair in every situation, so not a single one of the nine gennin had a real problem with teaming up. They gathered eight scrolls between them, and only one serious injury, which Yoshi’s weird blood limit had healed before they arrived at the Tower.

Sakura solved the clue for them, which was why Ino did feel mildly guilty when Sakura was selected as Ino’s opponent for the preliminary match.

“This match-up sucks,” Ino said apologetically as they faced one another in the arena.

Sakura flickered between hot and cool for so long that Ino was tempted to snap her into one of the personalities. But that wouldn’t have been – well, fair.

Ino waited. Sakura could choose for herself.

Eventually, Sakura raised her head and turned to the proctor. “I forfeit.” Quietly, so that only Ino could hear, she added: “Kami fuck it in all the stinking orifices.”

“Sakura-chan…?” said Ino. She had not expected that.

Sakura’s shoulders stiffened; Ino could see her switch back so she could explain with a summer-breeze soft-and-calmness. “We can’t use genjutsu or ninjutsu-”
Admittedly, neither of them knew any that would work on the other one, including the Yamanaka techniques due to Sakura’s mental condition.

“-you are better at taijutsu and bladed weaponry, and I won’t use medical techniques against an ally.”

Ino agreed that to harm the other at all, either would have had to try hard enough that the harm might be irreversible. She wanted to be noble, too, but practicality would always win. “Okay, then. It just sucks.”

Sakura snorted and danced over to bump Ino’s shoulder and then put an arm around her waist. “As long as you kick butt in the next round for the both of us.”

“Promise,” Ino assured her, and meant it with her entire being. She would also recruit Yoshi to fuck up the life of the bastard that had rigged the so called ‘random’ match-ups (she was only willing to let that bastard live because she hadn’t been ordered to fight Yoshi).

Sakura hid her homicidal rage under the veneer of contentedness as she leaned into Ino’s side.

x

The only one who actually cheered for Shikamaru when he kicked that Sound kunoichi’s arse was Chouji, because pretty much everybody else was watching Sakura being comforted by Ino, who was in turn being cuddled by Hinata, like that was normal.

Kiba pulled out another paper tissue and held it under his nose. ‘hy must all de girls do dat all the tibe?!’

x

“Is that a fucking joke?!” Ino-chan spat, eyes narrowing at the board and killing intent flaring.

Hinata shuddered but, looking at the board, had to agree with the sentiment. The proctors claimed that the selections were random, but it was too much of a coincidence, especially in light of the match-up between Ino-chan and Sakura-chan.

Either somebody wanted to specifically pair up ninja with similar specialties, or the Hyuuga money had spoken once again, using a Clan Elder as its mouthpiece.

“This is a team exam, Hinata-chan,” Yoshi-kun reminded her from the other side.

Ino-chan stopped cursing under her breath and hugged Hinata hard and fast. “Brother’s right. You’re not Hinata of the Hyuuga now. You’re Hinata of Team Eight.”

Oddly, this was exactly what Hinata needed to hear. She understood the… well, suggestion, but it might as well have been an order. She smiled at the Yamanaka siblings and walked down to the arena. She might have been shaking, but at least she was not afraid.

“Hinata-hime,” said Neji-nii-san-

No. Neji. Just Neji. Ino-chan had been very adamant about this. Perhaps one day, but not now. She was Hinata of Team Eight, and this Team Nine shinobi was her opponent.

She ignored the rain of insults and accusations with ease of long practice and turned to the administrator. “A-ano, Proctor-san? D-do you know if the detained shinobi had been moved to a different cell yet?”
The proctor seemed confused.

Neji paused – apparently also uncertain what her question meant – and then he restarted assuring her that she would lose.

“The cell has been emptied,” said someone in the audience… ah, there. The first exam’s proctor. The one with the prominent facial scarring.

Hinata bowed in thanks. “T-then I am ready to begin.”

She reached for the scroll Yoshi-kun had given her. Certainly she was fast enough to activate the seal before Neji could complete One Hundred and Twenty-Eight Palms?

x

“Found him!” Yoshi reported excitedly and hopped up and down in place several times. In the arena below them Shino faced off against some guy called Zaku. “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m going in; any special wishes?”

Several people automatically looked at Nara, but Nara was either asleep or pretending to be, because his preliminary fight was over and thus he could not be bothered to even maintain consciousness, never mind that one of his teammates was still waiting.

Akimichi just gave everybody an apologetic shrug, like it was his fault that Nara was a dick.

“That Sand guy,” Inuzuka muttered, “against somebody we don’t care about.”

“Even better,” Sakura hissed, “against one of his siblings. Sasuke-kun, whom do you want to fight?”

Sasuke opened his mouth—

“And keep in mind that the goal is becoming chuunin and avenging me, ‘cause those bastards messed with my chances—”

“The other Sand guy,” Sasuke said, cursing himself for needing the reminder. It was so easy to get swallowed by the desire to make them all see, to prove to them—

But, no. Sakura was right. He had a clear goal; a simple mission. The proctors said it explicitly: at this stage of the Exams the quality of the performance did not matter at all. Only victory mattered. The other Sand guy was a puppet-user with a single puppet. There was a slight concern of poison (another Suna specialty), but with the Sharingan Sasuke could avoid being hit.

“So,” Yoshi summarised, “Gaara versus Temari, Sasuke versus Kankuro, Chouji and Kiba against some of those other Konoha people we don’t know – if you can’t take them, at least we know they won’t kill you. A boy for Chouji, because this is not the time for aversion therapy. Everyone in agreement?”

“What about you?” Sasuke demanded.

Yoshi laughed. “I’m just overjoyed they didn’t put me against Ino. Probably still too scared of Dad. Anyway—”

Sakura caught him before his body brained itself on the banister.

If the idiot lost his match – or got caught – Sasuke was going to make him regret ever graduating.
Temari took one look at the board, slammed her fan against the floor in a fit of pique (leaving a spider-web of cracks) and promised to herself that someone was going to pay for this cheating.

With a bitter grimace, she announced: “Proctor, I forfeit!”

Hopefully, Gaara wouldn’t take the loss of his opportunity for sanctioned murder too violently.

Sasuke – predictably – won his match. Kiba and Chouji both lost, but at least neither was seriously hurt. Finally, once Sakura’s arms were about to go numb and Hinata-chan looked a little strained holding up the genjutsu that made it seem like Yoshi-kun was conscious, the board showed the next match-up.

Yamanaka Yoshi vs. Akado Yoroi.

Yoshi took a deep, gasping breath, coughed, and smiled (making both Sakura and Hinata-chan smile back). “Huh, guys, get this. Before I messed with it, the selection was really random choice. How’s that for bad luck?”

Sakura let go of him.

Sadly, at that point Hinata-chan was still holding up the genjutsu, so no one saw him fall on his arse.

Chouji had lost his duel.

Shikamaru closed his eyes and pretended that he had slept through it.

He had been worried that Chouji would lose. He owed Yoshi for making sure that Chouji’s opponent was somebody that wouldn’t have hurt him too badly, because Shikamaru himself had been too scared to say a name – to make that recommendation. Scared that when Chouji lost, he might blame Shikamaru.

Or, worse – that he might not, and all the assigning of blame would be up to Shikamaru himself. Which would have been far too troublesome.

The door opened, letting in a sliver of light, before Neji had begun to feel warm, and thus probably before any permanent damage was inflicted.

Surrounded by chakra-suppressing seals, Neji could barely see anything even with the light. There was a technician of small stature, with several ANBU flanking her.

“Oh, thank Izanami-“

Neji scowled and, with some difficulty, drew himself upright. “Excuse me-“

“Shit, sorry, come on right out, Hyuuga-san.” The woman of indeterminate rank signed something to the ANBU, who backed up. “Do you need any help-?”

“I take it to mean,” Neji spoke carefully, feeling as though he were drugged, “that my cousin has
won the preliminary duel…”

“Err... since you’re, you know, outside of the arena…” The technician shrugged. “I’d guess so.”

“I see.” The sensation of warmth began to creep in. Neji let his mostly blind eyes trail over the walls of the ice box he had been locked in. “Am I detained?”

“No, no, of course not,” the woman assured him with amusement that seemed grossly misplaced to Neji, “but after the Snake Sannin, we were kinda worried we’d have to deal with… like… Uchiha Itachi or something… hehehe…”

Neji resented the cheer, but he was let out, provided with a thick blanket and given warm tea, so he refrained from informing her of his honest opinion. It was not as though anyone had ever been interested in Neji’s opinion on anything, anyway.

x

Kakashi wasn’t sure if he was annoyed or impressed that his terribly bad idea of a team had rigged the Chuunin Exams…

Whom was he kidding? He was impressed. Sasuke and Yoshi were both in the finals, which would cause a bit of a scheduling nightmare, but it was worth it. Too bad about Sakura.

He should have taught the girl some genjutsu. Or at least some basic Doton jutsu. She looked like the type that would enjoy smothering someone under a wall of mud. Then again, some days she looked like the type that would enjoy opening a person throat-to-groin and watching them try to hold their guts inside their body.

So maybe kenjutsu?

x

Yuuki did not often see Inoichi cry, but he was one of those rare men aware of the fragility of the important things surrounding him, so he did not channel heartbreak into aggression the way others might.

He let tears wash it away and, unless the grief was especially haunting, he even let Yuuki comfort him. Like today.

Her husband lay on the sofa, sleeping deeply, head pillowed on Yuuki’s thigh and a curtain of blond hair hiding his face, when her children melted out of the shadows like a pair of vengeful sprites.

“What’s wrong with Dad?” whispered Ino.

Yuuki was not much pleased about her openly murderous expression, but a time to remedy that would come later.

“Yeah, who do we have to kill?” agreed Yoshi.

While her daughter was entirely unrepentant, her son did react to Yuuki’s look.

His face shifted into a shallow smile. “I mean, how can we help?”

Yuuki opened her mouth to tell them they couldn’t help – but that was not entirely true, was it? They had considerable skills for ninja so young, and Yuuki had already seen the results of their earlier, less refined efforts in the Hyuuga girl and the Uchiha boy.
The risk was worth it.

“That boy Hyuuga Hinata defeated today in the tournament—”

“Her arsehole cousin,” Ino adlibbed.

“—is the son of someone your Father had once been close to,” Yuuki continued, warning her daughter with a look that this story-telling could be stopped at any time if she could not keep her rude tongue shut inside her mouth. “That boy’s Father died when you were too young to remember.”

Perhaps not Yoshi, who remembered a little too much from that age, sadly, but then, Yoshi would never have had a reason to meet Hizashi.

Yuuki sighed and carded her fingers through Inoichi’s hair. “That boy is not well, and your Father cannot help him.” She looked up.

Twin expressions of determination directed at her confirmed that they understood.

The children shared a look between them, and then turned to look at Inoichi. “Mission accepted.”

It was not quite the graveyard appointment yet, but Hiruzen had rescheduled all that could wait until tomorrow, and Inoichi was his last meeting of the day before he would go down to the T&I and face his greatest failure.

Perhaps another Kage could have remained sitting in his high tower and pretended that everything was perfectly well now that the missing nin had been incarcerated, but Hiruzen had never stopped seeing his student in Orochimaru-kun’s face. He remembered how enthusiastic his student had been, how determined – how fiercely he had fought for Konoha and how much he had sacrificed without a second thought.

For that amazing boy to change into this… creature… something devastating must have occurred. Something that Hiruzen had overlooked, and he viscerally needed to know what it was.

“Ah, Inoichi…” he said, hearing the surprise in his voice and feeling at the same time too old and like a student woefully unprepared for his test.

The young Clan Head favoured him with a scrutiny that probably read not only what Hiruzen felt and thought, but also what he had had for breakfast, which seemed to have occurred half a lifetime ago.

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“For that amazing boy to change into this… creature… something devastating must have occurred. Something that Hiruzen had overlooked, and he viscerally needed to know what it was.”

“Unless something goes drastically wrong, your son will be promoted,” Hiruzen said, too weary to beat about the bush. “Once he reaches chuunin status, he will begin training in his specialties.”

Hiruzen might not have been a Yamanaka, but he could read Inoichi’s reaction loud and clear. He had been at the receiving end on such a look from a Clan Head once before.

That Clan Head had been Uchiha Fugaku, but he could read Inoichi’s reaction loud and clear. He had been at the receiving end on such a look from a Clan Head once before.

That Clan Head had been Uchiha Fugaku, and it had happened mere days before the Massacre. Perhaps Hiruzen should have dismissed Shikaku before this meeting, but his mind was not quite what it used to be.

“I have sent a summons to Jiraiya,” Hiruzen informed his subordinate with all the authority he could muster. He reminded himself not to think of Orochimaru – not yet – that would come later. On some days it felt as though he were juggling kunai; so many of his ninja were angry, many of them angry
with him, and of those quite a few rightfully so.

He would never forget to cover his back when Kakashi-kun was around.

“Konoha had similar specialists before, as far as I know,” Inoichi said evasively. “Did not either of them leave behind any resources? Is your student truly the only one that can teach my son? What is it that qualifies him so uniquely?"

Hiruzen suppressed a hearty sigh. He should have expected this – should have expected it years ago when he had allowed Inoichi to adopt Naruto-chan. That was the problem with parents – they often wanted the best for their children regardless of whether the village would suffer for it.

“He is a Seal Master and a Sage,” Hiruzen explained, “and thus equipped to deal with… mishaps. And he has been preparing for this role for thirteen years.”

“Has he?” Inoichi’s eyes narrowed, and his voice went cold. “So he was not surprised to hear that his charge had disappeared nine years ago under suspicious circumstances, and is presumed dead? Probably dead in a gutter somewhere and eaten by rats—”

“Inoichi…” Hiruzen rubbed his forehead. He was two decades too old to deal with this. “I will look into options. If none other presents itself, I will bring Jiraiya in. I look forward to your coup.”

“As you say, Hokage-sama,” Inoichi replied noncommittally, and took his leave.

“It would not be that difficult,” Shikaku asserted nonchalantly.

Hiruzen refrained from rolling his eyes at his Chief Strategist. “With you planning it, I am sure it would not be.”

Inoichi was woken up half an hour before dawn-break by an out-of-breath ANBU bearing the news of Sandaime-sama’s death.
Shikaku seemed to be the last person who had seen Sandaime-sama alive.

Or, to be more accurate, he was one of the last three people to see Sandaime-sama alive – the other two were ANBU guards, and the reason for why Shikaku was not presently under suspicion.

Inoichi was technically under suspicion, due to how disastrously his last meeting with Sarutobi-sama had gone and the fact that he had not bothered to hide his displeasure after her had left the Tower. At least no one believed in his guilt seriously, and Ibiki had let him spend the night sitting on the sofa in his office rather than in an interrogation cell, and then let him go, since the Department was busy hunting for Orochimaru. Again.

“Excuse me,” said Ibiki, walking into Shikaku’s house in the late afternoon. He glanced at Inoichi stretched out and dozing under the kotatsu, and his expression darkened.

“Yes?” snapped Yoshino.

Ibiki flinched, and then turned to look at her.

Shikaku’s lovely wife was curled up in the armchair that could not be seen from the doorway, looking ready to spring and disembowel someone.

“I’m sorry for barging in, Yoshino-san,” Ibiki said with just the right balance of meekness and confidence for Yoshino to relent. He glanced at Inoichi again and then turned to Shikaku. “We’re officially declaring Orochimaru to be Sandaime-sama’s murderer.”

“Officially,” Shikaku repeated. He had a dark suspicion about where this was leading.

“We,” Ibiki replied, casting another unsubtle glance at Inoichi, “are of the mind that no advantage would come out of disclosing the facts. If Sandaime-sama was dead before Orochimaru had escaped from the cells – that would only alert Orochimaru’s spy that we are searching for them. And while no one may ever be entirely above suspicion…” He looked at Inoichi again, and fell silent.

Shikaku did not like owing a favour this big, but Inoichi was his best friend and one of the best men Shikaku had ever had the privilege to know (and Ibiki would never have offered this if he had a smidgen of suspicion that Inoichi might have been culpable in any way).

He nodded. “You may count on me, Ibiki-san.”

Kakashi knew that this moment was coming ever since Jiraiya crossed the village gates, and he was prepared.

“Where is Minato-kun’s son, Kakashi?” demanded the Sage.

Kakashi looked up from *Icha Icha Paradise* – not even its presence seemed to mollify its author. He sympathised. He did. After all, he had been there, once, a long time ago. Why, it almost felt like he had been a different person then.

Certainly Jiraiya had not been gone for so long that he and Kakashi were complete strangers now? Or had he? Well, now that did change things a little bit, didn’t it?
“I spent four years trying to find him,” Kakashi said truthfully. Four years filled with despair, which nearly culminated in his suicide attempt. He had murdered on his quest, and technically betrayed the village, even though he had been skillful enough not to be caught at it.

“And then you gave up?”

The accusation might have stung, had it not come from a man that had not lifted a pinky finger for Uzumaki Naruto in thirteen years. In light of events, Kakashi honestly did not understand on what authority Jiraiya demanded any information about the boy whatsoever.

Kakashi lowered his eyes to the page again. “Then Danzo died and Sandaime-sama investigated Root basement to ceiling. And found nothing.”

“A jinchuuriki can’t just disappear!” spat the Sage, rapidly approaching the state of incandescent.

A jinchuuriki could. With a Namikaze-Uzumaki seal (that completely cut off all demonic chakra) and a Clan Head that had more heart than brains (and Inoichi was not stupid, so that was a fuckton of heart), a jinchuuriki could disappear almost completely, leaving behind a pain-in-the-arse, run-of-the-mill clan kid.

“Goddamnit!” Jiraiya grated out. He dragged a fist over his face.

For about half a second Kakashi considered hinting.

And then he realised that if Jiraiya ever found out, that would be the end of it. He would force the truth out; he would strip Yoshi off of Naruto regardless of how much it would hurt the boy and his family, and he would force Naruto into the jinchuuriki mold, because that was what Jiraiya had accepted as his debt to Namikaze Minato.

Kakashi had his own debts, and his own heart (sad, shriveled thing that it was), so he stared glumly into the distance and didn’t say a word.

Shikaku’s opinion that a month was far too long a break between the second and the third stage of the Chuunin Exams was reinforced once again when he found the gennin that should have been training loitering around the Hokage Tower.

He had a distinctly bad feeling about it even before Inoichi’s son opened his mouth.

“I agree with you – that should definitely be investigated. But maybe we could first ask-”

“For yet another fucking run-around?” barked Sakura, loudly enough to attract attention from half of the street.

Jiraiya-sama and Tsunade-sama, who were following a few steps behind Shikaku, Chouza and Inoichi, paused in their quiet conversation to watch.

“Don’t look at me like that, Sakura-chan!” chided Yoshi. “I agree that it’s totally weird somebody let an S-class nukenin infiltrate not just the village, but also the Exams themselves-”

“This village can’t take care of its trash!” snapped Sasuke. “It’s not even the first time I’ve been targeted inside Konoha by an insane S-class shinobi-”

Laying it on a bit thick, huh? But it seemed to be working, considering the rise killing intent behind
Shikaku’s back.

“I didn’t even know that boy had the emotional capacity to get angry,” Shikaku remarked.

Inoichi watched the performance like a teacher intending to grade it afterwards. “Yoshi’s been doing very well by him.” Implying that his barely teenage son had done better than a line of trained professionals. Which would have been hubris, if it weren’t true.

Shikaku was, however, momentarily occupied with observing an infinitely more interesting triumph of the Yamanaka children over people’s issues.

Jiraiya-sama’s face screwed up in pain and anger. It was not widely known, but during those years he had spent maintaining Konoha’s spy network his primary motivation had been keeping tabs on his treacherous former teammate.

Those who were in the know just hoped that Jiraiya-sama did not feel the need to try and rehabilitate Orochimaru. Certainly murdering the Sandaime would have been the final nail in that coffin?

Tsunade-sama looked about the same as ever – which was less drunk than she really was. With the small additional detail that her fists were tightly clenched.

“Your children lit the fire under someone’s arse,” Shikaku noted quietly.

“I wonder if they timed it like this on purpose,” muttered Chouza, arms crossed in front of his chest. He watched the Toad Sage gravely.

Inoichi scoffed. “Of course they did. That-” He inclined his head toward the two enraged Sannin. “-was the whole point.”

The crash reverberated through the entire Hokage Tower.

A group of panicked ANBU and other assorted ninja invaded the Hokage’s office, and Tsunade stared back at them, arms akimbo, silently daring them to say a single fucking word about the Hokage’s desk half-embedded in the wall.

“Out,” she hissed, “of my office.”

Most of them went without arguing about the semantics, which she took as sheer self-preservation on their parts. Only the few who were above such things as fear for their lives remained behind.

“Have you decided to accept the nomination, then?” asked Jiraiya.

Tsunade could tell he wanted to rub his hands together in glee. So she threw the letter in his direction, letting it flutter to the floor halfway between them. It pleased her to see him have to crouch to pick it up. “Read that.”

Jiraiya read it. His face went pink, then red, and then an unhealthy puce colour. “What the shit!”

“That’s what I thought,” agreed Tsunade. “So tell me, which one of us is going to declare war on the Land of Rice Paddies? Because we will declare that war, rather than allow that snake back inside this village-”

“You!” Jiraiya yelled. “You! You make the declarations, Hime!” He ambled over and made a pathetic attempt at puppy eyes. “Look, I’ll even go in the field and be your general. Anything you
want. Just free me from this cage!”

This was the perfect time to make some demand about Jiraiya ceasing to sexually harass her – and other women, but primarily her – but Tsunade honestly just wanted Orochimaru’s head on a pike. “Fine!” she growled, and took a swig directly from the bottle.

“Yes! Yes, oh sweet kami, thank you, yes!” He tried to kiss her, and she gave him the satisfaction of a kiss with her fist. It embedded him in the wall right above the desk. The result looked like one of those surrealist paintings.

“Nara!” Tsunade bellowed.

The Jounin Commander peeled himself off the wall.

“Oh, you’re here. Never mind. You’ve heard then. Short version: Orochimaru stated his intention to *honour* Konoha with his visit in his capacity as the Otokage to watch the third stage of the Chuunin Exams. To which I say: fuck him with a morning star. Yes, I am aware that response equals a declaration of war. Ask me if I care.” She paused for another gulp of sake, and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “Come on, ask me.”

“As you say, *Godaiame-sama,*” replied the cool bastard with the imperturbable snark.

“Yeah, I know,” Tsunade admitted, and sighed. “Fuck knows I’m going to look stupid in the Hat. *Everybody* looks stupid in the Hat.” Because they were. Everybody who put it on was a goddamn idiot.

“You’ll look *beautiful,*” Jiraiya croaked from the hole in the wall, but he was obviously concussed, so his opinion didn’t count.

---x---

Iruka finished laughing at his own story long after Kakashi gave up on his half-hearted attempt at a chuckle-

And that was it.

Iruka wasn’t going to pretend that everything was fine any longer. He passed Kakashi another beer and asked: “Will you tell me what’s bothering you?”

“Maa…” Kakashi rubbed at the back of his head, and for a moment it seemed like he would enforce a change of subject. Then he took a sip of the beer through the – presumably genjutsu – mask. “Secrets. Obligations. That feeling you get when you have to choose between two loyalties.” He smiled widely and mirthlessly. “You know what I mean.”

Guilt, Iruka translated. Regret or remorse or some variation of the theme.

“We are shinobi,” he said. “Keeping secrets is what we do.”

“Even when we hurt people who don’t deserve it?”

Iruka, sadly, was cruel enough to reply: “Especially then.” Or perhaps it wasn’t cruelty; perhaps it was self-reflection. He had not told Kakashi that dating him was an assignment, and since Kakashi was an elite jounin, there was no way of telling if he knew. “Sometimes we burn ourselves with our own Will of Fire – but it’s better than letting the fire go out.”
He wanted to smack himself for the cheesiness, but once he had said it, he couldn’t take it back and not come across as a complete moron.

Kakashi didn’t laugh at him. He took another long, contemplative pull from the bottle, and then something in his posture reset completely. “So, sensei, you were telling me about Sarutobi-kun’s cronies?”

Sakura ran up over the roofs just as the gathered procession began to move toward the Southern Gate. Her hair was still wet, but the weather was warm, so she wasn’t worried about catching a cold.

“What’s going on?” she demanded. She braked, but the shingle didn’t give her enough traction; she was about to catch herself by channeling chakra when Sasuke’s hand struck out and gripped her belt to stabilise her. “Thanks.”

“Hn,” Sasuke said predictably, and let go.

“Story goes,” Ino spoke, “that they found the Kazekage’s body, and it looks like he’s been dead for at least a month. The gennin team from Suna are his kids. They’re getting recalled. There’s some questions about succession, and… well…”

“It might result in a civil war,” Shikamaru filled in.

The Suna group walked down the street under the roof the rookies had commandeered, with the three Sand siblings in the centre.

“The blonde?” Yoshi asked quietly.

“She is attractive, don’t you think?” Ino whispered back.

Sakura looked down. To her the girl – Temari – had seemed strong and skilled and quick to anger. That in itself was probably enough to make her attractive to some. Sakura personally didn’t feel it.

“She’s just your type,” snarked Shikamaru. “That’s about as close as you can get to dating yourself.”

“Nah,” Ino snarked back. “The closest would be dating Yoshi.”

Sakura concurred. Ino and Yoshi were very different people, but in some ways they were exactly the same.

Chouji choked on nothing. “Uh-”

Ino punched him in the back. “You do remember we’re not actually related? At least not closely enough for it to matter.”

“I’m sure Inoichi-san never specified that,” mused Shikamaru. “Most people simply assume that Yoshi is the child of Inoichi-san’s mistress.”

“The what?!” Ino screeched.

Shikamaru shrugged. “Not like it’s unusual for Clan Heads. Most don’t legitimise those kids, though, so he’s still coming off as the good guy.”

Ino theatrically moaned and put her free arm (the one that wasn’t holding a mortified Hinata) around Sakura’s waist so she could flop down onto Sakura’s shoulder almost as though she was using a
Yamanaka jutsu, scattering a very pretty waterfall of blond hair. “It’s ridiculous that I have to specify this, but Yoshi is not my blood brother!”

Yoshi shrugged when they stared at him, grinning and admitting to nothing.

“Wait!” Kiba yelped. “What do you mean he’s not your blood brother?”

“Yoshi-kun’s n-not?” Ami turned wide eyes to her two teammates, who looked just as clueless. “I thought you were twins!”

“Hanabi-chan and I attended your joint birthday celebrations,” Hinata said quietly.

Ino raised her head to glare (pointedly away from Hinata’s direction which, coming from Ino, was kind of a sweet gesture). “We’re just not.”

Kiba shrank. So did the entire Team Three.

Shikamaru didn’t. “I know that,” he said, seemingly distracted by the clouds.

Ino rounded on him, almost wrenching Sakura’s shoulder in the process (and Sakura kicked her ankle in retaliation). “Then why did you say that shit about thinking Yoshi’s illegitimate?”

Shikamaru shrugged. “I said most people think so. I don’t. Mum described in nightmarish detail what Yuuki-san would have done to Inoichi-san if it were true, and he’s still got all his limbs, so.”

Chouji nodded. “Yoshino-ba-san went on an epic tear. I think that one jounin from the T&I was taking notes.” He shuddered.

When all eyes turned to Shikamaru with a mute question, he shrugged again. “Mum can get… enthusiastic.”

There was a while of silence. The Suna procession passed out of sight, and the spectators down in the street and on the other roofs around started dispersing. A few of the Rookie Twelve looked like they would have liked to go, too, only nobody wanted to be the first to leave.

“Switch,” Ino breathed into Sakura’s ear.

Conditioned by ears of responding to that word spoken in that tone, Sakura went under, and then back up. The momentary vertigo receded, and because this was not a good time to go and lick Sasuke-kun’s delectable face from the tip of his chin to the delicate swirl of his pretty ear, she turned to the girls instead. “While we’re all here… I’ve got to know. Tell the truth. Who was in Sasuke’s fanclub but actually liked Yoshi better?” Just to scope out the true, die-hard competition for the Uchiha family jewels.

Yoshi actually tried to protest. “Sakura-”

“Shut the fuck up,” Sakura ordered him softly.

Yoshi did shut up, but it was probably because of the forest of hands that rose rather than because Sakura told him to.

Oh, very good. That actually pretty much cleared the way, and considering that Ino had moved on as well, Sakura just had to keep an eye on any new interlopers.

Sasuke stared, too, although rather than shocked he looked pissed off. “I had to endure years of harassment because they all had a crush on you?!”
He was lucky Ino was maintaining her hold around Sakura’s waist; otherwise Sakura would have been on him already, showing him what ‘harassment’ actually meant. And he would have liked it.

Yoshi frowned. “Sasuke, Ino and I intervened whenever anybody crossed the lines of harassment. And if you try to tell anybody you didn’t want to be admired, Sakura will laugh at you.”

“I will,” Sakura promised him, already chuckling, because Sasuke’s expression invited her to. And also because she could vividly imagine his face if she ripped off his shirt and tongue-fucked his belly-button. That would be hilarious.

For a moment Sasuke just pretended that he had never been a part of the conversation, and then he body-flickered away.

Sakura enjoyed herself. Polite-Sakura, however, was going to ask Yoshi to deface Ino’s favourite book for this.

The third stage of the Chuunin Exams did not significantly differ from the matches at the end of the second stage. If anything, it was more boring, because almost all the contestants were from Konoha, and no maiming was expected.

The turnout of spectators was disappointing, too.

Sakura sat between Yoshi and Ino, who were shouting loud and unnecessary encouragements.

There was a little bit of screaming, but mostly there were crunching and squelchy wet noises. A few people in the audience vomited.

Sakura turned over a page and went on reading. She was not especially interested in embalming techniques, but she had purposely selected a book that she did not need to focus on. This way she had the capacity to follow what was happening down in the arena.

“…did Hinata-chan just rip someone into pieces with her bare hands?” asked Yoshi.

“Hn,” said Sasuke, although he sounded worryingly enthusiastic.

“Hm?” Sakura raised her head and checked on the surprise maiming that had just transpired. “No, of course not. She used chakra scalpels for the really tough bits.”

Ino’s jaw fell. “You taught her chakra scalpels?”

“She asked,” Sakura said, maybe a little defensively. “She’s got the control for it. And she uses them impressively.” She shrugged, looked down at her book and quietly added: “You were busy with genjutsu training for the finals, and Tomomi-ba-san supervised.”

“Thanks, Sakura-chan,” Ino said and kissed her cheek.

Sakura grinned. “It was my absolute pleasure, Ino-chan.”

In the row above and below them, the other spectators suddenly found pressing reasons to move further away, and then yet further as Hinata returned from her match, liberally blood-stained.

Sakura pulled out a box of alcohol wipes and a dry soap.

Shino automatically rose to help Hinata clean up. “An impressive performance, Ladybug.”
“Thank you, Shino-kun,” she replied, smiling wildly. “I believe Kiba-kun feels sufficiently vindicated-”

“I love you,” Kiba professed unashamedly. “But next time let’s do this instead of neutralisation when we identify a traitor, and not wait until they… defeat me in the preliminaries, okay?” He offered his hand for a fist-bump.

Sakura wondered how many people had actually found that it had been a spy rather than Orochimaru himself that had killed the previous Hokage. If Kiba knew… either he was better connected than he seemed, or he had somehow earned Hinata’s trust.

“Um…” Hinata, blushing and looking at the floor, returned the fist-bump, leaving Kiba’s knuckles blood-stained. “O-okay.”

The strangers moved yet further away.

x

Neji stared for close to a full minute. Then he averted his face. “I did not ask for Hinata-sama’s mercy.”

“And yet the…” Lee paused, searching for the right words. “…somewhat less than youthful… flower of Konoha clearly deemed you worthy of it, my rival!”

“I would have preferred-”

“If you say death is better than loss in a competition,” Tenten said with threat clear in her tone, “I’ll tell Gai-sensei, and you know he would-”

“There is no point to therapy,” Neji interrupted her before they went over the entire well-rehearsed performance. “What must happen shall happen, and all who labour under the illusion of free will are fools. There is not hope, and yet they persist in peddling this lie and calling it healing.”

“I’m going to go congratulate your cousin,” Tenten cut him off. “You stay here and stew. Lee?”

“Please, lead the way, my most youthful teammate! I, too, wish to convey my appreciation of the amazing power in the hands of Konoha’s blossoms! Yosh!”

x

“Is it just me,” asked Kiba, “or does that green guy keep talking about Bleach Boy?”

“It’s just you,” Ino assured him.

“Lee-san is a very optimistic ninja,” Hinata-chan said, tracking the boy’s progress through the audience. She seemed… fascinated. “

Ino was a little surprised, but mostly curious about how this would go. With the exception of Yoshi, who was universally liked and never paid much attention to it, Hinata had not ever before shown interest in any boy.

On the other hand, Lee had proven himself to be exceptional when his reaction to Ino kicking his arse in the finals (with genjutsu, because she was forewarned and not suicidal) was to earnestly congratulate and unselfconsciously compliment her. That reaction from an older boy – who by rights should have been all injured ego after a defeat from a younger girl – was impressive.
A graceful loser as well as a graceful winner (he had been nice to Chouji after kicking his arse in the preliminaries – even offered to spar with him). Ino would keep an eye on him, of course, but she was not opposed to letting Hinata spend more time with him.

“The ‘yosh!’ thing?” Yoshi was saying to Kiba, and then laughed. He leaned closer and lowered his voice to a confidential tone. “When I learned to talk – like, properly talk, in whole sentences – I used to have a verbal tick. Mum helped me unlearn it, but sometimes when I feel really relaxed, it tries to come back. I haven’t actually said it in years, but sometimes I kinda have to bite down on it.”

“That’s crazy,” Sakura deadpanned.

“Hn,” concurred Sasuke-kun.

“Yes,” Yoshi agreed easily. “But saying ‘yosh!’ is better than a whole lot of other things. Take Ino, for instance. She would seem so much more polite if she substituted ‘yosh!’ for every four letter word-”

“And you’d go paranoid thinking I’m talking about you all the time,” Ino retorted, and also jabbed him in the side for being sanctimonious.

“Yosh!” exclaimed Lee (Yoshi did actually reflexively react to the address, which was so funny) and bowed to Hinata-chan. “Congratulations on your excellent fight!”

Hinata went red.

x

Kakashi pouted – thankfully, behind the book and the mask nobody could tell.

He had been looking forward to those kenjutsu lessons. And now Sakura was wielding chakra blades with enough proficiency to teach them to somebody else, and he had actually gone through all that trouble to draft lesson plans for her…

Eh, he would know better next time. No drafting lessons plans ever again. He would leave that sort of thing to Iruka, and then distract him whenever a good opportunity came up. Yep, that sounded a lot more enjoyable.

x

“What did you do to them!” Iruka demanded.

“Actually,” Kakashi said despondently, “they were like that when you gave them to me.”

“No, they weren’t!”

“Uhm, Iruka-sensei?” Yoshi-kun raised his hand like they were still in class. “We really were.”

“B-but…” Iruka knew enough about Yamanaka Yoshi that he was not overly surprised by anything the boy pulled out, but this was the first time he had seen Sasuke-kun crack a smile since his family died, and it was in reaction to seeing someone murdered in a fashion that made Iruka gag… and… and… “Sakura-chan?” he asked, bemused and angry.

What had happened to that lovely, polite girl?

Sakura shrugged and turned to Yoshi. “See? This is the reason why I never let hot-Sakura out in the Academy.”
“Except sometimes in taijutsu practice,” Sasuke pointed out.

Sakura shrugged again. “Ami and Keiko were asking for it. Besides, where do you think I’ve learned exactly how to kick you in the kidneys so you piss blood for a week?”

Iruka blinked, feeling despair creep upon him. He wished he could ask Kakashi for reassurance, but Kakashi was – sometimes hilariously – bad at reassuring people. So he turned to Yoshi instead, and was gifted with a sunshiny smile.

“Don’t worry, Iruka-sensei. We won’t break your boyfriend.”

Iruka’s jaw sank. He felt himself sinking as well – deeper into the well of despair. Was this an enemy’s genjutsu?

Sakura leaned closer to her blond teammate and whispered into his ear.

Yoshi effected a faux embarrassed expression. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know we weren’t supposed to notice – just forget I said anything.” He smiled widely. It almost worked.

Iruka turned to Kakashi.

Kakashi briefly glanced over the top of his book, conveying that he was blameless in this, and also that the kids might plausibly be the death of him one of these days.

“Does that count as pranking sensei?” Yoshi whispered.

“You’re reaching,” Sasuke grumbled dismissively.

“It counts as making sensei uncomfortable,” concluded Sakura, “and, honestly, that’s enough of an achievement that I’m going to celebrate. Recreational drugs and exploding seals, anyone?”

Yoshi whooped. “Let’s!”

They were gone before Iruka moved to stop them.

Kakashi had not even tried and, when Iruka leveled him an accusing look, he simply closed his book, stashed it away, and shrugged. “It’s not like they’ll blow up any infrastructure. By now they’re good at keeping it to the training grounds.”

Yes. This was what Iruka meant by Kakashi being bad at reassurance.
Chapter Notes

The order is not random. It’s actually ‘alphabetical’ if you go by hiragana. It only feels contrived because that’s what I was given to work with.

Enjoy.

Yoshino-ba-san stepped up to the centre of the dais, surveyed the line of gennin hopefuls standing in front of her, and then scoffed.

“This fills me with confidence,” Sakura whispered dryly. “Wonder which nukenin will attack this fucking shindig.”

Naruto could feel the disaster brew, so he decided to risk it. Just as Yoshino-ba-san began to speak—

“Shinobi of the Village Hidden in Leaves, we are about—

—he leaned close to Sakura and whispered in her ear: “Switch.”

“-to witness the promotion of the following gennin shinobi to the rank of chuunin. They have proven that they deserve this rank in the standard examinations to the satisfaction of their proctors.”

Sakura went pale and began to shiver.

Ino glared at Naruto.

What was their problem? Sakura had nothing to be nervous about. She knew she wasn’t getting promoted. What was the big issue?

At least this way she wouldn’t attack anyone or start shouting obscenities…

“When I call your name,” announced Yoshino-ba-san, “step forward and accept your promotion and your chuunin vest. Aburame Shino!”

One of the chuunin who had helped with seeding the intel during the written exam came over to hand the vest to Shino, shake his hand – which Shino accepted with ill grace – and mutter a congratulation under Yoshino-ba-san calling out: “Uchiha Sasuke!”

The same process repeated with a different chuunin, also one they had met during the Exams (and maybe also as part of the wall guard detail…?).

“Nara Shikamaru!”

“Troublesome,” Shikamaru said predictably, avoiding looking at his – very obviously proud – Mum up on the dais.

“Yamanaka Ino!”

Ino squealed.
Naruto flinched and covered his ear. He hadn’t known she made that noise…? When he turned to glare at her, she had her hand clapped over her mouth and was turning red, so he laughed at her instead.

Sakura finally relaxed a little and then promptly started sniffing, as if Ino was getting married rather than promoted.

Around them all the other gennin – especially Hinata-chan – wilted. On one hand, Naruto firmly believed that Hinata-chan had the hard skills to be a chuunin. On the other hand, she did not have the ability to lead, and if the war that the older ninja whispered about really was coming, a higher rank could get her killed-

“Yamanaka Yoshi!”

Naruto beamed.

And, as he stepped forwards, there came the cinch: “Rock Lee!”

“We should celebrate!” Inoichi exclaimed. He had of course known that both his children were skilled, but seeing them pass the Chuunin Exams at first try after mere six months of gennin-hood filled him to bursting with glee, and he needed a chance to get it all out before he resorted to publicly embarrassing them with random bursts of pride.

“Yesss!” Yoshi agreed excitedly, punching the air.

“Noon…” moaned Ino. “I don’t want a big party.” She looked at the empty side of the sofa for just a moment, but both Inoichi and Yoshi saw Yuuki not sitting there.

Well, yes, it would have been odd to celebrate without Yuuki. The children had refused birthday parties, too, if she wasn’t home for them.

“You just don’t want to have to tidy up afterwards,” Yoshi accused his sister playfully, nudging her shoulder.

“There,” Ino agreed. “And I don’t want to see the lazy lumps before I have to. The best part of the Chuunin Exams was no team training.”

Yoshi put his arm around her shoulder, and they bumped their blond heads together.

Inoichi wondered if that was something he should look into – but his children were independent people, and if they wanted help they could ask for it. He wasn’t going to butt in without invitation.

“Let’s cook dinner together and gorge on sugar until we can’t move,” suggested Inoichi, which earned him a double glomp and excited agreements. He put his arms around his two hellions and distributed kisses to the tops of their heads.

Suddenly he was faced with two upturned smirks.

Ino blinked mock-innocently. “Poker night, Daddy?”

Chouji hated it when Ino got angry, and lately Ino was angry every time Chouji saw her. He knew that Team Ten was the main problem, but even though he tried to help, nothing he did had any
effect.

He had asked Asuma-sensei, too, but Asuma-sensei explained to him that before he would give any one of them any truly strong techniques, he needed to be sure that they would not use those techniques against one another. So now they waited in a sort of limbo filled with shogi and the occasional C-rank to break up the boredom, until Asuma-sensei made up his mind.

At least so it seemed to him. Obviously, neither Ino nor Shikamaru nor Chouji would ever seriously hurt any of the other two, and they would probably die to defend the others, but how were you supposed to prove something like that?

Especially to someone that had been out of the village for many years and hadn’t seen them grow up together?

“I don’t really want to disband the team,” Asuma-sensei said at the first team meeting after Shikamaru and Ino were promoted. “The Council would tear me a new one, and Chouji-kun can pass the next Chuunin Exams anyway. You’ll catch up to -”

“He won’t if you don’t actually start training us!” Ino snapped. “I get that you think we’ll all get training at home, and you’ll get a free ride, but-”

“Whoa!” Asuma-sensei raised his hands, looking shocked. “Hey, Ino-chan, when have I ever neglected your training?”

Chouji cringed. This was going to end in a bloodbath. Even Shikamaru was eyeing a nearby tree like he was tempted to climb up into relative safety, regardless of the effort involved.

“Name a single thing you taught us!” demanded Ino.

“A bunch of chakra exercises for your elemental affinities,” sensei replied off the top of his head. “Water walking, but I guess you already knew that? A couple of ciphers, the basics of Konoha handsigns… and how to recognise when you’re supposed to forget the Shinobi Code and use common sense instead. Look, it’s not my fault if you don’t want to work with your teammates-”

“My teammates and I used to work together all the fucking time before you came along! We suffered through years and years of enforced cooperation, only for you to split us apart and turn us against each other-”

“So you won’t mind if I send you three out alone for survival training?” Asuma-sensei inquired, pulling out a cigarette.

Chouji thought that was a stupid question. They had gone through the Forest of Death together, hadn’t they? And, before, on that C-rank that brought them North into the mountains when they met those Grass ninja, they had worked together without problems. Maybe they didn’t enjoy spending so much time together, but it was easy to rely on one another.

Chouji sort of liked it.

“It beats watching you lose at shogi,” Ino replied, arms crossed in front of her chest, mouth turned downward.

Shikamaru shook his head. “That won’t work. Ino hates me.”

Chouji opened his mouth to protest, but then he realised that he had no clue what Shika was talking about. He only knew it wasn’t survival training.
“I don’t hate you!” Ino turned to him. “I dislike you, and I wouldn’t trust you with anybody’s wellbeing, but neither of that has any bearing on our professional cooperation.” Then she whirled back to yell some more at Asuma-sensei. “And did you seriously enter us into the Chuunin Exams to make us prove that we can work together?!”

“In my defense,” said Asuma-sensei in that flat tone that falsely implied he didn’t care, “I’ve seen you refuse to train with Chouji repeatedly.”

“Yes, because I need taijutsu practice, and Chouji still can’t even pretend to hit a girl worth a damn.”

Chouji’s breath caught. He knew… he had known that was a problem. He did. But he just couldn’t help it. Girls were small and fragile and pretty, and he just couldn’t do it. Even when he knew they were tough, vicious pieces of work like Ino.

Ino sniffed. “Go save your arse, sensei. Don’t split the team – why do something that might benefit us if it would result in trouble for you?” She turned on her heel and strode off down the path to the village.

Chouji didn’t even think about it – he ran after her. He caught up to her at the edge of the training field, and jogged alongside her, since Ino had long legs and could walk really fast when she was mad.

“What did Shika do?” he asked.

Ino shook her head, and slowed down a little for him. “He’s a horse’s arse, let’s leave it at that.”

x

“So, chuunin, huh?” Kakashi said, turning over a page of his second least favourite *Icha Icha* book. Every time he managed to convince himself that ninja pirate queens were worth slogging through seafood metaphors used in sex scenes, he regretted it.

Sasuke did not raise his head from his own reading.

Kakashi should have known better than to expect a response to anything less than a direct question spoken in a tone that conveyed the implicit order to answer. He so hated being direct, but with a team consisting of the uncommunicative Sasuke, the hyper-communicative Yoshi and the plain contrary Sakura, Kakashi often found himself without another recourse.

There was a truism Iruka liked to comfort himself with: ‘by teaching the teacher learns as much than the students do’.

Kakashi would not say he had learnt ‘as much’, but he had definitely overcome some unique obstacles.

“You are eligible to claim your Clan Headship. Is that something you intend to do?”

“Not at this time,” Sasuke answered, thus confirming that Kakashi’s tone had been sufficiently authoritative.

“Any future plans?” Kakashi inquired.

This time the tone was clearly not sufficiently authoritative, since Sasuke’s response amounted to: “Hn.”
Kakashi slumped further in the chair he had appropriated. He listened to the rustling of paper and thought fondly of Minato-sensei, who must have been at least a minor deity to somehow manage a thirteen-year-old Kakashi. Thirteen-year-old Kakashi had been arguably worse than thirteen-year-old Sasuke.

He had certainly been less interested in teamwork and completely unwilling to acknowledge that he was the last living member of a clan.

Since self-reflection was about the worst manner of wasting one’s time, Kakashi decided to do something constructive instead.

“I can teach you to use your elemental affinity to blow fist-sized holes into people’s ribcages,” he mentioned casually.

Sasuke sighed and – after a moment that was presumably spent praying for patience – looked over. He did not seem quite as impressed as he rightly should have been. “Why not? There might be some way of adapting that jutsu into something actually useful…”

Had Kakashi mentioned that he hated his team?

x

Chouji came back from his talk with Ino completely disheartened. He relayed a little of what they talked about, but he didn’t seem to want to converse. He just took some pleasure in repeating the words Ino had used to describe Shikamaru.

Shikamaru slumped, groaned, squinted at Chouji.

“What?” said Chouji. “You want me to tell you that you don’t sometimes act like a horse’s hindquarters?”

“Can’t argue with the truth,” admitted Shikamaru.

It was his fault, after all. His stupid brain – sure, he thought fast and put stuff together, but whenever people called him a genius they forgot about the… downsides? side-effects?

Like over-focusing. Tunnel vision.

He had been so fixated on the idea of breaking up this team, and maybe forming a new one that would include Yoshi, that he had forgotten how Chouji and Ino would feel about his actions. Manipulating Asuma had been fun – Shikamaru absolutely understood why the Yamanaka enjoyed lying to people – but maybe he should have stopped when he saw Ino’s frustration mounting over the months.

“The things Asuma-sensei thinks about us…” Chouji started and didn’t finish.

Shikamaru sighed. That was the curse of having smart teammates. They could see through you (even if it was a little too late).

“He made it easy.” He cringed when he heard himself. He sounded just like a six-year-old Ino.

“That’s not an excuse,” protested Chouji, and then looked at Shikamaru the way he had looked at him after Shikamaru broke his friendship with Yoshi.

And… that hurt. Maybe even worse than it had hurt last time, because this time Shikamaru knew it
was honestly deserved.

Naruto made sure to knock before he let himself into Ino’s room. It would have been locked if she hadn’t wanted him there, so the door opening was a good sign.

The drapes were pulled over the window and the door to the terrace; there was barely any light inside. Ino was lying in her bed next to a mostly empty box of chocolates clearly pilfered from their Mum’s special stash.

“Heard stuff kinda blew up,” Naruto said, sitting down onto Ino’s soft carpet.

Ino opened her eyes. She looked like she would throw up all the chocolate if she moved too fast rather than in danger of blowing up again emotionally. “Stupid Asuma.”

“Stupid Shikamaru,” Naruto retorted, and sighed. “I heard about it from Chouji. And you know that if Chouji grasses up Shikamaru, it means he fucked up badly.”

“Chouji wouldn’t,” Ino protested.

“I’d have thought so too, but he did. So, what we need to do is plan revenge on Shikamaru for being a ‘horse’s arse’, plan revenge on Asuma for being stupid and lazy, and—”

“Remember that mold that spread in Great Uncle Hide’s cellar?” Ino cut him off.

Naruto took a moment to recalibrate, and then nodded. It was hard to forget. Yamanaka were the best at dealing with plants (after Mokuton users, of whom there were a whole lot of one in the world, and that one was a fairly well-kept ANBU secret), but they didn’t manage to kill that mold, and in the end it spread so far they had to dismantle the whole house, burn the base, sterilise the ground, and rebuild from the bottom up.

“Tomomi-ba-chan kept a bit for research. She said it might be good for medicine. Or poison.” Then she grinned. “Or architectural warfare, I guess.”

Naruto laughed. “Where did you put it?”

“Shikamaru’s bedroom, of course. Under his bed. Izanagi, you wouldn’t believe it – it’s like he never cleans. But I had some left over, so I did Fate Boy’s bedroom, too.”

Naruto nearly fell over during the resulting giggle-fit. His sister had once again shown off her huge balls of steel. How did she not get caught? Weren’t Hyuuga supposed to be, like, impossible to sneak up on?

Did… did she recruit Hinata to help? That was… glorious.

“Why did he have to be a Hyuuga?” Ino whined, rolling over to her side and unwrapping the gold foil from another chocolate. “He’s hot, but no amount of hotness is worth getting embroiled in that clan’s bullshit…”

“There, there, Ichimatsu-chan.” Naruto patted her knee. “I’m sure some crazy boy will turn up, ready to be swept off his feet by you.”

“Or girl,” Ino pointed out.

Naruto rather doubted that, since Ino was tragically straight, for all that she professionally portrayed
herself as... *open to all options.* For instance, Naruto was fairly sure those stories she had told him about the Sand kunoichi were true. She had, fortunately, shared very few details. But those few sounded authentic enough to him.

“If you say so,” he said, shrugging one shoulder.

“Hey!” Ino protested.

Naruto laughed and dodged her half-hearted kick. “So, the reason why you haven’t collared and leashed Hinata-chan is that she’s a Hyuuga, not that you’re ultimately not attracted to her that way?” It was a good thing, too; otherwise he would have had to kick his sister’s arse for unethical conduct.

Even though Hinata was not officially her patient anymore, the power imbalance remained, and starting a romance at this point would be more than a little icky.

As far as he could tell Ino and Hinata were playing up their closeness for shits and giggles. Neither of them seemed sure what she wanted out of a real relationship, but both were enjoying the reactions of the people around them too much to stop.

It also had the side-effect of acclimatising Hinata to being subject to scrutiny, specifically for her romantic entanglements. One day when she found someone for real, this experience would be invaluable to her.

“The goal is to make Hinata-chan better,” Ino lamented.

And ‘make her better’ in Ino’s opinion meant ‘make her boring’. But the Hyuuga thing definitely wasn’t helping.

x

“Alright, girly. Yamanaka-squared like you, so you come recommended. Show me whatcha got,” said Anko-san, pulling one of her discarded dango sticks out of the tree into which she had stuck it, and wielding it instead of a proper weapon.

Sakura nodded timidly. She eyed the pointy tip of the dango stick, a little intimidated but determined to make a good showing.

“Oh, wait,” said Anko-san. “I wanna see the other one. *Switch.*”

Sakura blinked. Then shook her head. “That trick works for only two people in the world—”

She deliberately let the spark of fury catch; there was the familiar falling and rising sensation, and Sakura’s smile widened into a grin.

“*-bitch.*”

x

Sasuke and Sakura were both as stable and busy as Naruto could make them, and he couldn’t start working on Kakashi, because there were already three other people there and any conditioning he might try could mess up their (mostly amateur but still fairly solid) efforts.

The whole Exams debacle was finally over with as few casualties as there could be, and Dad had managed to procure the copy of *Uzumaki Mito-sama’s notes*-

No, Naruto had not silently screamed into his pillow as soon as his bedroom door was shut. Not at
all.

-so this was the ideal time to start working on a project that he had kept on a back-burner for ages.

When Kurama opened an eye, there was a little yellow-and-blue worm-like thing sitting cross-legged on the other side of the bars and watching him.

“Oh, good morning,” the thing said cheerfully.

Kurama rose on his forelegs, pulled in a deep, lung-expanding breath, and roared hard enough to flatten the little worm against the floor of the mind-dungeon.

The worm remained curled up for a moment and then sat up straight again. An odious smile affixed itself on its face. “So, not a good morning, then. I get you. The accommodations suck.”

Kurama roared again.

The worm-like thing was back, frustratingly unafraid. Smiling again. No teeth (clever prey). Kurama would kill and eat it, if he weren’t imprisoned inside it.

“I asked Dad,” it said, “and he told me that we could make this place suck less. You up for trying?”

“I’m going to fucking devour you, vermin,” Kurama replied, wishing keenly that it were in his power to go through with the threat.

And wishing yet more keenly that he hadn’t spoken, and thus revealed his capacity for speech. There went his chance to pretend that he was a primitive manifestation of chakra and spare himself the onus of dealing with another Sage-damned human.

The worm shrugged; it must have known it was safe for now. “So, not yet. Or – do you just like this sort of ambience?”

“Did you get dropped on your head a lot?” Kurama snapped before he thought better of it. Why couldn’t he just keep his maw shut? Was the thing really too irritating for him to maintain self-control? “The fuck do you mean about your Father? I know for a fact the worm got itself killed-”

“I was adopted,” it said cheerfully.

“It’s too early in the millennium for this.” Kurama curled up, piled his tails on top of his head, and went to sleep.

“Hi, demon-san-”

“Fuck off and die.”

“Okay, see you tomorrow!”

“I think I figured it out!”
Kurama startled from his sleep, thought a few things he would not have been able to put into words due to the limits of human language, and lifted two strategically placed tails so he could glare at his jailer. “How to release the seal?”

“How to make this place livable,” said the thing, for once not smiling. It radiated sincerity. It should not have been possible to radiate sincerity, but it somehow managed to create the effect. “Let’s try, yeah? How do you feel about flowers? I love flowers! I love all kinds of plants-”

“You would,” Kurama grumbled under his breath, and because there was nothing he could actually do about it, he resigned himself to having his prison redesigned against his will.

\[x\]

Ino found Yoshi on the engawa, sprawled in the narrow rectangle of sunlight. His eyes were closed and his breathing even, like he had just dropped off while trying to read (there was what looked like a hand-written book in his hands) so she wasn’t surprised at all.

“How have you caught the lazy, idiot brother?” she demanded. He would fit right in with the Nara.

“I am playing checkers, Sister-terror,” he informed her calmly. The rhythm of his breathing barely changed.

This was weird.

“Your eyes are closed,” Ino pointed out. “You’re playing checkers like Shikamaru watches clouds.”

“Shikamaru does actually watch clouds. It relaxes him.” Of course Yoshi would know that. He was doomed. “Doomed. So, yeah, you’re right.”

Alright, now she was intrigued. He wasn’t just messing with her, that was clear, but Ino still couldn’t believe that her hyperactive, attention-span-challenged brother would manage to play an entire game of anything but tic-tac-toe without having it in his face, obscuring the view of everything else.

“You’re playing checkers against yourself inside your head? You don’t have that kind of memory.”

“Well, no, and I’d have preferred poker, but you can’t really honestly randomise mental card shuffling, so that was a no go. Still, I’ve got this weird headspace and a really grumpy opponent, so I’m going to stop talking to you now and focus on the game, before he gets all crabby old man again. I’m getting trounced anyway, and he’s not a graceful winner.” He smiled. “Ja ne, Ino.”

Ino left him to it. He would tell her about whatever weird psychological experiment he was conducting later.

\[x\]

It was only a matter of time before Team Three ran into Team Seven at the Missions Desk.

Sasuke-kun, predictably, ignored them, and Sakura-chan merely waved in their direction before she engaged the chūnin behind the desk in a whispered argument. Their sensei did not raise his eyes from his book.

Yoshi-kun, however, seemed utterly delighted. “Hello, kunoichi-san! How are you all doing?”

“We’re fine, Yoshi-kun,” Fuyumi-chan assured him, smiling.

That was a miracle in itself. Keiko couldn’t remember the last time Fuyumi-chan had smiled unless
she was looking at something sharp and pointy. Or at good food in large quantities.

“Right…” Keiko agreed. “It’s funny. I think the bugs are sort of starting to be alright. I mean, some days I even forget they’re there… until one crawls over my hand.”

“You too?” Ami-chan exclaimed. “The other day I caught myself thinking they were sort of neat.”

“Uh-uh…” Well, Keiko wouldn’t have gone so far as to proclaim them ‘neat’, but that might have been because she was less susceptible to autosuggestion than Ami-chan. Or, alternately, because she wasn’t so good at lying to get Yoshi-kun to pay attention to her – ‘neat’ was the exact word that Yoshi-kun had used when he had tried to cheer them up.

“That’s so cool!” enthused Yoshi-kun. “Did you see Shino in the Exams? He totally kicked arse.”

They had, in fact, gone to watch the tournament. Shino-kun had been impressive, and his promotion was well-deserved.

“Makes sense,” Ami-chan agreed. “Shibi-sensei is… weird…”

“But he’s badass,” Fuyumi-chan filled in.

“Shino, huh?” Sakura-chan tugged on Yoshi-kun’s ponytail and waved a scroll at him to remind him that they were all here to be assigned a mission. “Spreading the Aburame appreciation… without even knowing it, apparently.”

Yoshi-kun gave Team Three an apologetic look, and let his teammate drag him away.

“Is that a friend of my son?” asked Shibi-sensei.

Keiko thought it was odd and maybe a little sad, too, that he had to ask. But if Shino-kun was anything like Shibi-sensei, they probably spent most of their time together in silence, and then it made sense that they wouldn’t know a lot about one another.

Ami-chan smiled widely and nodded. “Yamanaka Yoshi-kun.”

Shibi-sensei reflected upon the information for a moment, and then concluded: “I see. Yamanaka Ino’s brother. He is similar to his sister.”

“Not too similar,” said Keiko. “Ino-chan may be the ruling queen, but Yoshi-kun is everybody’s friend.”

x

Shikamaru had cottoned onto the fact that he had not thought this through, but the consequences were still unexpected.

It didn’t happen to him often, but this time it was absolutely clear that he had had no idea of what he would unleash when he messed with Asuma-sensei’s perception of the team. He had done so well, too – he was sure that from an objective point of view Ino would have been impressed.

“Can’t,” Chouji told him stiffly. “Sorry. I’m going out with other people and…” He left it hanging, which was nicer than admitting ‘they don’t want to spend time with you’.

Shikamaru in turn did not say that it was odd to see Chouji suddenly so popular. Before, Chouji barely ever went anywhere unless it was with Shikamaru.
Apparently Shikamaru was in for a lesson, Yamanaka-style. Psychological torture and social warfare.

“Well,” he said once the silence stretched too long, and Chouji was beginning to look guilty, “say hi to Yoshi for me?”

Chouji nodded. “I will.”

Shikamaru remained alone to work on the plan to put all these things right again. He suspected it would take him at least as long as it took to wreck them.
Planting a Seed

Chapter Notes

I am nursing this overwhelming platonic crush on SaaUM!Inoichi. That man… aww.

More to the point, I keep making minor edits to the unposted parts of the story. Somehow they resulted in twenty percent rise in word count (remember those 100K I mentioned in Chapter One? My file shows 120K now). I caved and split off a chapter, which is why there are suddenly thirty of them altogether instead of the twenty-nine announced previously. I did not change anything in the first twenty chapters, so there’s no need to go back through the posted stuff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Please, help?” Shikamaru begged.

On his knees.

Because he was exhausted enough that sitting on his heels was a lot more comfortable than standing. Getting Yoshi on his own had been unexpectedly difficult; in the end he only managed it because Chouji took pity and agreed to play messenger. Shikamaru perhaps should have thought of something more practical than ‘half an hour after sunset in the Nara forest’ but he did not want Ino to catch a wind of this tête-à-tête.

“I am prepared to offer extensive bribes.”

Yoshi petted Fuki, who had split from the herd and come over to lick him as if he was made of rock salt. “No threats?”

Shikamaru shuddered theatrically. “I’ve met Inoichi-san.”

Yoshi stared at him for a moment and then scowled. “The first step to self-improvement is admitting where you suck. Dad does not scare you. And trying to pretend like you’re not scared of Mum just makes you look like an idiot. Only stupid people are not scared of Mum. She psyched out even the God of Shinobi.”

Shikamaru swallowed. He was genuinely… well, wary was a weak word, but frightened didn’t quite fit either… he was reasonably intimidated by Inoichi-san. Had been since that time in the izakaya, really.

Yuuki-san, on the other hand…

…was not often around, and Shikamaru had gotten far too used to discounting her in his plans. Stupid! That was the kind of mistake that would be fatal one of these days, and he was smarter than that.

Yoshi stroked along Fuki’s dappled neck, and then crossed his arms over his chest. On anyone else that gesture would have seemed defensive, but Yoshi simply threw it out as another challenge. “So, bribes?”
“I realise that there is very little I possess right now that would interest you, but I can help you get damn near anything you want.”

Yoshi blinked, slowly. His lashes looked white in the light of the first emerging stars; his irises shone eerie blue like will o’ the wisps luring a clueless passer-by to his doom.

Shikamaru reminded himself to breathe.

Then Yoshi grinned and shook his head. “So, you realised that there was no way to infiltrate Ino’s circle of friends, and decided that the optimal strategy was to convert one of the people in your enemy’s camp to your side? No wonder they call you a strategic genius.”

Shikamaru slumped and groaned. “Now you’re just making fun of me.”

“Yes, yes I am.” Yoshi laughed freely, all shaking shoulders and fluttering hair and glittering eyes.

Shikamaru bit down on the ‘troublesome’ that wanted to come out of his mouth, and accepted the mocking as his due. He waited until Yoshi got the hilarity out of his system; then he tried again. “So, what would you recommend?”

Yoshi’s smile twisted into a sour grimace. “Yeah, no. I’m not doing your work for you. And before you start, yes, I helped Shino and Kiba and Ami, because they meant well but genuinely had no clue what they should do. You? You know. You’re just too lazy and too afraid for your ego to go out there and admit that you were wrong and work to make up for it—”

Shikamaru startled at the sudden silence. His hands were clenched into fists on top of his thighs, bracing him against the onslaught of painful assessment, but all that he had heard up until now was what he had expected, and all of it was completely fair.

So what had stopped Yoshi?

Yoshi had covered his mouth with his hand and seemed like he was biting down on something hard. He blinked a lot, too – almost like he was trying to blink away tears? But why? That made no sense. He had been laughing just now.

If anything, he should be angry. Shikamaru expected anger. This was supposed to be the place where Shikamaru would start making up for all the crap he had let pile up out of… well, yeah, laziness, and facing the anger and upset he had caused was a part of that.

“I’m sorry,” said Yoshi, and that made no sense. “I got carried away, and I shouldn’t have- you asked me for advice, and I promise that I can do better than this. Let me try again?”

What?

Yoshi was still making zero sense.

“But you’re right,” Shikamaru protested. “I am lazy, and I do hate to admit that I’m wrong, because being right damn near all the time is all I’ve got going for me—”

“I took it personally,” Yoshi cut in. “I shouldn’t have. I know better than that. Let me try again? Please?”

Oh, now Shikamaru understood.

He had, without realising it, managed to get under Yoshi’s skin. This was Yoshi backpedalling until
they were on *impersonal* ground again.

“No,” Shikamaru snapped. He did regret that his way of getting under Yoshi’s guard was painful – why was it painful, though? he would have to think about that more later, now there wasn’t time for it – but he did not regret that it happened. Knowing that he had that power… it was uplifting. And frightening.

He had not deserved it – but that didn’t mean that he did not treasure it.

“No?” Yoshi repeated. He petted Fuki again and gently pushed her away. “Fine. I’ll see myself out.” He strode away toward the edge of the Nara lands.

Shikamaru let him go, because trying to stop him would probably result in Yoshi giving him a taste of Yuuki-san’s medicine, and Shikamaru needed all his faculties. He had a lot to do, and he had to avoid most of his usual methods, so this was going to be the biggest pain in the arse imaginable. Worth it, though.

Besides, Yoshi had already given him the advice Shikamaru had begged for: the gist of it was that Shikamaru could not fake it this time; he had to work to regain his team’s trust. It would certainly be a novel experience.

x

“Just when I thought you might not be a complete waste of oxygen you go and pull shit like this.”

The worm sniffled and wiped off its eyes. “’s just the pollen. We’re in the middle of a flowering meadow if you missed it-”

“I wish I could have.”

“-and I’ve got all sorts of ‘llergies.”

“One, having a bijuu sealed in you negates all allergic reactions. Two, we’re in your own Sage-forgotten mindscape. Three, that crap could maybe fly if you had not been brought up in a flower shop. Four…” Kurama belatedly realised what he was doing. He roared with indescribable aggravation, rolled over and buried himself under his tails.

He was *not* anybody’s Sage-damned confidant!

“Four?” piped up the worm.

Kurama sucker-punched him with a tail.

That was, he decided, pretty good advice anyway.

x

“Hello, Team Kakashi,” Iruka said, smiling genially across the Missions Desk.

Their responses varied, from a sardonic lift of an eyebrow to a grin indicating that Iruka’s challenge was recognised and accepted.

Kakashi continued staring out of the window as an exciting change from *Icha Icha*, which had less to do with his sudden interest in the welfare of Konoha’s population and more with the fact that Iruka had managed to transfer the infamous orange cover onto a book of Stone poetry from the Shodai’s era (poetry which, predictably, consisted mostly of nostalgia for the Clan Wars and long-winded,
unhealthy appreciation for rocks). Iruka had a bet with himself about how long it would take Kakashi to incinerate that crime against literature – and he was already losing.

He hoped it was because Kakashi intended to instate poetry reading as part of team training.

“Good morning, Iruka-sensei,” Sakura said politely. She seemed like the same sweet girl she had been at the Academy.

Iruka was still perplexed by her; Kakashi assured him that this was the real Sakura, but could it not be the effect of some obscure Yamanaka jutsu? Not that he suspected Yoshi of doing anything nefarious to her, but perhaps Sakura had consented to some alteration in a misguided effort to win Sasuke?

The terrible thing was that, if Sakura truly had changed to capture Sasuke’s attention, it was working.

“Individual assignments for all of you today,” Iruka informed them, handing out scrolls and relishing the grumbles.

He did not like feeling as though he had failed his mission. He was supposed to keep an eye on Team Seven via keeping an eye on Kakashi, and while the latter part went swimmingly, he had somehow fallen for the smokescreen of Kakashi’s melodrama.

Kakashi often complained about his students, but in such a way that he clearly was mocking himself. He had come across as a perpetually exasperated yet devoted teacher of a group of talented kids with a tendency to act out. Which he pretended – badly – to not enjoy.

Iruka honestly had not expected that it was a case of the trio doing what they wanted and Kakashi trying to keep them alive and in line through the authority of his position and his ability to kick their insubordinate butts.

Kakashi probably thought of his A-rank recon of a potential warfront (partnered with Asuma) as a relaxing vacation.

“An exercise with Team Ten?” Sakura inquired, reading her scroll.

Yoshi burst into laughter and could not seem to stop. He went gradually redder and redder, until Sakura punched him in the stomach. He still made little hiccupping giggle-like sounds afterwards, but at least he calmed down a bit.

“Hn?” inquired Sasuke.

Iruka concurred. He had not expected a positive response to any of the assignments. He was particularly looking forward to the results of Sasuke substituting for Suzume-sensei at the Academy. For a week.

“Ino’s finally managed to argue Asuma-sensei into teaching Chouji to get over his chivalry,” Yoshi explained. “And if Ino didn’t manage to break Chouji off that vice herself, then Sakura’s the only one with a chance before they have to pull out the big guns.”

“By ‘big guns’ you mean Anko-sensei?” Sakura inquired.

Iruka blanched. Anko-sensei?! When had that happened? “Just… do your best, Sakura-chan. And if you feel like additional support is required-”

“I’ll tell Ino to commission Team Three for a D-rank,” Sakura filled in. “Don’t worry, sensei. I’ll
punch Chouji until he punches back. It’s worked on harder cases.” She pointed her thumb at Sasuke.

Sasuke shrugged.

“That’s not the funny part, though,” Sakura added.

Yoshi giggled again. “Nah. The funny part is that Shikamaru is going to be there.”

There was half a minute of silence as Team Kakashi contemplated this assertion. Iruka took the chance to mark down the time and names of the ninja who had accepted their assignments to the respective missions.

He made a cursory check of the entire room. There were few people this late in the morning. A pair of tokujou seemed to be on the verge of releasing KI out of impatience with Kakashi’s team blocking the proceedings, but Iruka could not care less. He still had something to discuss with Yoshi, and Batsu-san’s desk was free… at second glance it turned out that there was a clone sitting at Batsu-san’s desk and Batsu-san himself was gone.

That explained why the tokujou still waited. The same went for the team in line behind them, and for the lone chuunin that looked like she had gotten no sleep in the past week.

Iruka pulled a familiar form out of a drawer and started composing a scathing report on his ‘colleague’. Yoshino-san would have a field day with this one-

“The walks of the drowned,” Sasuke muttered under his breath, gleeful with fresh realisation.

Iruka channeled chakra to his ears.

“Yep. So many sewer-related missions in a row that Yoshino-ba-san banned him from coming home like that, and you can sorta imagine the reactions he got when he tried the public baths.”

“Dunked in the river?” Sakura assumed.

“Twice a day. Tragically, it’s the river on the opposite side of town from the Nara compound.”

“How does Ino control his mission assignments?” Sakura breathed, impressed.

Yes, Iruka would have liked to know that, too.

Yoshi shrugged. “By dating the guy who handles them.”

Proving that all ninja were shameless eavesdroppers and gossips, everyone in the room and Batsu-san’s clone turned to look at Iruka.

Iruka mentally noted their names, and reshuffled some of the missions. Let’s see a jounin deal with a shower of solo D-ranks. Ha! The chuunin would get her due in the form of some very inconvenient prank later, when she didn’t look so sleep-deprived that she might reflexively kill the closest civilian if startled.

There was no excuse for accusing Iruka of even looking at one of his former students that way. For goodness’ sake, was Yamanaka-chan fourteen yet?!

And when Iruka found which one of his colleagues did look at her in an unsavoury way, there would be a reckoning.

It better not have been Batsu-san, or Iruka would have him put on the Earth-border patrol for the rest
of his life. Which would not be long.

“Yoshi-kun,” Iruka said, still smiling, even though Yoshi could clearly tell the expression for the implied threat that it was, “would you be so kind and deliver this to Inoichi-san? I meant to take it over earlier, but time’s gotten away from me…”

Yoshi huffed and raised his eyebrows to convey ‘that’s what you’re going with, sensei?’ with unexpected eloquence. Nevertheless, he did accept the storage scroll and inspect the seal. “Not the standard office fuuinjutsu supplier.” He leered. “Ooh, it’s personal communication. If it blows up with paint and glitter, I’m throwing you under the wagon, sensei.”

Iruka rolled his eyes. He had not expected proficiency with sealwork from Yoshi-kun, but he had expected the unexpected, so he was not shocked. Impressed, perhaps, but he knew better than to show it. Last time he had been so startled that Team Seven got the best of him – but he was not going to take that lying down.

“Merely some educational literature,” Iruka said.

It had the advantage of being absolutely truthful.

x

Ino looked up from painting her nails just in time to see Chouji faceplant into the grass so hard that the earth shook.

She looked back down. She was not entirely sure this was her colour. One would say that pearly purple would be perfect for her, and it did look amazing in the bottle, but on her nails it seemed a little lackluster.

“Get up, straw dummy,” ordered Sakura.

Chouji groaned, pulled himself up on all four, and turned over so he could drop onto his butt. “Can’t we please take a break?”

“You took a six months’ break!” Ino reminded him.

“Don’t your fists hurt, Sakura-chan?” Chouji inquired plaintively.

Sakura cracked her knuckles.

Chouji groaned again.

A shadow fell over Ino’s nails, and she hissed at the idiot who was just asking to join Chouji in this exercise. Except Ino would tie his hands behind his back first, so that Sakura could have an easier job of it.

“I have an idea,” Shikamaru said. He took a deep breath, audibly bracing himself, and then suggested: “Why don’t I henge into Sakura and switch with her for a while?”

Ino’s head shot up. Intrigued against her will, she signed at Sakura to go along with this new plan. Chouji would still go easy on Shikamaru because Chouji hated seeing his friends hurt, but at least he would let himself get annoyed and hit back. Additionally, this might have a cathartic effect.

She liked annoying Shikamaru by stealing Chouji from him, but a Shikamaru-less Chouji was a morose Chouji, and a morose Chouji was just depressing. Seeing him upset annoyed her. She
preferred him contented and, sadly, Shikamaru was an indelible part of that.

Chouji punching Shikamaru a few times would be good for them both. And enjoyable for Ino.

Sakura sat down in the grass next to her. “I’m not sure I like it,” she commented toward Ino’s drying nails.

Ino shrugged. “We can use the rest of the bottle to decorate lazyarse’s kunai. Yoshi taught me a simple static-shock seal.” She gestured toward the pile of weapons and gear Shikamaru had discarded before he took Sakura’s place in the centre of the training field.

In said centre Chouji finally unbent enough to clock the Sakura-lookalike in the face.

Ino whistled, grudgingly impressed. “I knew the moron was obnoxious, but I had no idea he could be that obnoxious. I thought for sure Chouji would hold out longer than two minutes.”

Sakura grinned. “Well, I did soften him up a lot. I think in another two minutes, he would have punched even the real me.”

Ino grinned back. “That’s on the agenda for tomorrow.”

x

“…what was that,” snapped Kurama. He preferred to sleep while his host went about his day, but when the idiot worm nearly cooked itself, Kurama could not afford to ignore it.

“The mission said to clean up this parcel,” replied his jailer. It had not yet regained its typical ease of manner, and from what little Kurama recalled of the distant past, this sort of behaviour indicated an emotional problem.

It tied in reasonably with the ‘allergies’ from their earlier meeting.

“I agree with the ‘burn it all to cinders’ idea of clean up, but I thought your species frowned on that?” Kurama distinctly recalled some of the humans getting butt-hurt about him crushing their precious anthill.

The blue-and-yellow worm shrugged. “I’m friends with Sasuke. What did they expect?”

x

Their Dad stared at the glossy pieces of paper in his hands. “Yoshi, why is Iruka-sensei sending me pamphlets about the dangers of drug abuse?”

Ino started giggling. “M-maybe… maybe he worries… y-you m-might have a problem, Daddy? You do raid Yoshino-ba-san’s stash a lot.”

Dad gave her a look that implied that his patience was dwindling, but there was no emotion behind it except puzzlement.

Ino had no clue, either, but that did not prevent her from enjoying Dad’s bemusement.

Yoshi placed his chin in the cup formed by his hands and grinned. “Ooh, he’s being sneaky. Sakura freaked him out by sorta implying that we were going to get high and blow up stuff-”

“Sakura on drugs,” Ino said in awe. “Now there’s a walking natural disaster-”
"-which we weren’t going to really do, ‘cause I agree with Ino on this one, and Sasuke’s still real worried that Sakura will snap and annihilate a clan. He gets twitchy after she pours herself a second cup of sake."

"Am I supposed to know that you drink?" Dad inquired dryly.

Yoshi shrugged. "I’m not ashamed of it?" He raised his eyebrows. "I mean, Dad, where do you think I learnt it? We don’t overdo it and… yeah, it’s not like it does anything for me. But you should see Sasuke. He goes all soft and tactile, and at one point I could tell Sakura was trying to decide if she would eat him literally or metaphorically."

"Don’t tell me these things!" exclaimed Dad.

"Tell me all the details," insisted Ino. "All of them!"

Dad glared at the pamphlet again and rubbed his temple. "Well, this is a really nice gesture, except that all the horses had fled and I can’t be bothered with closing the barn door now. Aside from everything else, you shook off Anko’s poisons in training so many times that she asked me for your hand in marriage."

Yoshi looked intrigued.

Ino felt intrigued. Not by the Yoshi-and-Anko-san thing, but more by Anko-san herself. Hmm… That sounded… educational.

Dad tugged on Yoshi’s pony-tail. "Don’t even try that on me, son. I’m not going to scandalise nine tenths of the village for your amusement. And remember that you promised."

"Yep!" Yoshi practically squeaked.

Ino pounced on him, determined to get to the bottom of what was shaping up to be delightful blackmail material, but Dad had them separated in a sidestep and a twist. Ino happily cuddled into his chest instead.

"You’re both adults now," Dad said, holding them just this side of painfully tight. "I know it and you know it. If you want to poison yourself, that’s your prerogative." He paused and then concluded, with utmost conviction: "You’ll be smart about it."

"Yes, Dad-"

"Don’t ‘yes, Dad’ me, daughter-"

"I w-will, D-dad," Ino assured him, trying in vain to suppress the giggles.

"Son?" Dad demanded.

Yoshi stood straight under Dad’s arm, coming almost up to his shoulder (still an inch shorter than Ino, ha!), and said: "I promise I crossed drunken debauchery and getting someone pregnant off my list of potential teenage rebellion plans."

Dad shook his head, despairing. "I wish I had been as prudent as you when I was a teenager." He walked away after that proclamation, while Ino and Yoshi were both too stunned to react.

"B-but…” Ino looked at Yoshi. "We know we do not have an older sibling."

Yoshi looked back at her.
They were in perfect agreement on this one. They needed to know what their Dad did.

“Hi, Rasen-kun!” called out Yamanaka Yoshi, skipping across the street toward the market stall where Neji was acting the bodyguard while Hanabi-sama prevaricated over confectionery. “Your name’s Rasen, right?”

Yamanaka Ino appeared a moment later from the same direction. She hit her brother’s shoulder. “Stupid brother! It’s Uzu! Hi, Uzu-kun!”

Hanabi-sama turned away from the display of candied fruits and surveyed the two blonds with an expression of intense loathing. “Cousin? Who are these… people?”

Neji refrained from pointing out that she had been in the audience when the siblings competed in the Chuunin Exams tournament. Far be it from his younger cousin to pay attention to those beneath her – unless their distress entertained her.

“They are chuunin of Konoha, Hanabi-sama,” he said sardonically. For an instance he felt pleased at the opportunity to be the bearer of unpleasant news. It was nowhere near enough to make up for the humiliation of his own defeat in the preliminaries, but he had had to learn to take his small – petty – satisfactions where he could.

“The standards really have fallen.” Hanabi-sama sniffed and grimaced as though she had caught a whiff of the septic tank. Her expression was nearly the carbon copy of Elder Sumire’s. “Not just that cripple on your team, but these clowns? At this rate it’s a miracle someone did not push a promotion up Hinata’s fat ar-grk.”

Neji moved to defend Hanabi-sama from the madwoman’s attack, but found himself blocked by what looked like a bastardised Juuken strike from the boy. Neji countered and was about to activate the Byakugan, when the boy waved a seal tag in an implied threat.

Neji shivered in remembrance of the soul-pervading cold.

“Don’t worry,” said the boy, losing all former levity, “Ino won’t hurt her. But Ino also won’t let anyone abuse Hinata-chan. And I.” A pair of narrowed blue eyes pinned Neji with a look so weighted it almost felt like a physical force. “-won’t either.”

The Yamanaka girl finished threatening Hanabi-sama with a – presumably poisoned – senbon and stepped up to her brother’s shoulder. “See, Spiral Guy, this is us being nice. You don’t want us to stop being nice. Besides, Yoshi’s convinced that you’re better than this and that you only bullied Hinata due to social pressure rather than getting off on it, which I’m not entirely sold on-”

“Hinata-chan wouldn’t keep giving him yet another chance every time he fucks up if she didn’t see something in him,” said the brother, although his skeptical expression belied his words.

“Hnf nm hnt uhr!” exclaimed Hanabi-sama.

“See you around, Free-Will-kun,” Yamanaka Ino said, twirling her fingers in a mocking wave.

She and her brother departed while Neji activated his Byakugan, saw through the genjutsu of his younger cousin sitting calmly on the edge of the merchant’s cart to the truth of her struggling against bindings – plain rope rather than ninja wire, clearly indicating the intention to restrain but not harm on the part of Yamanaka – and moved to free her.
He did expect the yelling *and* the punishing strikes. A few closed tenketsu and a handful of contusions were a paltry punishment for failing in his duty to protect her. He managed not to reflexively retaliate by virtue of long practice. He hoped she was satisfied now, and would not subject him to a harsher punishment at Hiashi-sama’s hands.

It was never worth it to deny Hanabi-sama her little amusements – not if you had a cursed seal on your forehead.

Neji wondered what it was like to have family whom you could trust and respect. And if the resentment he felt for the Yamanaka siblings would ever abate.

“Will you buy anything, ninja-sama?” asked the merchant. “Because if not, might you move along before you scare away my customers-”

“Mind who you’re addressing!” snapped Hanabi-sama.

Hinata-sama would not have done that, Neji thought. And for the first time he accepted that there might have been a difference between *temperance* and *weakness*.

The merchant fell silent and bowed in apology, but Neji could clearly read her fear and hatred. He wondered if this was what had happened to the Uchiha.

And if the Caged Bird Seal was not all that stood between him and a district full of corpses.

x

“Have you spoken with Yoshi lately?”

“What do you want with him?” Chouji asked. It came out harsher than he meant it to – but maybe that was a good thing. He didn’t know how to stand up to Shikamaru, and he hated trying, but obviously it needed to be done sometimes.

Chouji wanted to be a good friend, even when Shika made it difficult. Their friendship was more than worth a little additional effort.

“Never mind then,” Shika replied, a bit less apathetic and more resigned than was his normal. Sometimes the best thing you could do for someone was give them space, Chouji thought. And sometimes giving someone space was the worst thing you could do to them.

Chouji had no idea how to tell which occasion was which.

As time passed and Shika’s friendship with Yoshi failed to heal, he suspected that Shika had the same problem.

x

Naruto was grateful for the reality checks from the Kyuubi *and* impressed that Iruka-sensei managed to wage a semi-effective campaign against Team Kakashi, but he wasn’t exactly in the best mood even before he came home and found Ino balancing on the edge between furious and moping.

“Whom do I make wish I had killed them instead?” he asked. His knuckles itched to hit something. Not that wholesale destruction of property was not satisfying, but it lacked the adrenalin kick of a proper fight.

“Pipe down,” Ino grumbled, and plopped a piece of chocolate into her mouth. “Renji broke up with
me… but he did it because Iruka-sensei clued him in that I’m not actually fifteen, and he went into some kind of existential crisis. It was mildly entertaining.”

“Um, Ino, not that I want to stick my nose into your love-life, but I feel like there’s a line and this went a little too far beyond-“

“Calm down.” She rolled her eyes and threw the next bonbon just so that Naruto could easily catch it into his mouth. “It’s not like I conned him into sex-”

“You just conned him into wanting it with you.” Naruto swallowed down the rising bile together with the chocolate. Nope, not thinking of his sister in a compromising position. Trauma galore.

“Which is a basic conversion technique-“

“That we’re not supposed to use on our allies,” he reminded her.

“Fine.” She put her feet up onto the coffee table and blindly rooted inside the box for another bonbon. “Let’s be boring.”

x

“Boring?!” Yoshi repeated, aghast. “What?! Did you give up on torturing Shikamaru?”

“It’s not fun when he rolls over and takes it,” Ino grumbled. “Well, not for me. Maybe for someone else it would be…?”

“Maybe?” Yoshi said blandly, faking disinterest. “I’ve gotta go water my plants now. Come get me if you want to spar after dinner!” He disappeared upstairs.

Ino deflated. She could not believe that he had not taken that opportunity after she had set it up for him so perfectly.

It was just as she had suspected: the wound of his broken friendship with Shikamaru had only been cauterised, not healed. And it still hurt – too much for Yoshi to joke about it, and he joked about damn near everything (murder and extensive trauma were clearly fair game).

Yoshi could fool almost everyone including himself; it was up to his family to knock some sense into him. But Mum wasn’t coming home for months yet, and Dad had far too much faith in them – so it was up to Ino to start un-fucking this terrible knot of pretenses and misapprehensions and denied feelings.

Ino buried her face in a sofa cushion and started working on accepting the inevitable to the background of colourful mental invective.

Why, brother? Why him of all people?!

x

Shikamaru limped home from the Hospital sporting two black eyes.

At least he didn’t stink of waste today, but Yoshino still watched her son with concern. She wished he were a little less intelligent; it might have made him a little smarter.

“I know,” he said, passing her in the living room. “The bones are fine – it’s just bruising. I told the medic to leave it like that. There’s marginal chance Ino will kill me less tomorrow if I already look half-dead.”
Yoshino followed the logic, and once again confirmed for herself that her son was the most intelligent moron she knew, his Father notwithstanding. “She won’t. Ino-chan feels no pity.”

Her son’s shoulders slumped further. That posture looked extremely uncomfortable, and also like a swift road to hyperlordosis.

“Whatever,” Shikamaru groused, trudging up the stairs at a snail’s pace. “When I die, give all my effects to Chouji. He deserves some kind of recompense.”

And bury you next to an empty lot reserved for your star-crossed love? Yoshino thought pithily, but she did not say it out loud.

x

“Since it’s the last day of my assignment to your team,” Sakura announced cheerfully, “it’s my treat!”

“You might want to rethink that,” Ino warned her, poking Chouji’s stomach. “Are your parents rich enough?”

Sakura shrugged. “It’s fine. Kakashi-sensei’s coming back tomorrow and then we’ll get another B-rank. ‘sides, Yoshi’s agreed to meet us at Yakiniku-Q.”

Shikamaru inconspicuously sauntered up to trudge along in their wake.

“What special form of torture did Iruka-sensei inflict upon him today?” Ino inquired, definitely hoping for some juicy blackmail.

“Something with the Inuzuka dogs,” Sakura replied.

“That doesn’t sound too bad,” Ino decided, looking disappointed.

It was her own fault; she had, after all, managed to redirect all the worst D-ranks to Shikamaru.

“Well, we’re not too far out,” Sakura estimated. “We would have heard any major explosions. I guess that means that Kiba wasn’t home.”

Ino nodded, putting her arm around Sakura’s waist. “That boy can’t stop pulling Yoshi’s pigtails.

Shikamaru shuffled forwards at the tail of the procession, hands in his pockets and eyes on the clouds on the horizon.

Yoshi in pigtails, huh? Yoshi in pigtails was an unbearably adorable picture, and Shikamaru was extremely lucky that it had never happened, or he might have just given up on the last vestiges of his sanity and done something devastatingly impetuous.

As in, more devastatingly impetuous than sabotaging his own team.

x

“He went out with a bunch of the other rookies lately, so I thought it was getting better,” Chouza said sadly to the glass of beer. “But it was just an aberration. Shikamaru and Chouji are still so insular.” He drained the glass and signaled the barkeep for another. “Inoichi, your kids used to be just like that. How did you get them to make friends?”

Inoichi straightened. He felt the foam cap on his nose, but watching Chouza try and not snicker at
him was worth not wiping it off. “Oh, I just… gave them a project.” Not that the Project had inspired Ino and Yoshi to widen their circle of confidence (they barely trusted him and Yuuki as it were). It did, however, get them to care for other people, which was almost as good.

“A… project?” Chouza repeated.

Shikaku didn’t glance up from his drink, but he looked focused – he was either listening or in the middle of some complicated mental exercise.

“Yes,” Inoichi confirmed. “One that forced them to try and understand their peers. Then it was just a matter of waiting until they became attached.” To an Uchiha and a Hyuuga respectively, of course, because if anyone had asked Inoichi what sort of associates he wouldn’t want for his children, those would have been the first two names he mentioned. In hindsight, how could he have ever respected anything else from his beloved hellspawn? “It’s very easy with Yoshi. He genuinely wants to be everybody’s friend. Ino… has more stringent requirements.”

Shikaku contemplated for a long, quiet while; then he straightened on the barstool and let his head fall back. His neck popped. “That probably wouldn’t help me.”

“Nor me,” agreed Chouza. His new beer was half gone already.

Inoichi squeezed what little his hand could encompass of Chouza’s shoulder, and then turned to Shikaku. “Are you actually worried that your son has no friends, or do you think he should start networking? Because those require different approach.”

Shikaku waved his hand without a care. “He’s a Nara. People will come to him. Networking happens by itself for us.”

Chouza snorted.

“Uh-uh.” Inoichi struggled not to roll his eyes. Networking for the Nara didn’t happen ‘by itself’. It happened ‘by befriending a Yamanaka’. “And remind me, how many friends do you have?”

“Does Yoshino count?” Shikaku asked half-seriously.

As if Inoichi knew. His personal experience proved that friendship was the basis of a harmonious marriage, and he had his assumptions about Shikaku and Yoshino – but not ones he would voice. “I don’t know. You tell me.”

Chouza took a deep pull from his glass to get himself exempted from this dialogue. He looked like he regretted bringing up the topic.

“Five,” Shikaku decided, and accepted Chouza’s thump on the back with an upward quirk of his lips, despite the fact that Chouza hit even harder when tipsy. That blow would have cracked a few ribs if the recipient wasn’t used to the way of the Akimichi.

Inoichi had honestly expected a lower number. Five people you liked and trusted was an enormous treasure. “That’s pretty good. How many did you have at Shikamaru’s age?”

“…three?” Shikaku suggested tentatively. “That’s still two more than my son.”

“You’re not counting Yoshi?” Chouza inquired, frowning.

Shikaku gave him a sardonic look. “No.”
Inoichi considered this, and nodded. “Fair enough.”

“Evening, Tsunade-sama,” said Hiruzen-sensei’s son.

Tsunade scrutinised first him and then Hatake. They had one concerning injury between the two of them, and that had been dressed with acceptable proficiency. Nevertheless. “Sarutobi-kun, verbal report now; Hatake, you can compose a written one in the Hospital. No, Hatake, that is not a suggestion.”

Hatake saluted and jumped out of the window like the drama queen he was.

Asuma smirked around his unlit cigarette. “The good news is, the Fire Daimyo sends his congratulations on your appointment, so we can scrap the assassination plans.”

“And the bad news?” asked Tsunade.

“The new Kazekage wasn’t so lucky, so there’s a bit of a civil war going on just past the Land of Rivers.”

Tsunade was not particularly worried. The bloodthirsty jinchuuriki from the latest Chuunin Exams was a member of the Godaime Kazekage’s gennin team, and there was no one left in the Land of Wind that had a prayer of standing against that teacher-student duo.

“Also,” Asuma said, “please tell Kakashi not to go on a murdering spree all over the Stone village; he won’t tell me what happened to rekindle his hatred, but that guy needs his head checked, Tsunade-sama.”

Tsunade stared at the young man for a prolonged while and then said, with satisfying dryness: “He does? I had no idea.”

Chapter End Notes

A clarification, for posterity: Ino is not having sex. Um… yet. She’s getting into the swing of things a little too young, but she’s not out to get hurt, so she’s pacing herself. She did get verry close to Temari, admittedly – she wasn’t lying about that. Renji, though, only got within sight of first base (Ino’s too damn good at coy looks and coy touches, apparently). Also, I imagined Renji in his late teens, so he would be less resistant to that sort of manipulation.
Chouji was ecstatic.

Chouji was ecstatic, because he was a chuunin, too!

Things had been getting better – almost back to normal – even before, and watching Shikamaru grovel without looking like he was groveling was unexpectedly fun (Chouji didn’t like feeling like that, but Shikamaru had totally brought it on himself). Asuma-sensei trained them a lot more, and by the time of the next Chuunin Exams Chouji had formed a team with Sakura-chan (who was very scary) and Hinata-chan (who was scary too, but a lot nicer) and they all passed!

“Congratulations!” called out Yoshi, meeting them at the gates (while Sasuke stood off to the side and pretended to be uninvolved). He hugged Chouji and Sakura-chan; then he mimed a hug toward Hinata-chan and waited until she came to him before squeezing her gently.

Chouji wished he had known that was the secret. Hinata-chan made him feel too big and strong and clumsy with the way she kept flinching and then trying to dismiss it like it was nothing.

Then Ino appeared, hugging Chouji hard enough to crack a rib.

And – right, there was Shikamaru. They exchanged a half-hug and a manly back-pat, and it was like everything was okay again. Chouji was so happy he could have cried.

“I… I’m having a celebration,” Hinata-chan said to Yoshi, and then turned around to include everybody present. “It’s tradition. I will try to make it less formal, though – and you’re all invited.”

Ino immediately perked up. “Sasuke-kun, will you go with me-”

“No.”

Ino pouted, although she was obviously more amused by Sasuke’s momentary horror than disappointed. She turned around and narrowed her eyes at Shikamaru. “Shikamaru, you’re my date for Hinata’s party.”

“No,” said Shikamaru, grimacing – it was likely that this rejection would mess up things when they only just made up – but no less resolute than Sasuke had been a moment ago.

“What do you mean ‘no’?” demanded Ino. Her amusement was gone. “I’m not asking. I’m telling you-”

“You can’t order me around, Ino,” snapped Shikamaru. “And I am spoken for; I will not betray my significant other by parading around with you.”

A hush fell on the entire group. Yoshi was leading Hinata-chan away swiftly, but it was already too late; Chouji could see her trembling lips. She probably regretted issuing the invitations, or perhaps even having a party to celebrate her amazing success. Chouji wished there was a way to take it all back, to somehow undo the whole scene and start from scratch.

And he wished his chest didn’t ache so badly. He knew he had been leaving Shikamaru behind too much when things were messed up and Ino tried to… kind of steal Chouji away from Shika. But he had also always made sure to spend some time with his best friend.
And Shika still never told him.

“You’re what?! When?! Who?! This makes no sense!” Ino went pale and shaky. She was frowning; her eyes began to glisten as if she was about to cry. She looked – really, really upset. As upset as Chouji felt. “How come I don’t know about this?” She turned to Chouji with a mute question.

Chouji gulped. “Uh, just a guess, Ino, but this reaction might be why.” He didn’t have a clue what to tell her.

Ino covered her mouth with her fist, lips pressed to her knuckles, and for a moment just quietly quivered in mounting anger. Then she rounded on Shikamaru. “I… I was actually considering being on your side, like an idiot, even after all the bullshit, because even when I thought you couldn’t be trusted, I at least believed that you were invested. Forget it, trashbag!” She threw him one last venomous glower and stomped away.

…and that almost sounded like Ino was in love with Shikamaru. Which, no. That was absurd. Chouji was willing to believe a lot of things, but not that.

“What are you really in a relationship, Shika?” he asked, trying to figure out how not to feel betrayed that he hadn’t even known Shikamaru was interested in someone.

Shikamaru shrugged and scratched at his hairline. “Eh, it’s more of a hypothetical relationship right now.”

So, Shikamaru was interested in somebody and there were probably the awkward kind of feelings, if he didn’t want to harm his chances by appearing as Ino’s date even just in the name of groveling. Chouji knew better than anyone how focused and serious (and, to be honest, obsessive) Shikamaru could get.

Mostly he had a lot of fleeting topics of shallow interest, since his brain always needed something to chew on, but once in a while something stuck, and then nobody and nothing could get it out of his mind. It was wedged there for good. That was what had happened when Shika tried to break Team Ten. So if an actual person stuck in Shikamaru’s mind (or maybe in his heart, that could probably happen, too), there was no way of getting them out of there short of removing the organ itself.

“Good luck,” Chouji said, and smiled (and hoped the smile didn’t look as faint as it felt). “Tell me if you need a wingman, yeah?”

Shikamaru smirked and nodded, even though Chouji was quite sure that once Shika made his move, there would be no need for any wingmaning. It would be a lightning-fast precision strike at the end of a long stealth campaign. A pre-planned snatch-and-grab.

And it was fine by him – as long as his best friend was happy.

“Yeah, so, congratulations on your promotion,” said Shikamaru, mustering a grin for Chouji’s sake.

Chouji nodded. “Asuma-sensei promised to pay for dinner. You in?”

Godaime-sama had poured herself a cup of sake the moment the messenger hawk landed on the windowsill. It turned out to be propitious, because the message contained a single pictogram – a sad, frowny face.

She downed the alcohol and moved back to her desk to pour another shot.
Shikaku had long since stopped passive-aggressively trying to convince her to lower her intake. There was no point to it; as of yet he had not noticed that it significantly affected her faculties, but he did discover a marked rise in property damage, personal assault and signs of depression whenever she neared sobriety.

“So, Orochimaru fucked off like the yellow-bellied lizard he is, but on the bright side we’ve more or less won on the Sound front.”

Shikaku nodded. There was a difference between cowardice and self-preservation, but the woman was more than entitled to her rancour.

He was not personally acquainted with Orochimaru – to his continued pleasure – and could not even hazard a guess on how the Snake Sage might react. He merely suspected that the reaction would not, in fact, be cowardly at all. “Will he organise guerilla attacks? Or come directly to Konoha?”

Tsunade-sama waved her hand. “Nah. He’ll hole up somewhere again and in fifteen years’ time come back as the Kage of the Village hidden in Bird Shit or something equally as fitting.”

Shikaku bit on the inside of his cheek. “Shall I send a response to Jiraiya-sama?”

“Nah,” repeated their esteemed Hokage. “The moron can use his words if he wants to talk. ‘sides, it’s not like we haven’t done this before. We just need a blond upstart to single-handedly slaughter a Stone platoon- Whatever happened to Mark Two? I was sure we had a replacement in the works.”

“Ah,” Shikaku said, hoping that his pretence of nonchalance together with Hokage-sama’s inebriation would suffice to deceive, “if you mean Yondaime-sama’s legacy, the official status is missing, but since it has been ten years, I am afraid everyone has lost hope.”

Tsunade-sama’s face fell. Her eyes glistened for a moment before she turned to the window and pinched the bridge of her nose. “No wonder Orochimaru fucked off. And Jiraiya fucked off. I should have fucking stayed fucked off. This fucking village…”

Shikaku mutely handed her another bottle and felt like a heel.

Shikamaru watched the clouds pass overhead and wondered what it would be like to just let the wind carry him off to some other place where he would turn into a lot of falling water.

It was a scary, scary day when Ino was the most observant person in Konoha. And she was only going to get better at it, Shikamaru was sure. If she could get a personality transplant, he would be happy to have her on his team. Kunoichi of her caliber were rare.

No wonder his Mother harboured that terrifying adoration for her.

“Why are women so aggressive?” he mused.

The clouds did not offer an opinion.

They were placid. Placid like many other women, civilian mostly, but also some of the kunoichi – those that got married a retired from active duty, mostly – and Shikamaru answered his own question. They were aggressive because they had to be.

“Yeah, okay…” He sighed. Maybe he should trust Ino a little more. It was just… difficult. He was pretty sure that Ino wanted him to fail in the one particular endeavour that was most important to him,
and she would not hesitate to sabotage him.

He could see her point.

And Chouji was feeling slighted that he didn’t know whom Shikamaru meant when Ino did, but it wasn’t like Shikamaru had told Ino. She just paid way too much attention to exactly those things he would have preferred her to miss.

He groaned and rolled over. Time to go to team training and try to patch things up. Again.

×

The war leaked – as war did – from Sound to Grass, and the Land of Earth started rumbling with the vision of potential acquisitions, too. Suddenly there were fewer shinobi in the village.

Team Asuma had finished their C-rank just in time for Ino to get home, shower, dress and hurry over to the restaurant where Hinata-chan’s ‘party’ took place. She arrived with minutes to spare and so, so content to let Hinata-chan seat her and set a tall glass of juice in front of her.

Ino sat, sipped, and watched the guests trickle into the room and mingle. Shikamaru was already there, hiding in a corner with Shino. Tenten was talking to a trio of older kunoichi, one of whom was Kurenai-sensei. There were a few smaller children, all Hyuuga, supervised closely by blank-faced adults.

Ino had known from the start that ‘party’ wouldn’t be quite the right word, but this looked dismal.

“Hinata-hime!” exclaimed Lee, bursting into the room. He wasn’t wearing the green leotard, which confused Ino for a moment, but then it turned out that he was exactly the same person even in a kimono. “My most sincere congratulations on your amazing achievement!” He thrust a bouquet of wildflowers into Hinata’s hands.

It was… startling. Ino had brought a gift, of course, but something inside her softened as she watched this boy clumsily express his appreciation. He didn’t seem like he had anybody to ask about the protocol, if it even occurred to him that there was protocol; he just ploughed through on sheer determination.

And it was clear how much Hinata-chan liked that – that strength to persevere despite huge obstacles. Huh, Ino thought, and smiled around her straw.

In the end Chouji arrived, too – and that was it.

Hiashi-sama presided over the dinner, sitting to Hinata-chan’s right and making her so terribly nervous that she barely even ate anything. To Hinata-chan’s left sat her little sister Hanabi and, judging by Hinata-chan’s little flinches, either muttered little digs under her breath, or kicked.

Ino broke a pair of chopsticks; her fingers just squeezed as she imagined them wrapped around the little brat’s throat.

“Um… Ino…?”

“Yes, Chouji?”

“So… Team Seven’s not coming?”

Ino rolled her eyes at the sashimi she was rearranging on her plate (why sashimi?), glad that her
fringe hid the gesture. “You can tell Shikamaru that Team Kakashi has left on a mission while we were on ours. They’re not expected back for a couple of weeks.”

Chouji sighed, and then turned to his other side. “I told you she would see through it.”

Shikamaru could just grow a pair, or stop pining like a forest. Ino had no idea how she could have believed he was actually dating someone – she had just been blindsided by his utter pathos. It was like he already considered himself married or something.

This was getting ridiculous.

But… maybe this wasn’t the best time? With the war heating up and experienced shinobi being sent to the front lines, newer teams were tapped for support and to fill in for the senior chuunin. Ino expected that they would start on their own B-ranks soon enough, now that Chouji had been promoted, too.

On the other hand, who cared about timing? They were ninja. They had to grab their chances as they occurred. And maybe plotting would distract her from worrying about her brother and her best friend and, alright, about Sasuke-kun, too.

Fine, then. Here came the biggest challenge of her life: making Nara Shikamaru’s dream come true.

x

“Shishou…”

“Shizune!” Tsunade exclaimed, leaping over the desk to get to her apprentice faster. Her hands glowed green as she reflexively channeled healing chakra.

Shizune looked terrible, but fortunately her injuries were light, and the death-warmed-over look was owed to sheer exhaustion. Tsunade put an arm around her and pulled her over to deposit her into the Hokage’s chair.

The girl tensed like she wanted to protest, but she did not have enough energy.

Tsunade poured a cup of sake and tried to force it down Shizune’s throat, only to encounter a defensive block, which resulted in the alcohol being spilled over her trousers.

Shizune narrowed her eyes; the intention was a derisive stare, but it just made her look like she was about to fall asleep.

She pressed two scrolls into Tsunade’s cup-free hand. “The report from Jiraiya-sama and… the body of Sandaime-sama’s murderer.”

Tsunade threw the cup away – didn’t give a damn that it shattered into a dozen pieces – and pulled Shizune to her. The girl almost smothered against her stomach, but for the moment Tsunade couldn’t help herself. There was this toxic cocktail of emotions – satisfaction, retroactive fear for her apprentice, grief and sheer nostalgia for the era that had disappeared like yesterday’s smoke, replaced with this cage of an office.

The Hokage is dead; long live the Hokage.

“It was Yakushi, after all,” Shizune muttered once she managed to turn her head and inhale.

Good job, Tsunade thought, and hoped that her desperate clutching conveyed some of it.
And then she thought, secretly, just to herself, that this was the last time she would doubt the intelligence brought to her by a Yamanaka-Hyuuga duo.

Next time Academy graduation came about, she was going to take an avid interest in team assignments.

For now, though, she was going to raise a toast to her late sensei and memorise how it felt when one of the very few people she gave a damn about did come back to her safe and sound.

X

Yoshi took to wearing a bandana.

So did Sakura.

It was the only outward indication they gave to what kind of missions they were taking. Shikamaru tried not to think about it – he had enough worries of his own, what with intermittent mission lead whenever Asuma-sensei was needed elsewhere, which was increasingly often.

It was a rare day when he met his former classmates in the village.

“Oh c’mon, everyone knows the drapes are fake!” shouted Kiba, and Shikamaru automatically moved that way – toward the market. “Didya know there’s a betting pool about the colour of the carpet? People are gonna try to check!”

Yoshi, who was obviously the target of that unfortunately phrased (but likely well-meant) warning, grabbed Sakura to prevent her from eviscerating the loudmouth.

He did not manage to stop Sasuke.

Fortunately, the Uchiha contended himself with spilling a bucket of fish guts from a nearby stall over Kiba’s head.

“That means Yoshi’s flattered, but he does not feel the same way,” Sakura explained helpfully.

Kiba wiped his face, licked his hand, grimaced, and strode off amidst promises or retaliation that probably somewhat overestimated his own abilities.

“He wasn’t really hitting on me,” Yoshi pointed out. Presumably he knew Kiba well enough to interpret that clumsy attempt at sharing intel. Then he snorted. “But maybe I shouldn’t have spent so much time henge’d into Hinata-chan for him. I think I confused him.”

“Hn,” Sasuke replied unrepentantly.

Yoshi glanced in the direction Kiba had fled. “Anyone else feel like we’re unnecessarily mean to Kiba?”

“You lead by example,” Sakura told him, and then huffed. “Not that I don’t get where he’s coming from. I envy you the hair, too.”

Shikamaru paused at the mouth of the street and found himself just watching Team Seven go about, making purchases and chatting with vendors. Yoshi’s hair was loose today – long and light-gold, reflecting the sun. Perhaps to a sufficiently sensitive nose he smelled of bleach again, and that was what had provoked Kiba to such crudeness…

…but most likely the Inuzuka was just angry at himself for falling into the same trap as everybody
else. It was difficult not to be entranced. Yoshi was… radiant.

The human race, Shikamaru thought despondently, was full of morons. Gambling morons, at that. You only had to look at the hair on Yoshi’s forearms – or at Yoshi’s eyelashes – to see that he was a natural blond.

Just not Yamanaka-blond.

* 

Shino raised his eyebrows. It was one of very few of his facial expressions that had any effect on his audience.

Kiba glared up from the brook, where he was cleaning the worst of the damage from his shirt and hair. “Look, I know I should have phrased it better. But he’s always really got on my nerves, ‘cause everything about him is fake. I get that it’s a shinobi skill, but other people relax when they’re inside the village. That guy is not himself even at home. I know – I was there. I actually have no damn clue who he is.”

And thus, true to the Inuzuka temperament, he kept trying to provoke Yoshi into displaying a visceral reaction.

Shino nodded. “That is remarkably astute of you.” He had a clue, owing to his kikaichu, but once that first clue was obtained he stopped searching further. If his knowledge should compromise Yoshi-san’s safety, it was not worth it.

Kiba snorted. “You’re telling me you know who he is.”

“Paradoxically, despite literally living a lie, Yoshi-san is one of the most genuine people I know.” Shino trusted him implicitly, and so did the Ladybug. “I hide much of myself, too.”

“You’re not a manipulator.” Kiba must have decided that he was as clean as he could get without a shower and a change of attire, and squelched out of the water.

Shino was not looking forward to today’s team training. He had not been aware that fish innards grew quite so pungent. He pulled his collar higher before he inhaled, and replied: “No. But I have the luxury of being under the protection of an excellent one.”

Kiba shrugged and stared off in the direction from which they expected their third teammate to arrive. “Yeah, I get that. Respect. I wanted to be friends with him. Tried a few times-”

Since Shino had once been personally subjected to Kiba’s idea of attempting to initiate friendship, he was not surprised by the lack of success of this endeavour.

“-but I’m not gonna be friends with a persona, and he refuses to be a real person.”

Shino accepted this reasoning. He maintained that it was Kiba’s loss, but that was Shino’s personal feeling, and it had no bearing on his teammate’s decision.

* 

“Is that from Yuuki?” Yoshino asked quietly.

Inoichi sighed and nodded.

“She is well?”
Inoichi nodded again.

She twirled her glass around and then watched the little alcoholic funnel smooth out into a clear surface. “Sometimes it just gets so damn quiet around here.”

It was good to share the quiet with someone. Yoshino missed Yuuki, too. Mayu wasn’t much of a drinker, and Shikaku fell either asleep or deep into his thoughts.

Inoichi’s loneliness was different from Yoshino’s – far less existentialist, tied to the very physical absence of his wife – but he got it.

He tapped the edge of his glass against the counter. “I look at the kids and think – weren’t we like that just a couple years ago? I would not take any of it back, but it’s…”

“It’s hard not to envy them?” she suggested. Sometimes she did envy them. Sometimes she wished she were fifteen again and still believed that she would one day achieve her dreams. She didn’t regret much – she had a good life, and most days she was still crazy head over heels in love with her husband (at least at those times when she wasn’t plotting his bloody and gory murder) – but she still got so damn melancholy sometimes.

“No. It isn’t.” Inoichi shook his head, pony-tail swinging to and fro. “We had our youth, they have theirs.”

“Our youth was swallowed by a fucking war,” she pointed out.

“Then it’s our sacred fucking duty to make sure theirs isn’t.”

Too late, Yoshino thought. She didn’t say it, because if Inoichi could ever be broken it would have been by the accusation that he had failed his children. He poured far too much of himself into those kids to withstand it if anything ever happened to them. Honestly, Yoshino was not sure what it would do to her and Shikaku if they survived their son, but they would survive. Inoichi? Not a chance.

Still, she hoped that he was a little bit right – that this would not be like the Third Shinobi War.

“Can I ask for a favour?” he spoke after a long while of silence.

“Sure. You’ll already owe us until your grandchildren make jounin, so one more favour doesn’t make much difference…” She enjoyed his horrorstruck expression. Not that he could expect grandchildren out of Yoshi, but Ino still stood a chance.

“I told Yuuki to stay where she was until this conflict blows over. I don’t want her trekking across a battleground with no one to cover her back. But I’m going out there tomorrow and if-”

“Stop right there. Contrary to your staunch belief, we-” by which she meant Mayu, Yuuki and herself, “-know all about the super-secret Ino-Shika-Cho pact. Our kids are communal. If you cark it – and you better not, or Hizashi will kick your skinny arse in the afterlife – they’ll still have five parents left.”

“…thank-”

“Oh shut up and drink your booze, Blondie.”

“Don’t call me that.”
“What’s Shikaku’s is mine, and that includes dumb nicknames. Deal, Blondie.”

x

Iruka left Kakashi to his well-deserved sleep and went for a walk, which conveniently led him to the T&I building. He dropped in unexpectedly, hoping to make a verbal report if Ibiki-san wasn’t too busy.

Then he had to duck into a bathroom, because there was a familiar face just coming up from the basement, where the executive part of the Department lived. Yoshi-kun tapped at one of the office doors; when there was no response from inside he walked away, pouting in his disappointment.

“Did you offer him the apprenticeship?” Iruka asked Ibiki-san a few minutes later.

“Little bastard turned me down.” The tokujou scowled, and then shrugged it off. “He’s just playing hard to get. I’ll indulge him for a while and then put him to task.”

Iruka’s experience with Yoshi-kun and all the stories Kakashi had told him painted a different picture. It was unlikely that Yoshi-kun could ever be pressured into doing something he did not wish to do, and he had repeatedly stated his ambition to specialise in therapy.

Still, Ibiki-san knew Iruka’s opinion, so Iruka simply skipped over to the topic that brought him here in the first place. “I didn’t get much out of Kakashi. As always, he’s meticulous about keeping confidential information confidential, and I don’t think he would tell me anything at all about any A-ranks or higher. He’s too good a shinobi.” He frowned. “Have I mentioned what I think about a fresh-chuunin team being consistently assigned A-ranks?”

“Speaking of. They are all chuunin now. And, shockingly, all still alive.” Ibiki-san affected a rather unwarranted look of surprise. “They beat the odds. In any case, you can stop meeting with Hatake. I’m sorry for putting you through this for so long, but you’ve been doing damn good work-”

Iruka smiled. “I think I’ll continue dating him.” He actually didn’t have to think about it. Perhaps he had been thinking about it for a long time, but it was more likely that he had settled into the knowledge without the need for thought – maybe so far back as the first time he had visited Kakashi at the Hospital.

He looked up and found Ibiki-san staring at him incredulously.

“Is that… a joke?”

Iruka had expected the reaction. Even enjoyed it a little bit. “He’s really sort of sweet. And hilarious.” Especially at times when he tried to be reassuring.

Ibiki raised his hands to form the tiger seal. “Kai!”

“I’m not under a genjutsu-”

“Don’t be so sure,” Ibiki-san cut him off. “Hatake has a Sharingan. Let me just test-”

“Ibiki-san!” Iruka waited for a moment until he was sure that the tokujou wouldn’t continue his rant, and then smiled again. “Ibiki-san.”

The man stared incredulously for another while, and then sighed. “Really?”

Iruka’s smile widened. “Really.”
“You always seemed so… smart. Level-headed. Down-to-earth.” Very few people ever saw the Head of T&I acting petulantly, and most probably did not live to tell the tale. No one would have believed Iruka if he tried to share the experience.

“I guess that might be why,” he pointed out. If opposites truly attracted, as the cliché said, Iruka could placate himself that it was not actually his fault – it was just chemistry.

Ibiki grimaced, and then dismissed the subject with: “Oh, well. When he fucks up, I’ll make sure he’ll regret it.”

Iruka loved the optimism – he really did.

x

“This is not what I expected B-ranks to be like,” Chouji gasped. The thing that fell out of the mangle of his jutsu was barely recognisable as the shinobi it had once been.

Shikamaru said nothing. He was sitting under Asuma-taichou’s genjutsu, hands folded in the rat seal, and waiting for their enemies to be herded to him. He had already dispatched four clones and was now holding a pair of alligator summons paralysed.

Another attack, and Chouji disappeared among Doton-formed rocky outcrops.

Shikamaru listened and waited. Seconds stretched, punctuated by slow, measured inhales and exhales.

He tracked the distant sounds of Asuma’s fight and Ino’s traps being sprung.

His shadows grabbed the third summon-

A silhouette appeared in the mouth of a crevice. A long-range fighter.

Their chakra pulsed.

A flicker of killing intent was all the warning Shikamaru had before a hail of shuriken flew at his position.

He was going to die.

Already? What a pain.

He could not let go of the shadows yet – he tightened his hold, breaking the summons’ limbs so they couldn’t gang up on Chouji afterwards – he watched as the multitude of small blades came at him-

-there was no time for a jutsu and nowhere to dodge-

I wanted to tell him.

Everything went dark.
Sadness alert. I’m not kidding. This is primarily a crack/humour story, but if you’re in a mood for a pick-me-up right now, this chapter probably won’t help you. Don’t hurt yourself, yeah?

Shikamaru blinked.

It was still dark. A mud wall had risen an inch in front of him and blocked the attack in the nick of time.


An instance later she was gone, hunting down the nin that had nearly just sent Shikamaru straight to the Pure Lands.

Shikamaru had not even moved during the whole exchange, and now it was far too late for him to do anything, so he continued focusing on his task as if Ino saved his life three times every day and this was a perfectly normal course of their afternoon.

It might soon be their new normal.

Shikamaru might… not mind.

x

“You’re still here,” Kakashi muttered, stumbling three-quarters-blind into his kitchen.

Iruka looked up from his slowly cooling tea. “Is that… a surprise?”

Kakashi shrugged. He opened the cupboard, pulled out a spare eye-patch – out of a kitchen cupboard! – and tied it on. “Maa, maybe just a little.”

Iruka decided that was about all the discussion they needed to have about how Kakashi had known about Iruka’s assignment and gone along with it anyway, and now that it was over they were both going along with it because they both liked the road.

“Tea?” asked Iruka, and offered the other cup.

Kakashi took it. He held it in his hands for a long while, looking first out of the window and then at Iruka, who couldn’t pretend that he didn’t feel the gaze boring into the side of his skull, so he met it.

Kakashi’s eye was smiling.

Iruka huffed and shook his head, feeling stupidly fond. Before he left for the Academy he kissed his lover’s cheek and said: “Have a good mission, Kakashi.”

That was a nice tradition to start.
On the way from the Missions Desk to the Nara Compound, Shikamaru made a detour by Rowan Street and bought the ring he had been eyeing for a couple of months, thanking his lucky stars that no one had snatched it before he had amassed the necessary funds.

It took him hours to fall asleep that night, hyperaware of the tiny piece of metal regardless of how well he hid it. Then he got measly four hours of blessed unconsciousness before the Hokage’s messenger literally dragged him out of bed for an emergency assignment.

He managed to pull on his uniform while still mostly asleep; his Mother barged into his room to give him a storage seal of emergency rations and a weird look.

“What?” he asked, slipping the tag into a pocket.

“Look at you, all grown up and taking B-ranks.”

Shikamaru groaned. “Mum…”

“So, who’s the lucky girl?”

“What?”

His Mother snorted. “I know everything, pekopeko. Get used to it.”

Everything except, apparently, who the ‘lucky girl’ was. Although, knowing his Mother, that was most likely a trick question, and she had phrased it so to make Shikamaru automatically correct her and thus unwittingly reveal something he wanted to keep secret.

It almost worked, too, since Shikamaru was not entirely awake yet.

Troublesome, wily woman knew how to use her chances to their maximum potential. Her penchant for soaking up gossip was unfortunate in the extreme.

Shikamaru played around with the idea of naming Ino, since the whole concept was absurd to the point of sarcasm, but knowing his Mother, she would hear something in his inflection that would clue her in.

He decided that discretion was a better part of valour after all, jumped out of the window and ran.

He didn’t even care that he could hear the devil woman’s cackling all the way to the edge of the Nara lands.

“Hi, demon-san, how’s it going today d’you have a minute?”

Kurama took stock of the situation in the physical world and decided that he was not interested today in finding out what human death felt like. “Take a tail. If you fry yourself with my chakra, at least I won’t have to deal with any more allergies.”

“key thanks bye!”

Shikamaru’s blood was pounding in his ears.
He was sure that Ino experienced the exact same thing, and whatever force drove Chouji, he managed not to fall too far behind. Perhaps he, too, felt the marrow freezing despair at the thought that they might be late.

They couldn’t be late. They would break speed records, reach the Grass border, find Team Kakashi and warn them about the ambush.

They would-

“Battle,” Asuma-sensei snapped, eyes on the horizon.

Shikamaru, impossibly, sped up. He was running into an attack, and knew it. It was too late. But he had to know – they must have gotten away, right? Yoshi couldn’t be… couldn’t be…

He wasn’t sure when he had lost the rest of Team Asuma, or how long it would take them to catch up to him. He flew through the trees, and minutes – mere minutes! – later leapt through bushes into a meadow spreading the width of the valley.

And gaped at the sight in front of him.

The Grass platoon was there as advised – too late! – by the – tardy! – intelligence department. But they were all dead. Some lay in pieces, some were scorched, some bore what looked like lightning damage. A few were trapped in various Doton techniques. A handful of scattered Kage Bunshin of Yoshi popped one by one along the edges of the carnage.

Sakura grabbed Sasuke, forcefully sat him down and began to pull off his shirt. Sasuke reacted with mild annoyance and helped her with the shirt-

To Shikamaru’s relief the intention was to heal the wound in Sasuke’s abdomen. Sakura looked angry and focused, so she probably had that in hand. She finished soon enough and handed Sasuke alcohol wipes so he could clean himself up.

Then she proceeded to pull bits of gore out of her hair – she must have lost her bandana at some point – and complained about inadequate intel, promising gross bodily harm on the officers that compiled their mission specs, all interspersed with words that coloured the air blue.

Yoshi wandered up among the corpses, looking sheepish. “Hey, Shikamaru! Whatcha doing here?”

Shikamaru took a deep breath. His blood was still rushing in his ears, and he was… he was just so relieved he thought he might faint.

“Hey, siddown. Ya look worse than Sasuke-kun, and he nearly got gutted by this one chick…”

Shikamaru obediently sat down, staring at the horrific battlefield and then at Yoshi, who was blood-stained, but also smiling. The incorrect words tried to force themselves through his throat, forced up by the well of relief he felt as their retrieval mission (the Hokage said search and rescue, but they all knew) turned out to be unnecessary. Shikamaru swallowed those words and said instead: “We were… coming to warn you… about the ambush.” His lungs burnt. His chakra levels were dangerously low.

“Moron’s alive, shockingly,” said Ino’s voice.

The rest of Shikamaru’s team stepped out of the bushes. Asuma whistled at the sight.

Yoshi bashfully laughed. “Don’t do that, sensei.”
“Wait…” Chouji, bent over and trying to catch his breath, tilted his head up to look at Yoshi as if he couldn’t believe his eyes and ears. “This was you?!”

“Yep,” Yoshi admitted cheerfully. “Well, not all of it, my team helped, but… uhm, I’ve got a couple aces up my sleeves…” He raised his hands and wriggled them as if trying to shake cards out of his long mesh sleeves. “I didn’t mean to do that to them, but they jumped out at us and refused to talk about it when I tried and then I went sort of *fwump* and they all… um.”

“Where’s your sensei?!” demanded Ino, about as enraged as Shikamaru would be about Yoshi having been put into this situation, if Shikamaru had any capacity for emotion left over.

“Taichou’s sleeping off chakra exhaustion,” Sakura informed her, exasperated. “Pro-tip: don’t implant a fucking Sharingan into your eye-socket if you’re not a fucking Uchiha.”

The girls went on bickering. Team Kakashi let Asuma feel like he had taken charge (by now Shikamaru could tell when they genuinely followed somebody, and when they just gave the appearance) and Yoshi went to help the (already smoking – what lung capacity!) jounin to find an unconscious Hatake Kakashi somewhere among the many dead bodies.

Shikamaru sat on his swath of un-scorched ground, let his eyes stray from the bloodbath to the blue-grey sky above, and reflected.

Team Seven had been designated a frontline assault squad right upon its formation. Shikamaru had called bullshit on that when he first heard it. He had assumed it was cover for the intention to make them run black ops once they got some experience. Sure, Sasuke could have been good at wholesale slaughter, and Sakura would have taken the support role anyway, especially since Tsunade-sama instated mandatory team-medics, but Yoshi? No, putting Yoshi with his Yamanaka expertise on frontline assault made zero sense.

Or so Shikamaru had thought.

Now he was reconsidering – looking around at the battlefield that more resembled the results of a natural disaster, and then at a sheepish Yoshi tugging on his ponytail and suggesting another spot as they searched for their unconscious Team Lead, before a couple of ninken turned up and led the rescue efforts.

Shikamaru had missed something. Something key. Something that was going to make his life a whole lot more interesting than he had ever wanted it to be.

x

The war with Grass fizzled out before it was even officially declared, leaving behind a few bereaved families and forcing a couple of shinobi – including cousin Rikuto – to retire on medical grounds.

Fortunately, Rikuto took it with humour (possibly in self-defence, since the alternative was a Clan’s worth of self-proclaimed therapists on his back), showing off his prosthesis to the smaller cousins and convincing Inoue-ba-san to let him take over most of the administrative part of running the greenhouses.

Ino and Yoshi’s Dad came home without so much as a bruise and blatantly let himself be cheated at poker so he could semi-legally share a couple of war stories with his children as forfeits.

He worked personally with a Sannin! On the other hand, it turned out that the Sannin weren’t nearly as cool as they sounded.
Team Kakashi was collectively nicknamed ‘The Plague’, and appeared in Grass, Rock and Stone Bingo Books.

Ino laughed herself sick, called her brother ‘Pestis’ until Dad mock-threatened to separate them, and they ended the day with a three-way spar. Ino maintained they should rename Team Kakashi ‘The Common Cold’ instead – she deserved that for having to explain things to her own teammates.

“Yoshi has a lot of chakra,” she said, sitting lotus style in the clearing behind the Nara house, where they used to spend so many Saturdays. “And he can speed up learning techniques with shadow clones. He’s had a bunch of teachers, too – not just from the Clan, but people like Anko-san, who’s helped turn Sakura into the monster she is, and, obviously, Sharingan no Kakashi.”

Chouji accepted the explanation.

Shikamaru looked skeptical, but he could look skeptical until the Sun rose in the West for all Ino cared.

She didn’t know all Yoshi’s secrets either. She just knew Yoshi was important.
She didn’t understand it when their parents adopted him, but she understood now. There was something to her brother, something that would have had him long-since swallowed up by ANBU if Dad hadn’t decided to protect him and Mum hadn’t agreed to it.

Whatever it was, it just made Yoshi extra special. And Ino loved him like they were two parts of one body.

x

Since Ino would have preferred using Hanabi as fertiliser, they had to devise an alternative way of getting at Neji. Nothing was impossible, even in war, and between engaging Hinata-chan’s assistance and folding Tenten and Lee into their flock, they finally got Neji where they wanted him.

Which turned out to be Training Field Nineteen.

Then they proceeded to mercilessly extort him.

“You did what?!” Neji demanded, losing composure right from the start.

Ino examined her nails – green today, as an obvious hook. “Don’t be sour. It’s all in good fun! I think Lee will be a great bowling buddy.”

“I will not go,” Neji stated. “There is no reason-”

“Oh,” Naruto stepped in right on cue, “did we mention that the third competing team is Hinata-chan and Shino? Lee really, really wants to show Hinata-chan how good he is at bowling. I guess he might go so far as to… try and persuade you.”

Neji shuddered.

“He really likes Hinata-chan,” Ino said, like she was sharing an illicit secret.

“Mhm.” Naruto smiled. “Imagine all the other things we might tell Lee.”

“Or even Gai-sensei, if we think it’s necessary,” added Ino.

Neji stared at them; the last vestiges of hope slowly trickled out of his expression. “Ninja… tag… you said?”

“You’ll play?!” Naruto grinned and hopped in place, maintaining an air of innocence.

“Your defeat is inevitable,” said Fate Boy. “Byakugan.”

An hour later Fate Boy had not only reconsidered his definition of ‘inevitable’, but also nursed several tree bark rashes and had yet to reconcile himself to the state of his hair.

“Why does your taijutsu resemble the Gentle Fist style?” he demanded angrily, breathing hard.

Naruto didn’t feel tired at all; but then, he hardly ever did. “Dad taught me this. He said he ‘picked it up somewhere’.” Looking at Neji, with his solid stances and his easily shifting centre of gravity, the similarities of his style were obvious.

And so was the ‘somewhere’ whence their Dad had picked it up. Hizashi-san, huh? Close, Mum had said. Whatever that meant (Ino had a vivid imagination and the unquenchable need to share, but it was their Dad and that made it super weird). In the end the only important part was that their Dad cared about Neji’s Dad, and therefore cared about his son, and so Naruto and Ino cared about Neji,
too. It was hard work to care about someone whose response to caring was verbal abuse and assault, although Naruto was pretty sure that Neji just honestly had no clue how to react to not being treated shitty.

Sort of like a reverse Academy-Sasuke.

“I… was not aware of any connection between Inoichi-sama and any of my clansmen,” Fate Boy said after he had screwed his head on.

To tell or not to tell, Naruto mused. It was a dilemma. On one hand, it might give them a connection to bond over. On the other hand, they didn’t have enough of a rapport with Neji to start pulling down his paradigms just yet.

“That’s something we would tell a friend,” Ino saved him. She smiled. “Let’s do this again when our days off coincide, Hyuuga-kun. We’re easy to befriend, I promise.”

Neji didn’t look especially convinced.

x

Yoshi and Sakura looked over Sasuke’s shoulders as he read the letter that had just fallen straight out of the sky.

To Uchiha Sasuke, it read in unfamiliar handwriting,

Hey kid, I don’t have a clue what this is about, and I don’t want one. Itachi asked me to write this because he’s blind. He’s holed up at the clinic in Moridama. The docs say he’s got a month to live on the outside, so if you want to see him, this is your last chance. Good luck!

It was signed with a scribble of a shark.

Sasuke seemed shocked into utter stillness. The only outward reaction he gave was a slight tremble that went through his whole frame. For Sakura the world went a little blurry around the edges and her throat tightened with the familiar lead-up to-

“Stay,” Yoshi whispered. His palm on the back of Sakura’s neck helped keep her tethered.

Yoshi’s free arm went around Sasuke’s ribs, both to keep Sasuke in place and to keep him focused on the here and now. He essentially held both his teammates mentally grounded. “I know there aren’t any official rules for pranking, but when I catch the-”

“It’s not a prank,” Sakura cut in.

“What?!”

Sakura pointed to the aspen tree where a single crow was sitting on a low bough and watching them.

“It’s not a prank.”

“When are we supposed to meet Kakashi?” asked Yoshi.

Sasuke, still shaky and disoriented, muttered: “In twenty minutes.”

“So we’ve got about three hours head start,” Sakura paraphrased, squashing the impulse to smile. This wasn’t a smiling moment. It was just her disobedient face that wanted to stretch like that.

Yoshi released them both from his grip, although he stayed in physical contact with Sasuke. “I’ll
shadow-clone us alibis. If he has to run around Konoha looking for us, that will win us another hour or so.”

Sasuke shook himself into a semblance of solidity. “You don’t have to—”

“Sasuke,” Yoshi cut him off, “we’ve had this conversation about three dozen times by now. Just fill in what you know I’m going to say and spare that time for packing. Fifteen minutes, Northern Gate. Go.” He flickered away.

Sasuke turned dark, wide eyes at her. “Sakura—”

“You asking to get punched?”

After a brief moment Sasuke admitted defeat. “…going.”

x

It took them four days to get to Moridama.

Moridama was a little town in the mountains, beyond the border of the Land of Fire. There was an onsen there that attracted just enough tourist traffic that the locals had a need for several establishments, among others a couple of ryokan, a handful of restaurants and a clinic.

“Good evening— oh, are you here for Itoshii-san?” asked the nurse at the reception as soon as they walked in, staring at Sasuke as if she were seeing a ghost.

Sasuke nodded (looking all of twelve years old at that moment despite pushing sixteen, which Naruto found kind of impressive).

The nurse’s face fell. She tried for a sympathetic smile, but it came across as a grimace. “I am so glad you made it in time, sir. Go right in – it’s room seventeen on the first floor. Itoshii-san’s friend is there. He can give you more information than I, since he is Itoshii-san’s stated next of kin and… ah, doctor-patient confidentiality. You understand.”

Sasuke nodded again and turned toward the stairs. Naruto decided to work with it rather than try to make Sasuke stop being rude to people. He – and Sakura by his side – bowed to the nurse and quietly thanked her.

There were some understanding and pitying looks exchanged all around, as there presumably always were when someone’s family member was dying and there was no more hope left. ‘Making them comfortable’ was the phrase, and it rang bitter in Naruto’s ears even though no one had actually said it out loud.

They caught up to Sasuke just inside the designated room. It was a single – apparently being an S-class missing nin paid well – and it was no wonder that the nurse identified Sasuke at a glance, because the man lying in the bed was clearly related to him. Even though the man looked terrible. Just grey and weak and ill.

“I didn’t see him,” Sasuke reported. “Went out the window as I opened the door.”

Itachi had the temerity to lift a corner of his mouth. “He does not want to meet you. Do not worry, little brother. He is no threat to you.”

“And I should believe you why?!” Sasuke snapped.
Sakura cringed and glanced at the door.

Naruto went and slapped a few noise-containment seal tags on both the door and the window, which he closed behind the mysterious letter-writer. And then he slapped another pair on the walls, just in case.

“This is so surreal,” whispered Sakura.

Naruto nodded. Itachi was smiling serenely, head tilted to the side and eyes not tracking; Sasuke was gripping his kodachi in a white-knuckled fist, jerking it up and then down as long-standing conviction pushed him to kill while his atrophied common sense kept reminding him that this was a blind, dying man in front of him.

“I have a lot to tell you, little brother…”

“What could you say that would excuse what you did?!”

“No excuses,” promised the prone man with serenity so unnatural it raised the hair on Naruto’s arms. “Just explanations. You deserve to know what orders were given – and who gave them.”

Sasuke, Yoshi and Sakura reconvened in the corridor. They all looked shell-shocked. Sasuke had been sick into a bedpan. Sakura was stuffing every emotion down the drain, and would pay for it whenever bitch made an appearance, but right now she needed to be calm.

Yoshi was enraged and sympathetic, and bawled unashamedly.

“Who is this Danzo person?” Sakura asked.

“A village Elder,” Yoshi explained. “He died maybe… seven years ago? And was posthumously declared a traitor. Guess they found out about all this when they went through his stuff. Dunno. By that time Dad was out of the Department and Ibiki-san headed the interrogations. And the decommissioning. I only found out a bit ‘cause I get into everything and Anko-san likes to enable me… I get why Dad never wanted us to know.”

Sasuke nodded very slowly and repeatedly, almost compulsively. “So… the person who ordered the death of my clan was publicly declared a traitor… but the Sandaime still left my brother hanging.”

“I guess it’s a good thing the Sandaime’s dead, huh?” Yoshi said wetly, crossing his arms in front of his chest. A muscle in his cheek worked.

“Yes,” Sakura agreed placidly. “It would suck to become traitors ourselves.” Which they would have if they assassinated the Hokage. And they would have assassinated the Hokage – she was fairly certain of that. She still might try to assassinate someone once she switched.

“The only possible reasons why he would not have recalled Itachi were shame or his complicity,” mused Sasuke.

And if it was shame, then fuck Sandaime anyway for prioritising his reputation over his shinobi’s lives.

“I’m sorry all your bad guys are dead,” Yoshi professed, wiping his reddened eyes. “I know you were looking forward to killing someone.” He took a deep breath with some difficulty due to a clogged nose. “And… I’m sorry about Itachi.”
Sasuke stared at the blank wall for a while, teeth clenched together hard. Then his expression disappeared. He looked like he used to look at the Academy before Yoshi had gotten his claws into him.

He walked back inside room seventeen and shut the door behind himself.

“Yoshi?” Sakura whispered.

Yoshi sighed. “I’m not sure. He might not come back.”

“To Konoha or to himself?”

“Yes.”

Pakkun still held a grudge, so Kakashi tracked his team to a little onsen town far in the North with the help of Urushi and Guruko. He found two of his subordinates sitting on cold stone steps in front of a building labeled as a clinic and a hospital, eating with the kind of reluctance that came from being not-hungry so intensely that throwing it all up again was a real concern.

There was a third, unopened container cooling on the stair above them.

Something had happened to Sasuke, clearly. Not the worst, though, because these two were more angry and sad than hopeless or grieving.

“Taichou,” said Yoshi, without any further acknowledgment. No explanations for their sudden disappearance, no excuses for not even leaving a note for their beleaguered Team Lead.

“Are you bringing us in?” asked Sakura.

Kakashi had seen her so apathetic before. Usually it resulted in massive destruction when her other personality came forwards.

He dropped down onto the stair next to them and availed himself to Sasuke’s untouched dinner. “The shadow clones and I picked up a mission. Team Kakashi is officially deployed for the next three weeks.”

Sakura almost twisted her head off, looking up at the hospital building over her shoulder. “Sasuke won’t leave—”

“Then we’ll have to make do without him. I’ve brought along a shadow clone that just so happens to be a dead ringer for him.” He gestured back the way he had come, where he had left the shadow trio to reconnoiter.

Kakashi knew there was very little that could have made his three hellions run away without sanction, and with the other clues he put together enough of an image of the situation. And he had ample reasons to trust his team.

And if he by chance remembered his kouhai’s helpful hints about a certain Council member before said kouhai embarked on a trip to hell, that was, naturally, neither here nor there.

Kakashi thought of last chances, and last family members left, and what he would give to have a few minutes with his Father. There was not much he was willing to compromise for, but this?

He had been there, and he knew where that road led. It wasn’t coincidence that his semblance of
humanity depended on Yoshi’s wellbeing, Iruka’s supervision and Gai’s intermittent reality checks.

“Iruka-sensei! Umino Iruka-sensei!”

Iruka paused with a sweet bun in his hand and focused on not sighing.

The caller walked swiftly between the market stalls, came to rapid halt and sketched out a far too deep bow. “Iruka-sensei, I must speak with you regarding one precious soul in your diligent care!”

Iruka set the bun back into the basket and resigned himself to a lack of snack. He liked being recognised – with a dearth of close friends (who were not traitors using him, but he was trying not to think about that too much) he appreciated having friendly acquaintances speak to him.

But he wished that parents understood the concept of office hours.

“How can I help you, shinobi-san?” he inquired with a practiced smile.

“Let me first treat you to this delightful bakery product!” announced the man, showing perceptiveness which, frankly, shocked Iruka.

A fast exchange with the vendor later, both Iruka and the stranger were walking side by side, each nibbling on his respective bun.

“If it would not trouble you overmuch, might I speak with you about your excellent devotion to Kakashi?” The man grinned; sun glinted off of his teeth-

And finally Iruka recognised him: Maito Gai. Undercover. Or, actually, wearing his civvies, but somehow the lack of a green overall made him seem to be undercover.

But, of course, it made sense that Gai-san would own a kimono.

It made less sense for Gai-san to dress up for a talk with Iruka, but presumably he had another reason for going underco- that was, dressing civilian today, and Iruka just so happened to cross his path. Right.

“Oh,” Iruka said, wondering if he was being led to a distant training ground to have an unfortunate accident. “Excellent is definitely overstating it, and I’m mostly devoted to never letting him win an argument. It’s a challenge.” Kakashi was annoyingly good at getting the last word (by making a fast exit) and being right (side-effect of being a genius and an elite jounin).

“A challenge!” Gai-san repeated, delighted. “I believe your devotion may be even more excellent than I suspected! What better way to stoke the fires of your youth than with a vigorous rivalry?!”

Iruka wondered if this was a reference to using banter as foreplay; even after closely examining the man’s face he honestly could not tell. “Are you asking for tips?” he inquired dryly.

The man paused for a moment and then shook with laughter. He wiped tears from his eyes with a sweeping gesture of his hand, and then used the same hand to clap Iruka’s back so hard the blow nearly sent him to his knees. “Excellent indeed! I must speak with you again soon, but at this very instance it behooves me to make myself scarce, for I do not trust my eternal rival’s cool to hold up against the heat of passionate jealousy! If those flames ever be doused, I shall seek out another audience with you post haste!”
He disappeared in a swirl of leaves before Iruka had decoded the statement.

Iruka shivered.

Gai-san was so nice and friendly that, were it not for the context of their meeting, Iruka probably wouldn’t have noticed he was being threatened.

Team Kakashi returned to Moridama eighteen days later, liberally spattered with mud and blood (Sakura had gone off the rails in a big and gory way), and found Sasuke waiting for them at a fresh grave. He was as pale as always, with shadows under his eyes and in his eyes, and even though he didn’t show any emotion whatsoever, there was a sense of brittleness about him.

“He and his partner basically dismantled Akatsuki from the inside. They killed the worst, and most of the remaining members just walked off their own way, but there’s one left that won’t stop,” Sasuke said, with the merest glimmer of knowledge of the existence of emotion. It was leagues better than cold emptiness.

“Sure thing,” Yoshi said, smiling sadly and moving – with confidence that brooked no opposition – to put an arm around Sasuke’s shoulders. “We’ll regroup and plot a new plot. About the partner…?”

Sasuke shook his head. “Not a… at least I don’t think they were. The writer of the letter. They were a good team.”

“Is he around?” asked Sakura.

Sasuke shrugged. “I didn’t see him. But if it were my team…”

He left the sentence hanging, but Kakashi could easily fill in the rest of it from repeated personal experience. If it were his team that died on him, he would have hung around to watch them be put into the ground, to make sure the memory was etched in so deeply that he would never forget, that the sacrifice and guilt would stay with him until his own bitter end.

That was just him, but… was Sasuke really all that different? With the exception of the revenge kick, but that was honestly just Sasuke being proactive, whereas Kakashi was generally a reactive kind of person. And even then there was that one time he had tried to kill the Sandaime to avenge Minato-sensei.

What he meant was that, in all likelihood, Itachi’s partner was sitting somewhere on a roof or up a tree or – if the rumours were to be believed – at the bottom of the pond, and watching.

Waiting.

For the paralysing numbness to be over.
“Will you be claiming your Clan Headship?” polite-Sakura asked after Yoshi left, as if worried that he would be sensitive about the topic.

As far as Sasuke knew – and Sasuke knew very far – Yoshi was only interested in the realities of leading a clan because he was curious, and he periodically mocked his sister for ‘being doomed to a future of politics’. There was not an iota of jealousy between the Yamanaka siblings.

“Yes,” Sasuke admitted. “I would prefer to have the Clan declared obsolete, but its formal existence grants me privileges I do not wish to lose.”

Sakura looked around the Study, and nodded – perhaps even understood. The Uchiha were an intrinsic part of Konoha, echoed in the culture, in the laws and the administrative structure, and yet all tangible proof of their once great existence was now concentrated in this slowly decaying Compound.

Konoha’s sharks could pry this land (his cousins’ homes, the Shrine, the Archives) out of Sasuke’s cold, dead fingers.

“Eat something,” insisted polite-Sakura. “I get that everything tastes like ashes, but it won’t help if your body starts eating itself to fuel your brain.”

Sasuke nodded. Yes, he would eat. He understood the necessity for a strict regime while in altered mind states. He was not dissociating nearly as much as he had been last time.

He looked up to meet his teammate’s eye, very briefly, to reassure her that he was not in need of a suicide watch. “Go save Yoshi from himself.”

“Yoshi-san!” It had been a long time since Shino had an opportunity to speak with his friend, and knew that the Ladybug missed him as well. If both teams were in the village concurrently, it behooved them to use the opportunity to spend time together.

A shared dinner, perhaps?

Yoshi-san paused in the street and turned in Shino’s direction. He smiled – and Shino knew that it was a smile out of obligation rather than joy.

“Hey, Shino. How are you doing?”

“Better than yourself, it seems. Is there anything with which I might assist you?”

Yoshi-san’s smile softened a bit. “You’re a good friend, Shino. Thank you, but I don’t think there’s anything right now. It’s just… some things take time. You know how it is.”

Shino did not, in fact, know how it was, but he understood the implication that Yoshi-san was presently not in the right frame of mind to socialise.

Additionally, it occurred to him that Yoshi-san made it a point to compliment other people often, even when the compliment was minimally warranted. On one hand, it was clearly a part of his strategy to endear himself to the recipients; on the other, Shino knew how the assurance that he was
‘a good friend’ – he, who could barely speak to others, much less forge a connection – had just made him feel. There was warmth in his chest.

He placed his hand, softly, on Yoshi-san’s shoulder. “You are a good friend as well, Yoshi-san. When there is something I might do to help ease your burdens, please let me know.”

Yoshi-san smiled and nodded.

Shino retracted his hand. He thought of what he would tell the Ladybug, and resolved to remain truthful, even though at this junction lies might have been kinder.

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“Yoshi-?” asked Shikamaru.

“I’m cursed, I’m sure,” Yoshi muttered under his breath and then directed a sad, tired semblance of a smile at Shikamaru. “Hey, Shikamaru. How are you doing?”

_Not so badly that I would need you to put on this civil façade for me_, Shikamaru thought, but he didn’t have the right to say that. Not anymore – and not yet.

“I’m fine,” Shikamaru assured him. “You’d know if anything happened to me – Ino would throw a party.”

Yoshi shrugged.

Usually he would either protest or at least retort with a cheeky ‘yeah, probably’, but today he could not seem to muster a response. He looked… sad. Yoshi, who always smiled, who even smiled after he had slaughtered his way through enemy ninja when they refused to be talked down, who should always be smiling, was looking sad.

Shikamaru had to do something. He had to-

“Yoshi!” called out Sakura. A moment later she was there, standing between Yoshi and Shikamaru, and crowding into Yoshi’s space. “I told you to wait for me-”

“And you were right,” Yoshi replied, with a shade of his usual cheekiness.

“When am I not?” Sakura retorted haughtily. “I decided that Sasuke could feed himself, and told him what I’d do to him if he skipped another meal, so I’m free to take you home and make sure you actually sleep instead of spending half the night beating yourself up over something you could not actually change.”

Yoshi frowned at her. “When did you become so forceful? I thought that was all…” He waved his hand.


“Bye, Shikamaru,” Yoshi and Shikamaru chorused, and Yoshi rewarded this extremely old and not really very funny joke with a wan grin.

“See you soon?” Shikamaru added hopefully.

Yoshi shrugged, and let Sakura drag him away.

Shikamaru turned around and ambled off in the direction of the Nara Compound. He felt like going
to sit with the deer for a while and meditate until he calmed down.

Of course he knew that Sasuke and Sakura would share a lot of unique experiences with Yoshi, some of them extremely classified. It was obvious that Yoshi’s teammates knew him very well. They knew many things about Yoshi that Shikamaru did not.

But the fact that all this was obvious, and common knowledge, didn’t help. As Ino would say, Shikamaru was *jealous as fuck.*

x

Ino showered team training off her body and went to hunt down her brother. He found him in the living room, which from him practically translated to a plea not to be left alone.

Not quite what she had expected, but she could run with it.

“Shikamaru mentioned he met you today, and that you seemed a little off. Everything okay, brother?”

Yoshi grinned at her.

Oh fuck. Everything was fucking obviously *very* not okay. And Ino’s stupid brother hadn’t been about to mention it, probably just going to disappear into the depths of the greenhouses later and pour his heart out to the plants, because he was a big, tough shinobi that could manage everything on his own.

“Bad mission. People dying. We found out stuff about this village that we never wanted to know. That sort of thing.”

Ino nodded and wedged herself onto the sofa next to her brother, intentionally on the side where there was less space, so he would have to move to accommodate her. She knew *that sort of thing* – the sort that you couldn’t change, couldn’t help, and were just forced to accept. The sort that made it seem like the whole world had dimmed a few lumens.

“I keep thinking about how I don’t want that to happen again, to anybody, but the only way to make sure is do it all myself and…” He shrugged.

Despite having grown up with Yoshi, Ino had barely parsed that mess of a sentence. But she *did* parse it. “Hokage, huh?”

“You think I could do it?”

“Sure.” Ino didn’t doubt that with sufficient support system Yoshi could make a good go of it. And he would have sufficient support system, because creating a support system was what he was best at.

“Unless you want to-”

“Not on your life,” she shut him down before he could fully form the idea. Ino was going to be a Clan Head, and that was more than enough politics for her, thanks a lot. But, it gave her an idea for helping her brother with the creation of that support system.

It was never too early to start conditioning his closest allies, was it?

“Is that why you don’t date?” she needled. “So focused on your career?”

Yoshi snorted. “Try harder, Ichimatsu-chan. I just had this idea a couple of days ago. And I do date.
I asked Shino out for dango the other day. He had a mission, but gave me a rain check. I’m going to cash it next time I see him.”

“Shino, still?” In hindsight Ino saw why it had always been so easy for Yoshi to talk about his crush, when the rest of their peers kept theirs secret like they were something embarrassing.

Her brother’s interest in the Aburame Heir was longstanding, and true enough, but far too low-key for it to ever grow into a great passion. Ino knew Yoshi, had watched him court a bunch of friends and allies, and was pretty sure that once Yoshi decided on the one person he wanted for himself (or, rather, admitted to himself that he had already picked and would not be budged), no amount of reserve would help the subject escape from his clutches.

Why was he taking so long?! Ino didn’t have the patience to watch this farce for eight more years…

She nudged his shoulder, raised her eyebrows and kicked the proverbial anthill. “I thought maybe you and Sasuke…”

“Eww! He’s actually still my patient, Ino! That’s wrong!” He shuddered theatrically, but there was an element of genuine horror to it; sex with somebody who depended on your treatment for their mental stability was fucked up. “What about you? Anyone catch your fancy for more than a week at the time?”

“Oi! Minoru-kun lasted almost three weeks!”

“Guy played hard to get?”

“Are you implying something, late-bloomer?”

The door flew open and their Dad stomped in, scowling. “Do I have to put you into opposite corners?! I thought you grew out of this-”

Ino and Yoshi looked at one another and burst into laughter.

“No, Daddy.”

“Nah, we’re just playing.” Yoshi batted at Ino’s upper arm with fingers curled into mock-claws, imitating a kitten.

Dad rolled his eyes at them, but seemed to be smiling a little as he left.

Yoshi waited until the door snicked shut before he stopped laughing and laid his head down on Ino’s shoulder. “Thanks, sis’. I needed that.”

Ino petted his head and let him take a little comfort from her. Whatever it was that had happened to Team Kakashi during their last mission, it had sucked a lot. Sakura was the one least affected, because she had poured it all away into hot-Sakura and could go about her day just like always. Sasuke-kun hasn’t been seen in public since and Yoshi…

She rubbed her cheek against his hair. Yoshi was an idiot and a menace, but she wouldn’t trade him for anything, and if he needed a little cheering up, she knew exactly whom to tap for it.

x

Shikamaru had presumed that the roof of the Akimichi house was a safe place to watch clouds and daydream for a few hours.
Shikamaru was wrong.

“I thought you were thinking hard, and instead you’re thinking hard,” drawled a vicious blonde with a venomous bite in her words.

Shikamaru didn’t fall for it, but it was a near thing. He had almost checked. His conscience wasn’t entirely clean, of course, but his thoughts just now were nowhere near R-rating. He saved that for the reasonable privacy of his bedroom.

“You’re blocking the sun, Ino,” Shikamaru informed her, closing his eyes and waiting for her to remove her shadow from his face.

Of course the troublesome woman wouldn’t do that. She just scoffed. “That’s what I thought. All the time you spend thinking, you just think of yourself. You might imagine other people there, but only as props. Like the only thing that matters is you achieving your own goals, and everyone else is there just to satisfy you-”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” Shikamaru snapped. He realised he was sitting up and glaring upwards at her, without having been aware of the transition.

So? Maybe he wasn’t the most generous guy around – and what? They were all shinobi. No one would ever give any of them a handout. They had to look out for themselves, because no one else ever would.

Ino stared back down at him with a grimace of disgust. “You’re just like your Father. Yoshino-ba-san gave up on so many things for him – damn near all her dreams and ambitions. And what’s she got for it? I don’t think I’ve seen her happy for a single day in her life.” She snorted. “I pity the person that marries you.”

She spun on her heel and strode away.

Shikamaru blinked after her.

That was… abrupt. That was so abrupt, and shocking and… had something happened to Ino? He didn’t think she had been so invested in any of her flings that they could hurt her, but there was clearly projection happening here.

And Shikamaru wasn’t taking it personally. No, he wasn’t. So his Mother drank and yelled a lot, and sometimes disappeared for a few days, looking glad to be leaving and… But that did not mean she was unhappy.

And Shikamaru’s own dream was not going to rob anyone of anything… was… it?

x

“I am such a bitch,” declared Ino-chan. She looked somewhat consternated, but at the same time proud. Perhaps a bit surprised?

Hinata was not very good at reading and interpreting such complex emotional states. “Umm…”

Ino-chan smiled at her and leaned over the table to press a kiss to Hinata’s cheekbone. Hinata felt the flush rise up her face. She knew that Ino-chan was a… an… um… serial dater, and that she was not interested in Hinata that way. Not that she didn’t mean her gestures of affection! Ino-chan’s affection for Hinata was clearly not romantic, but at the same time clearly far longer-lasting and more genuine than what she felt for any of her romantic partners.
Hinata was happy with that. Honest, she was.

There was, um, somebody else she admired *that way*. Even though it was hopeless.

“Don’t worry your pretty head,” Ino-chan assured her, and pushed the banana split to the very centre of the table so they could share equally. “I just twisted bits of truth into an ugly lie to make one stupid boy open his eyes. I swear they all walk through the world blindfolded.”

Hinata had very little experience with boys (don’t think about Lee-kun, he’s not interested in you like *that!* so she deferred to Ino-chan. Even though she felt that perhaps there were a few exceptions. Yoshi-kun occurred to her first, then (perhaps a little startlingly) Kiba-kun, and then Shino-kun. “Um, Shino-kun is not being oblivious. He is not interested, and trying to be… gentle…? Because he does value Yoshi-kun’s friendship greatly.”

Ino-chan laughed around a mouthful of strawberry ice cream. “Everyone knows Shino won’t be *it* for Yoshi. But he could have been *something*. Never mind, though; I’ve got a far more deserving victim.”

Hinata smiled. Watching Ino-chan in her element was always such a pleasure.

\[\text{x}\]

Naruto found Sasuke – predictably – holed up in his Father’s office. He doubted Sasuke would let go of this obsession until he had gone through every scrap of paper within the Compound and found out what really happened inside the Clan that someone had decided they needed to ‘save Konoha’ by wiping them out.

“Don’t mess up my system,” Sasuke snapped, but it was a mild snap for him, which Naruto decided to interpret as a backhanded welcome.

Naruto wound his way in between towers of boxes of scrolls and books. It looked like… well, like Ino’s room, to be honest. “Have you eaten today?”

He was worried. Sakura was off training with Anko-san, and there had been no one here to bully Sasuke out of starving himself.

Sasuke pulled away from the scroll he was reading to roll his eyes at Naruto. “Yes, mother hen. There’s a pot of vegetable soup if you’re hungry.”

Not just eaten, but cooked, Naruto thought, surprised. If the food had been brought by Sakura earlier it would have contained meat, but Sasuke was weird about his diet. His over-bred constitution didn’t do well with heavier meals if he wasn’t expending a lot of energy – hence going temporarily vegetarian.

“I brought dragon’s beard,” Naruto informed him and placed the offering within easy reach. “I know you don’t like sweets, but sugar is brain food. Think of it as medicine. And don’t even try to tell me you don’t have a headache.”

“Start digging through that,” Sasuke replied, pointing at the biggest box placed part-way under the desk. “If my brother was right, that’s about our enemy.”

Naruto looked at the pile of documentation and suppressed a groan. Still, it would be a welcome change from thinking about Hokageship, and maybe it would help them get some closure regarding Danzo and the Sandaime and, well, the Uchiha Clan itself.
“What is wrong with you?!” Ino demanded, landing in a crouch five yards from her teammate after she had narrowly avoided having her head casually knocked off of her shoulders when Chouji redirected his blow to miss her in the same direction as she dodged.

Chouji cringed. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be fucking sorry!” Ino yelled. “Just focus on what the fuck you’re doing! Like hitting me! You’re supposed to hit me! I thought you were over this! Hit me!” She knew that Chouji hated it when people cursed, especially people he cared about, so whenever Ino was angry at him she expressed it by turning off her profanity filter. Contrary to her brother’s opinion she had one. Yoshi would be unbearable if he knew, but her thoughts were about as profanity-heavy as hot-Sakura’s (three guesses where she learned most of her vulgar vocabulary).

“I can’t!” Chouji yelled back. “I can’t focus! I’m sorry!”

Which, Ino knew, meant that whatever the issue was, all these tough men were waiting around for her to discover and solve it. She followed Chouji’s line of sight to the tree that Shikamaru had climbed in order to get away from her some fifteen minutes earlier.

“What?” she demanded.

“Well,” said Chouji.

Ino rolled her eyes. Chouji would cover for that useless lazy lump to the end of the world and beyond. Whatever was happening, she could take a feather to the soles of Chouji’s feet and he would tell her fuck-all.

So it was up to her to determine what that idiot Nara had done now to worry his best friend so much that he had reverted to his gennin self.

Ino landed on the tree branch a couple of seconds later, and swiped Shikamaru’s book out of his hand before he had managed to mount a defense. He glared at her. Also, he might have grumbled something about Chouji failing to keep her busy, but at that point Ino was already stopping her chakra flow.

The genjutsu flickered and failed.

Shikamaru’s ear was red like a winter rose.

Ino snorted.

Shikamaru continued glaring, and a moment later trapped Ino in a shadow – damn branches – so he could steal his book back.

“Oooh,” she mocked, “a new piercing. So cool, Shikamaru-kun. Next you’ll tell me you’ve got a tattoo-”

“I won’t tell you,” he assured her.

Well, that was obvious. He hadn’t told her about his latest accessory, either (and she hadn’t even mocked him when he had first gotten the earrings, because they were honestly kind of cool). In fact, Shikamaru had tried to hide the addition under a genjutsu, even though they both knew genjutsu was his weak point.
“Is that a zircon?” Ino demanded. She had to admit that the stud in his ear was nice enough, yellow metal and semi-precious stone and all (she could actually imagine picking it out for herself), but it wasn’t something she would have expected Shikamaru to wear. Unless he meant it as a declaration.

Wow, she was good.

Shikamaru pretended to read his book.

“About fucking time,” she snapped. “If you were even a little lazier, you’d be dead from dehydration, because it’s too troublesome to get a damn glass of water… and it’s obviously too troublesome to make a trip to the Hospital, idiot, where any attending nurse could heal that for you in two seconds flat. Or, like – just throwing this out there – tell your medic teammate. Hold still.”

x

“Ha,” Naruto whispered to himself, “Sakura will eat her words.” He slunk along the wall of the apartment, checking for traps and triggers every inch of the way.

After five years of working on it, he had finally managed to get inside Kakashi’s apartment…

…only to find it empty.

He sighed. Now he couldn’t even be sure if he had gotten that good, or if Kakashi had relaxed his defenses. The whole apartment had been turned into a trap – it was impressive sealwork for someone not formally trained.

Naruto spent the next three hours carefully studying the seals and then tweaking a few of them (like erasing Kakashi’s signature from the keys). Next time Kakashi came to check on the place, he would get caught in his own trap. It wasn’t as good as the prank they had planned to pull when they were twelve, but they had stopped being angry at Kakashi-taichou, and even liked him most of the time, so perhaps that level of vindictiveness was unwarranted anyway.

x

“I know you don’t know Yoshi’s birthday,” Ino said, sidling up to Shikamaru while Team Asuma traversed the Fire Country to the objective of their mission, “because nobody knows his birthday.” The Yamanaka siblings celebrated together on the twenty-third of September, even though they were not actually twins. “And I know you do know his favourite colour, because everybody knows his favourite colour.”

Shikamaru yawned. Was there a point, or was she speaking simply to hear her own voice? He wouldn’t put it past her.

Ino smirked at him nastily. “What is Yoshi’s favourite food?”

“Dango,” Shikamaru replied. He sped up a little, but the blonde harpy didn’t seem to even notice.

“Wrong!” she chirped, happy that he had failed. “Dango’s a social occasion.”

Shikamaru fought against himself. Should he ask? Should he find out himself? Ino definitely couldn’t be trusted not to steer him wrong, and her sudden interest in his weltanschauung and now in his knowledge of Yoshi made him nervous.

“Then what?” he asked once his resistance ran out.
Ino flipped her ponytail over her shoulder and raised her chin. Her eyes went flinty. “Why should I tell you?”

That meant either that Shikamaru was supposed to already have known, or that he should get off his arse and find these things out for himself. He agreed on both accounts – even if it was really damn troublesome.

He slowed down again. Ino flounced off to scout ahead, uninterested in further conversation, and probably contented in once again having made a mess of Shikamaru’s neatly arranged thoughts.

Yoshi ate a lot of dango. He always invited people out for dango. The way Ino ate a lot of ice cream and often took the girls to get ice cream with her. But Ino’s favourite food was pudding.

What was Yoshi’s?

How did he not know?

x

Shikamaru had been thinking about Yoshi for so long that he had forgotten to look underneath the appearances.

He was remedying that situation now. And rediscovering a boy whom he had not seen since their first year at the Academy.
“Want to grab dango later, Shino?” Yoshi asked cheerfully, unbothered by the grime that covered him. The rest of his team was curiously absent, but with shadow clones he could be his own training buddy.

In contrast, Aburame was clean and dressed down; obviously he was making good use of his leave. The bastard.

Shikamaru frowned. There was some incongruence in his perception of this situation, but he wasn’t immediately sure what caused it. He looked closer.

Aburame raised his hand in a welcoming gesture; he did not quite smile – he never smiled – but his general ease suggested that he was happy about this encounter with Yoshi despite Yoshi’s post-training state.

“Shower first, Yoshi-san,” Aburame reminded him in a far-too-familiar tone and, as they parted ways, he briefly clasped Yoshi’s shoulder. And Yoshi was smiling at him – not the wide public grin, but the private, comfortable, genuine smile.

Something unfamiliar, dark and bloodthirsty rose inside Shikamaru’s mind. Yes, it would have been easier to let somebody else pave the road – to let Yoshi try out being in a relationship and what it meant, get all those awkward, naïve, fumbling moments out of the way. Yes, that sounded like a sound strategy. Let someone else do the hard work. Except…

Somebody else touching Yoshi? Unacceptable.

Unless and until Yoshi definitively declared that he wanted some particular person, he was to be protected from all lascivious intentions (even, when it came down to it, from Shikamaru’s own intentions – and not just because Ino had been trained by three different torture specialists).

It was not as though Shikamaru thought some fling – or even a full-blown romance – would somehow mystically taint Yoshi or something equally as narrow-minded and reeking of civilian sensibilities. It was just that the mere idea of Yoshi with this hypothetical, faceless other person (that did not at all look like Aburame Shino) made Shikamaru reach for a kunai with intent.

“That’s it, then,” he informed his empty bedroom later that night. “It’s time.”

Seeing as they had more or less singlehandedly won the war with Grass, nobody had minded that Team Plague got two months’ leave, with the caveat that they would be called in if relations with Rock heated up.

Sasuke began venturing out of his lair again, looking like an ill-tempered, sleep-deprived, photosensitive vampire (ergo evidencing barely any change). Sakura destroyed a few training fields, but the official casualty count was zero, which Kakashi personally counted as his great pedagogical success.

Yoshi picked up shifts at the Yamanaka Flowers, spent time in the greenhouses and gradually
returned back to his cheerful, walking-heart-attack self.

“Do I have something on my face?” Kakashi asked when he caught Iruka staring.

“A mask,” Iruka informed him helpfully.

“Good,” Kakashi retorted, “I was wondering where I’ve put that.”

“You’re looking better,” Iruka told him, turning back to his soul-crushing stack of kiddie homework. “And by better I mean-”

“More attractive?”

“-less depressed,” Iruka finished mercilessly. “You know, you don’t have to be embarrassed about caring for your team. It doesn’t make you any less terrifying. If anything, it’s the opposite.”

The part of Kakashi that compulsively needled people wanted to ask if Iruka was terrified of Kakashi, but past experience indicated that it would result in a verbal smack-down, and Kakashi was loath to disturb their pleasant evening of tranquil domesticity.

So he went back to his Icha Icha and only let himself be distracted by his boyfriend when said boyfriend made funny faces at the homework, read out the more memorable excerpts (“Chakra is the sticky stuff how ninja stick to stuff – I mean, he’s not wrong…”) and muttered commentary about his students’ mental capacities (“She is a puppy, oh kami, attention span up to three seconds – a butterfly flutters by and she’s gone…”).

Kakashi thought of the angry sexiled gennin that had stopped him from putting a Chidori through his own brain, and hoped that Iruka would never, ever change.

x

“What is that?!” Yoshi exclaimed, laughing like the hilarity was punched out of his chest in spite of him, leaning hard on the shop counter.

Shikamaru grinned and handed the plush tiger hat over. “Like it? I saw it on my mission and it reminded me of you-”

“Oh sweet Izanagi, it’s perfect!” Still laughing, Yoshi pulled on a strategic strand of his hair, which dragged his tie downwards until his ponytail started at the back of his neck (had Shikamaru mentioned that Yoshi’s hair was amazing?) and then put the monstrosity on.

It looked like an angry orange tiger with beady eyes was eating his head.

“I can’t believe they have this stuff in adult sizes,” Yoshi muttered, looking at himself in the glass of the windowpane since, unlike his sister, he did not always have a mirror handy. “I love it, Shikamaru! Thank you!”

In his exuberance Yoshi probably had not even noticed, but it was the first time he had hugged Shikamaru since they were eight – half their lifetime ago. What he did notice was Shikamaru absently pulling on his own ear.

“What is that?!” he asked, leaning closer until the tiger nosed at the crown of Shikamaru’s head.

Shikamaru sighed. New. Oh, well, he had known Yoshi wasn’t paying all that much attention to him. Anymore. Yet.
“Hmm…” Yoshi tilted his head and carefully considered the stud.

“Do you like it?” Shikamaru inquired masochistically, cursing his hand for deciding to go for the ear instead of the ponytail if it had to tug on something. And what was he nervous for, anyway?

No, okay, he thought as he took a deep breath and noticed how Yoshi *smelled*, this was legitimately nerve-wracking.

“I guess,” Yoshi said reluctantly, “but blue isn’t really your colour, Shikamaru. For you I’d pick green, or maybe even deep red. Garnet?”

Shikamaru shrugged. “I don’t mind this. I *like* blue.”

He was about to scratch behind the tiger hat’s ears to pull another laugh from Yoshi, but then a pair of customers walked in and the opportunity was lost.

---

Tsunade threw the missive on top of her desk, leaned back in her chair, and contemplated for the fifty-second time today whether it would be worth it to set the Hokage Tower on fire.

The paperwork ninja should all be extremely impressed by her restraint, but so far it seemed that the only impressed one was Nara – the Jounin Commander – and even that was limited to her ability to drink like a fish and not die of alcohol poisoning.

Speaking of alcohol poisoning, Rock was being really fucking ridiculous.

Wind was crumbling into sand, Water was busy with volume three or four of their civil war, and Earth took one look at what the Plague had done to Grass and started having Yondaime flashbacks… so nobody honestly expected that Rock would do anything but quiver in their sandals.

But, no, they wanted an outpost to facilitate trade so badly that they didn’t care their army would have to make a huge detour through Earth and Rivers just to get to the Land of Fire (because trying to cross Rain was a suicide). What did they even imagine they’d do? Take over some trader town somewhere in the borderlands and turn it into a stronghold?

“What the fuck?” Tsunade demanded, and then almost managed to enjoy the disdainful twist of Koharu’s mouth.

“I understand that matters of diplomacy mostly escape you, *Hokage-sama*,” said the old hag, translating roughly to ‘fuck you, bitch’ in the language of stuffy aristocrats, “but it is imperative to maintain at the very least a veneer of civility.”

Tsunade sighed. She cursed like a drunken gambler, but that did not mean she was *stupid*. At least Nara didn’t treat her like she had some sort of mental impairment simply because her blood-alcohol level was rarely below fatal. “Rock does not want to establish diplomatic contact. We *had* diplomatic contact, and then they withdrew. They want war – yes, I *can* tell – but they want Konoha to be the aggressor.” As if that would somehow convince either Rivers or Valleys to ally with Rock?

*I can actually read*, she thought and didn’t say out loud, which, frankly, was another impressive feat of self-control.

“It is too bad we cannot simply delegate these matters to Danzo anymore,” muttered the old woman.

Tsunade found herself clutching one of the discarded empty bottles and about to throw it. “Yes, too bad that we don’t have a warmongering traitor that would pour oil on this forest fire, too!”
Koharu looked appalled.

“Yes,” Tsunade assured her, and the unvoiced sentence came back, more insistent this time: “I can actually read! And I did read up on what the fuck has been happening inside this fucking pit of despair while I was trying to drink my brain away – unsuccessfully, I should add for your benefit!”

“You are a disgrace, Hokage-sama,” Koharu informed her, all injured dignity, and swanned off.

x

“Is she gone?” asked Shikamaru, leaning over the edge of the roof of Nara Clan Head’s house.

Naruto craned his neck. “Who?”

“That demon from hell you call your sister,” grumbled Shikamaru.

“She’s off with Yoshino-ba-san.” Naruto narrowed his eyes. “Speaking off, Yoshino-ba-san said you’re not home today. And seemed kinda angry, what with how you told her you had team training and, boy, was she surprised to see Ino walk in.”

Shikamaru sighed; his head thunked down against the eave. “Ino does this on purpose.”

…she probably did, too. Ino rarely spontaneously decided to visit Yoshino-ba-san, as far as Naruto was aware. He still didn’t know why she insisted on dragging him along, especially if she was going to ditch him – probably in favour of learning to mix fruity cocktails, because that was a life skill she decided Naruto didn’t need.

It wasn’t fair.

“So,” Naruto mused, “I guess you’re not coming down.”

Shikamaru raised his head. “You could come up. I’ve got something here for you.”

“Is it another funny hat?” Naruto asked, chakra-walking up the wall. He loved his tiger hat. Its name was Hodori-san, and it guarded Naruto’s bookcase.

Naruto crouched next to Shikamaru, who flapped a hand in a mute request to be pulled up to a sitting position.

Naruto helped him, reluctantly amused. “You’re so lazy.”

“I use my resources efficiently,” Shikamaru countered. He pulled a sealing scroll from his pocket, and out of it recovered a box of rainbow-coloured mochi. “Don’t share them with Ino. Don’t share them with anybody. These are for you only.”

“Now I’m worried,” Naruto said half-seriously, but he did accept the box (pretty colours!). “What are you going to ask for if you need to bribe me like this?”

“Not a bribe… exactly…”

Naruto took a deep breath. “Shoot.”

Shikamaru squinted at the sky above Naruto’s head. “I need to be subjected to the Yamanaka jutsu. It’s… something that I’ve never experienced, and it leaves a margin of error when I plan team strategies… So, would you?”
Naruto bit his lower lip. He had expected to be asked for some confidential information on someone, or for help with pranking someone, not to… to invade Shikamaru’s mind. That was… He wasn’t sure he was comfortable with that. “Why don’t you ask Ino?”

Shikamaru shuddered. “I emphatically do not want Ino inside my head.”

“But she’s your teammate.”

“And that’s why I trust her never to use that on me, but you…” Shikamaru looked Naruto in the eye and lifted the corner of his mouth. “You I’d trust to use it on me.”

“Oh.” That was… different. Naruto didn’t know what to do with the sudden outpouring of faith, especially since he and Shikamaru weren’t really that close. He’d have thought Shikamaru would be closer to Ino, even though that closeness was often antagonistic. And he was being put on the spot here, with Shikamaru holding eye-contact like he normally never did to apply additional pressure.

Naruto wasn’t going to be that easily squeezed. “Can I… Can I think about it?”

“Sure.” Shikamaru shrugged, like it didn’t matter all that much to him, which was a dirty lie, because otherwise he wouldn’t have mentioned it at all. “I’m not going make you or anything. If you’re uncomfortable…”

He sounded nervous.

And that, Naruto thought while he opened the box and put the orange moshi into his mouth, was very suspicious.

“Dad…?”

Inoichi registered the tone of voice and immediately put away his reading. He already knew all Yuuki’s letters by heart, anyway; he was just feeling a little lonely tonight. And now here was one of his children to keep him company. “Yes, Yoshi?”

Yoshi tugged on his ponytail. “Have you ever gone into a friend’s mind?”

An interesting question. Inoichi had discussed the ethical ramifications of Yamanaka Clan jutsu with his children as they learnt them, but the few personal experiences he had described had all involved enemies or severely impaired allies.

“Oh,” he admitted, “and before you ask, I always had their permission. In fact, your Mum even asked me to do it a few times.” He suppressed a sigh. He wished Yuuki were here, but not at the cost of risking her life to traverse the distance.

That woman had as good as been born with wings. She had remained grounded in Konoha for seven years to bear and nurture Inoichi’s heir, and even that took a great toll on her.

He would never again tie her down like that. “Oh,” Yoshi said eventually. He wound a strand of hair around his fingers.

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“Oh,” Yoshi said eventually. He wound a strand of hair around his fingers.

He did not offer any background for his query, but Inoichi had eyes and ears and a rather well-trained mind, so he could fill in the details. He smirked at his child. “I see.”

“No-”
“You would like to know if I ever used a mind jutsu on her in an intimate moment.”

It was extremely gratifying to see Yoshi go first pale and then bright red. Inoichi’s usually so composed son sputtered a bit before he collected himself, and with a sour look said: “No, that’s not what I wanted to ask. And it’s not what I wanted to know. Holy Izanagi, I never wanted to know that.”

“Then let this be a lesson to you, my child. If you wish to hear a particular answer—”

“-ask a specific question,” Yoshi completed obediently.

Ah, it was a problem of applying theory to practice then. It was Inoichi’s duty then to make sure Yoshi had all the practice he needed.

“I was asking because someone… someone asked me. Out of curiosity, I think. And I’m…”

“Interested?”

“Yes.”

“In trying it or in this person?”

“Yes,” Yoshi repeated, using the cheekiness to hide his embarrassment. “And I wanted to know if that kind of thing is okay. Like, shinobi do a lot of weird stuff to themselves and to each other, but sometimes those things make it impossible… or really unhealthy… to have a relationship. So I wanted to know if this was like that.”

Inoichi shook his head and smiled. “It’s like with all potentially damaging practices – remember *safe, sane and consensual*. ”

Yoshi made an inarticulate sound in the back of his throat and scarpered.

Inoichi was so relieved. Ino had demanded her Clan Talk during her Chuunin Exams; initially Inoichi and Yuuki thought that maybe Yoshi was just taking his time, but when it turned out that the entire Team Seven seemed as good as asexual at an age when they should have been a seething mass of hormones – while their Team Lead toted porn around in public – they began to worry.

It could have been a coincidence. Three very different children behaving this way for three very different reasons. Uchiha, with his trauma at a young age and the ongoing Itachi-related stress, Sakura-chan who had compartmentalised away her baser impulses to the point that she had created at least one separate personality, and Yoshi, who had had a you-know-what sealed inside him when he wasn’t an hour old yet. Plus, either of them could have been asexual by nature. Those were all plausible hypotheses.

But, as years passed, more and more people started looking at Hatake askance.

So hearing Yoshi admit to an interest in a person? A person that was not a plant? Inoichi raised his glass to the moon in a silent toast, and hoped that Yuuki was looking at the same moon wherever her trip had taken her.

x

“That should be everything,” announced Sasuke, more exhausted than triumphant as he sank into his chair at the table in his kitchen (which had been temporarily usurped by the joint forces of Sakura and Yoshi).
He had changed a lot in the past two months, and Sakura watched it all with worry gnawing at her stomach. With Yoshi’s unrelenting support and her own supervision, Sasuke did come back both to Konoha and to himself, although he had lost pieces along the way.

Some of those had been bad pieces; nobody would miss those – like his guilt for not having somehow magically saved his clan, and his fear of Itachi coming back and destroying everything Sasuke had managed to build in the meantime, and Sasuke’s related refusal to get close to anybody. But some had been good, and Sakura hoped that at least those secret wry smiles and the biting deadpan humour would come back with time.

“Great!” exclaimed Yoshi. “Then I’ll take tomorrow off from the Shop, you’ll sleep in and then go catch some sun, because, Sasuke-kun, you’ve started blending with the walls-”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Sakura admonished. He was usually good about table manners – his Mum was strict about them, so both he and Ino were well-trained – but give him ramen and he turned into a pig.

Yoshi obediently swallowed before he continued: “And then on Monday we can start planning. What do you think we should do first, Sakura – promotion or Madara?”

Sakura clicked her chopsticks together in thought. “If the war with Rock kicks off, we’ll get field-promoted anyway and save ourselves the bureaucracy, so…?”

“Good point,” agreed Yoshi. “Besides, we’ll have to be quick about this. Madara is what – a hundred years old? We’ve got to get to him before he croaks, or Sasuke-kun loses the last legitimate enemy and ends up totally revengeless-”

He dodged a vicious stab with chopsticks and laughed… and, to Sakura’s shock, Sasuke joined him. It was a quiet, rusty sound, and it sounded like it hurt. Sakura gaped open-mouthed as the boys migrated together, as Yoshi’s arm came around Sasuke’s shoulders and Sasuke bumped their heads together.

Wow.

She had not thought she would ever see anything like this. She wished Ino were here to see it, too – but at the same time not, because this belonged to Team Seven, it was their own – their accomplishment, in a way – and she wouldn’t share it with anyone (except inner, but that bitch was lost in a lewd fantasy, so she stayed quiet).

Shikamaru supposed that you could bring flowers to a flower shop assistant and have it work. It might come off as ironic, or cutely inept.

He intended to convey neither irony nor ineptitude. He was competent and serious.

Somehow his brainstorming session (spanning two cloud-watching afternoons and resulting in a number of realisations that could get him executed if mentioned out loud) landed him on the perfect idea of a courting gift.

And now, four months later, past Yoshi’s (and Ino’s) uncelebrated birthday, he still hadn’t managed to obtain it. His intractable, obsessive brain was stuck on it to the point that it disallowed him from substituting a less perfect gift, no matter how apt. He hadn’t moved a single step forward with the plan. It felt like he was running out of time if he wanted to strike while the iron was hot enough.
He wanted his iron white-hot.

“Shika…?” Chouji rolled over on the bed.

Shikamaru paused at the door of the room assigned to them – a perk of being hired by a rich client.
“All clear, Chouji. Go back to sleep.”

“Didja… dja… get a… ummm… side-mishun?”

Shikamaru sighed. He wasn’t going to lie to his best friend. If it was Ino asking he would have lied his arse off without compunctions, but to Chouji he only said: “Self-assigned.”

“Ummm?” Still disoriented with sleep, Chouji blinked into the darkness. “That… thing… you been looking for, right? Ummm… d’not get caught…?”

“I won’t,” Shikamaru promised. He had a good enough fake in a storage seal, and it would be weeks, maybe months before anyone noticed the theft. “Night, Chouji.”

He got a snore in response.

He closed the door behind himself and went to rob a private collection of Third War artifacts.

x

“There’s someone at the counter asking for you, Yoshi-kun!” Inoue-ba-san called out over the expanse of the greenhouse.

Naruto finished repotting the baby monstera and promised the others that he would be right back to attend to them.

Since his gloves were soil-encrusted, he hip-checked the door open. He did his best to wipe off his shoes before he trailed a Doton jutsu’s worth of dirt into the shop. He must have looked like a mud man.

“What’s going on, Ba-san? Ayaka-nee said I wasn’t needed today-”

“It’s not a customer, nephew,” she said, chuckling. She laughed harder when she spotted him.

“Hey, Yoshi,” said Shikamaru from where he was leaning against the counter. Couldn’t be bothered to keep himself upright under his own power. “Didn’t mean to pull you away from anything important. If you don’t have the time-”

“I’m busy in the greenhouse,” Naruto said, even though obviously Shikamaru had already inferred that much. “I don’t mind company, but I’ve got work to do.”

“I love glass ceilings,” Shikamaru countered, with just the tiniest hint of sarcasm about the double meaning. “They’re the best for cloud-watching.”

Naruto shrugged and went back to the greenhouse, ignoring Inoue-ba-san’s laughter behind him. Shikamaru did, as expected, follow him, familiar with the Yamanaka Compound after great many Saturdays he had spent here as a child. The Saturdays had never had a set hosting schedule, and most of them took place at the Nara Compound, which had the most privacy and the best grounds. The Akimichi had the best food.

The Yamanaka had… glass ceilings, apparently.
“If you’re looking for a place to hide from Ino…” Naruto said, rounding the birds of paradise, “…you’re actually absolutely correct in coming here. Ino likes the Shop well enough, but there are too few people in the greenhouses for her tastes.”

“I know that,” Shikamaru assured him. “I’m not hiding from Ino. That’s just a pleasant side-effect of coming to see you.”

Naruto was about to protest that Shikamaru never came to see him, when he realised that it wasn’t true. There was a succession of varied snacks brought to Naruto in the late hours of his late shifts at the Shop, with their short conversations usually abruptly ended by customers… and that rainbow box of mochi… and before that the tiger hat. Shikamaru had been coming to see him. And giving him stuff. That Naruto liked.

Naruto didn’t like being blindsided like this.

Fortunately, there were baby monsteras to hide behind. “Hey, kids!” he called out, and went to his knees in front of the bench. “I’m back, and I’m going to make sure you’re all super-comfortable in your pots. That guy? That’s just Shikamaru. Don’t mind him—"

He went on chattering and repotting until he genuinely forgot that Shikamaru was there. When he finished with the last specimen – it took a bit of surgery due to a broken leaf stalk – he looked away and there Shikamaru was, sitting on the floor, leaning back against a plastic canister of diluted fertiliser ready for watering, and looking up through the glass ceiling.

Naruto followed the line of sight. There were very few clouds against the darkening blue sky. “They’re tiny.”

Shikamaru smiled at him. “Not a cloudy day, today.”

“Sorry,” That had to have been disappointing. Not too disappointing though, obviously, since the guy had just spent about three hours observing that not-cloudy sky.

“You’re good company,” Shikamaru assured him, and although it should have been tongue-in-cheek teasing, it was not.

Naruto’s internal alarm shrieked. “You’re okay?” Maybe he was going to ask about the Yamanaka jutsu again. Naruto still hadn’t decided if he was going to do it – but he probably should make a decision soon.

Shikamaru kept smiling, which wasn’t usual for him and itself indicated that the answer was ‘no, I’m not okay’. And he looked nervous again. “I’ve got something for you.”

With some difficulty, Naruto managed to pull off his gloves. “Give me a minute to wash up. I’m all muddy—”

“It looks like war paint.” Shikamaru extended his hand toward Naruto’s face.

Naruto reflexively wiped his cheek. There was a crust.

He must have wiped off sweat with his gloves. He probably looked like a victim pulled out of a mud slide.

The water in the sink was cold – which was healthy for the plants and refreshing for when somebody got thirsty, but not especially great for cleaning humans. Naruto gave up when his hands turned pink, even though the edges of his nails remained black. That could wait until later.
He turned to his guest. “So, what-”

“This,” Shikamaru said, and thrust a small object bundled in a length of cloth at Naruto’s chest.

Naruto reflexively caught it. Already while unwrapping it he could tell it wouldn’t be food. It had weight to it, and soon enough resolved itself into a bladed weapon, and then into a kunai. A three-pronged kunai. Naruto stared at the thing in his hands and, while he knew exactly what it was, he couldn’t believe it.

“I… I can’t take this-”

“Don’t be stupid,” Shikamaru grumbled. “I got it for you. I don’t know anybody else studying fuuinjutsu-”

“Tenten-”

“...and interested in the Hiraishin. If anybody can figure it out it’s you.”

Naruto continued staring at the kunai in his hands – at the delicate sealwork traced into it once upon a time by the Yondaime, who then used it, and others like it, to kill entire platoons of enemies without getting so much as scratched. “Thank you…” he breathed, and finally looked up.

But Shikamaru was gone.

Shikamaru rounded the corner, pressed his back against the dirty alley wall, pulled the shadows around himself and clutched at his chest. His heart was racing like he had just sprinted from Konoha to Tanzaku-Gai.

This was pathetic.

He was about to be promoted to jounin; he had faced down S-class shinobi in the past. He could not fall apart because of a pair of blue eyes…?

But, gods, it was happening.

Inoichi glanced up, experiencing a momentary déjà vu.

His son looked a little shell-shocked, but otherwise he seemed fine, so Inoichi let himself enjoy this. Nonchalantly he put his puzzle book down. “Yes, Yoshi?”

The boy blinked a couple of times and then, wide-eyed, admitted: “I guess I might be asking for that specialised Clan Talk.”

It was all Inoichi could do not to burst into laughter. “Oh?”

Yoshi was slowly losing that perplexed countenance and beginning to blush.

If only Yuuki were here to see this. She got to see a lot of amazing things gallivanting all over the Elemental Countries, but this – this was Inoichi’s reward for staying chained to the old homestead.
“Just in case?” Yoshi tried.

“Oh?”

Yoshi’s shoulders slumped; he hid his eyes with a gesture Inoichi was fairly sure had been copied from him. “I’m beginning to regret I asked.”

“You be ecstatic you asked, son,” Inoichi assured him with no room for levity, “because if I found out you skipped on it to save yourself the embarrassment, I would have embarrassed you a hundred times worse. In public. And then punished you for disobeying your Clan Head’s orders.”

The Yamanaka Clan did not have a whole lot of hard rules about acceptable lovers, but there were a few, and there were a lot more about offspring and marriage (in that order – Inoichi knew teenagers, and himself had once been one).

“Yes, Dad,” Yoshi intoned, imitating his sister almost perfectly. “Can I please have the Talk without the interrogation? I haven’t actually done anything to be interrogated about. Which is, you know, the point.”

Inoichi did, in fact, still remember how he had felt when he had first fallen in love. It hadn’t been Yuuki then, not yet…and it hadn’t been Shikaku either (thankfully that crush had dissipated before they had graduated from the Academy). But it had been overwhelming, and it had warped his rational thinking until he couldn’t recognise himself.

In light of that, Yoshi’s self-reflection was nothing short of astounding.

So Inoichi gave up on the interrogation (he had other sources, anyway). “That’s fair.”

Chapter End Notes

The first love that Inoichi is remembering was Hizashi. They weren’t tragically ripped apart by their duties or anything; it just sort of burnt through in a year or so and they stayed friends until their respective obligations mostly swallowed them. Still, when Hizashi died (plus the circumstances of his death!), *that* sort of ripped Inoichi apart.

He would have picked up Naruto shortly thereafter.

(And, yes, as hinted, Hizashi is where Inoichi had ‘picked up’ a little Gentle Fist.)
Shikamaru had never seen Yoshi’s room.

He had seen Ino’s room once, for a moment.

Chouji had been out of the village for his second try at the Chuunin Exams and Shikamaru made the mistake of seeking refuge from his Mother at the Yamanaka house. Ino was the only one at home, which he had not realised until it was too late and the trap had been sprung. Shockingly, no one had ended at the Hospital: Ino simply fetched a set of mahjong tiles from her room. She barred Shikamaru from coming in with her, of course, and they set the game up downstairs. Not that she was embarrassed; she just plain didn’t like Shikamaru and didn’t want him in her private space.

From where he had been standing in the hallway, Shikamaru could tell that Ino’s bedroom was what he had expected it to be – colour-coordinated, all blues and purples, giving off a cold feel – and at the same time not what he had expected at all. Because it was half a library.

Shikamaru had known her for their entire lives (fourteen years at that time), and he had never pegged her as a bibliophile.

Obviously, she was even better at what she did than he had thought.

Shikamaru’s mind shelved the memory and – with considerable trepidation – prepared to take in the wholly new experience of Yoshi’s own space.

“Go on in.” Yoshi poked him without a hint of self-consciousness, as if it didn’t even occur to him that he was leading an outsider into his inner sanctum for the first time.

The room punched Shikamaru in the gut. He should have expected it – after all, this was Yoshi.

Wonderful and unpredictable Yoshi that had crawled under Shikamaru’s skin when they were knee-high, and stayed there for all these years.

There were books. About half as many as Ino had, although it was hard to judge, since Yoshi kept them in a bookcase, whereas Ino believed in building towers of them wherever there was a flat space. But the books were secondary.

There were plants. If Ino’s room was half a library, Yoshi’s was half a greenhouse, and Shikamaru wished his brain would stop trying to compare them. He already knew that the siblings had extremely different personalities, for all that their public acts seemed so similar.

“Hi, Midori-sensei!” Yoshi said cheerfully. “This is Shikamaru! He’s not really a plant person, but he’s a nature person, so please get along!” He clasped his hands together and bowed to the enormous dragon of a monstera plant that hulked, floor to ceiling, claiming nearly a quarter of the bedroom with its extended leaves.

No wonder Yoshi tended to its smaller relatives with such care. If this was his companion…

Shikamaru went along with it, amused and, well, it wasn’t that much of a drag. He bowed, muttered a ‘nice to meet you, Midori-sensei’, which was apparently all it took to win a smile from Yoshi. Gods, if Yoshi only knew what other kind of idiosyncrasies some other Nara men were willing to cater to out of infatuation, he wouldn’t have been so stunned by basic courtesy. Even if it was extended toward a plant.
There were other plants, too, and Yoshi introduced them – a succulent, something winding along the ceiling and framing the windows that made it seem as though the house itself had sprouted leaves, and a lot of smaller pots with strange, curly leaves. All green – none of them flowering. Perhaps it wasn’t the right season for them, but Shikamaru had the feeling that Yoshi simply liked green, in addition to his orange obsession. As a matter of fact, one of the windows opened into a greenhouse, and obviously doubled as a door.

“Sit,” Yoshi ordered, and pulled Shikamaru by the elbow to the bed.

Then, while Shikamaru was still a little turned around, Yoshi raised his arms in front of his chest in the familiar hand seal and-

Shikamaru blinked. He was doing a handstand in the middle of the room; balance and gravity reasserted themselves, and it was only Yoshi’s hand tightening around his ankle that kept him from falling on his face. “Shit!”

“Can I let go?” Yoshi asked solemnly.

“Yeah.” Shikamaru slowly, carefully, put his feet onto the floor and stood up. His arms were shaking. In fact, all of him was shaking. Yoshi again pulled him to sit on the bed, sat next to him and didn’t let go of his hand. His palm was warm.

“It’s okay,” Yoshi muttered to him. “It’s fine. I’ve got you. Just catch your breath – no, don’t close your eyes. You need the sensory input.”

“That was… not what I expected…” Shikamaru admitted. He had been braced for being taken over and puppeteered around, or for having his thoughts rifled through – he should have been more specific. Asked more questions.

“It’s the technique Ino uses most often in battle,” Yoshi informed him with rueful amusement. “The subject does not expect it, and we usually don’t let them watch what’s happening. If they ever wake up, it’s to complete disorientation. So, authentic experience. You asked for it, Shikamaru.”

He had asked for it. Because he was an infatuated moron.

Shikamaru leaned in and kissed Yoshi. He meant to wait for Yoshi’s surprise to abate before doing anything more than putting their faces together, but there was no surprise. Yoshi was smiling against his mouth.

So Shikamaru decided that to hell with it and went for broke.

It took them a little bit to figure out the angle, and teeth, and – okay – the drooling, and Shikamaru couldn’t focus. His heart raced like mad; Yoshi’s arms locked around his waist, pulling him closer into the radiating warmth. And – surprise! – Shikamaru found himself feeling enthusiastic.

Yoshi apparently could perform actual miracles.

Either way, Shikamaru loved him. A lot. A stupid lot. And wanted him this close for the rest of their lives… which, sadly, would be very short, because at about this point breathing became a major issue-

They broke apart to pant.

“Okay…” Yoshi huffed, “that… needs more… practice.”
Shikamaru nodded. And smirked.

“What?”

“This is…” Shikamaru glanced up and then got completely sidetracked, staring at Yoshi’s reddened lips, and his flushed cheeks, and his wide blue eyes. Uh… what had he been saying? Something about miracles…? Oh – right. “…the first time training won’t be troublesome at all.”

He had a follow-up thought – Ino-induced, he was absolutely certain – that it might at some point get to be pain in the arse, but he had a lot more class than to say something like that out loud.

For now, there was him in a chuckling Yoshi’s arms and more kissing to do.

x

“Disgraceful,” Kurama grumbled.

There were swarms of brightly coloured butterflies all over the blossoming mindscape meadow. It was revolting.

“Heh.” The little worm sheepishly rubbed the back of its neck and cast a sideways look at Kurama’s muzzle, as if he was contemplating the logistics of vulpine osculation. “I didn’t think a chakra construct would know a lot about kissing, demon-san.”

Kurama rolled his eyes. “I was sealed in two Uzumaki women and, believe me, they knew how to control a man. Mostly by leaving him insensate in his own bed. I don’t imagine an Uzumaki boy would have any trouble achieving the same effect.”

“Huh?” opined the jailer. “Are you offering tips?”

For Sage’s sake, why were all these hairless apes so unceasingly dumb? “Just roll him over and mount him, it’s not that complicated.”

x

Naruto strategically left his room through the greenhouse window to avoid any unpleasant encounters in the hallway, but his sister apparently knew him far too well, because when he tried to sneak out through the Shop she was loitering around and waiting for him.

Ino raised her eyebrows at him.

Naruto scowled.

She blinked mock-innocently.

He rolled his eyes. Like she was one to talk.

Ino snorted and punched his shoulder. “Better you than me, brother.”

“I get that,” Naruto said quietly, checking that Taimei was too busy to eavesdrop on their conversation. “You’ve never liked the Shikamaru you see. I’m not sure if I would like the Shikamaru you see. But I like the one he turns into around me.” It was a little disconcerting, but it was also textbook behaviour, so he simply used it as a case study and enjoyed himself. “He changes for me. I make him into somebody that I like very much.”

Ino’s eyes narrowed at the word ‘like’. “Him, or the power you have over him?”
Naruto danced by her with a smirk. “Yes.”

He fled to the Uchiha Compound, determined to stay the night. That way he and Sasuke could go for a run tomorrow in the morning, then have breakfast, and then train a bit before Sakura arrived.

Sasuke took one look at Naruto, frowned, and said: “You’re different.”

“So are you,” Naruto retorted, because he wasn’t going to discuss his… dalliance with anybody until he was a little surer about what he and Shikamaru were even doing. He had hopes, but that way lay crushing disappointment and the shattering of a heart he already had to painstakingly glue together once before. “Is that a new haircut?”

Sasuke rolled his eyes, but did not deny it. Instead he went back to the kitchen, where Sakura could be heard humming while she set the table. “Dinner, Yoshi, and then I’ll get to kick your arse into the ground. We haven’t sparred in…”

“Ages,” Naruto filled in. He missed it, too. Missions were fun, but he was brimming with nervous energy that would have been dangerous in the field. He laughed and punched the air. “Yosh!”

After a whole day spent trading blows – and banter – with his teammates, Naruto felt like he was walking on a cloud and there was a fountain full of detergent inside his chest. So many bubbles!

Also, date! His first official date, in fact. First real date. But it oddly felt exactly like all the other times he had convinced one of his friends to go and get dango with him. And – he pouted realising this – now he wouldn’t get to cash in that rain check from Shino. Even if they went out together, it wouldn’t be going out. Not even in that ‘Naruto flirting and Shino pretending he hadn’t noticed out of politeness’ kind of way.

He was going to miss that. Winding up Shino was its own reward – guy needed to unwind, and Naruto gladly helped him get to the point where he relaxed his self-containment enough to let his personality leak through-

“Oh,” said Shikamaru. He was sitting on a step in front of a weapons shop opposite Yoshi’s usual dango place. “Not in the mood for dumplings?”

“Hungry,” Naruto replied. They had trained hard. Sakura was, like, a death machine, and Sasuke took that comment Yoshi had made to him a long time ago about being the silent throat-slitting darkness as a challenge, and Naruto was only keeping up with them because he had had demon-san stuffed in him.

But, hey, Sasuke had smiled four times today, and that was the true extent of Naruto’s powers.

“I invited you out,” said Shikamaru. “You choose the restaurant.”

Out. As in, in public. Public was fine. Public was great. It was great that Shikamaru wasn’t interested in being discreet. Naruto wasn’t truly panicking (just yet), but as far as he knew – and, oh, he knew, because Ino told him – Shikamaru had never dated anybody. Dating seemed too troublesome to him.

So he was, probably, at least somewhat serious?

“Any restaurant?” Naruto asked a little shakily. “What if you don’t like the food?”
Shikamaru pulled himself up to his feet, stuck his hands in his pockets, and shrugged. “Eh, you’ll enjoy it. And next time we try something different.”

Naruto was faced with a difficult choice: he called it The Wasabi Peanut Dilemma. Because Yoshi’s favourite restaurant was not Naruto’s favourite restaurant, and it was far safer to remain Yoshi, but if he really wanted a real relationship with Shikamaru, he would have to be Naruto for him.

Shikamaru’s face smoothed out into careful neutrality once the silence dragged on too long. “I didn’t expect that to be a difficult question.”

Naruto waved his hands – his own gesture, which Yoshi didn’t use, and which was startled out of him because he was in a Naruto frame of mind. He stopped doing that quickly, turned away and hung his head, trying to get a hold of himself-

Shikamaru pulled Naruto’s ponytail to the side and kissed the back of his neck. The signal went from that patch of skin all through Naruto’s body to the tips of his toes.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” Shikamaru said quietly. Obviously, his mind was already whirring, coming up with theories about why this was a difficult question and what had tripped up Yoshi so badly, and this was going to end in a disaster. “I’ll pick the restaurant this time?”

Or was it the restaurant part, was the unvoiced question in the air.

Naruto honestly didn’t mind being seen in public with Shikamaru – trying to keep them secret was sort of ridiculous, and they had too many secrets between them already, being shinobi on different teams (and Naruto having spent most of his life basically undercover), so even though Shikamaru sounded like he might have gone for it anyway, Naruto was going to save them from a huge blow up. “It’s not like Ino hasn’t figured it out.”

Shikamaru groaned, and then his heavy head thunked down onto Naruto’s shoulder. “Your sister is an evil witch.”

Shikamaru didn’t need to be psych-trained to see that Yoshi wasn’t trusting him. It was not like Yoshi didn’t trust him – there was a difference. Yoshi did trust him, or else Shikamaru wouldn’t have gotten a single genuine reaction out of him, much less admission of uncertainty. But it still rankled.

Even worse: this was yet another instance when Shikamaru had to admit he had made his bed. What reason had he given Yoshi to believe that Shikamaru would always be on his side? None. The opposite, actually, since Yoshi must have internalised the misinterpretation of ‘the Ditching’ (as Ino called it) that Shikamaru himself had perpetuated.

In short, Yoshi believed that Shikamaru had once ditched him, because he had overheard a very mild unflattering remark about himself.

Simply explaining his reasoning now would not undo the years of Yoshi’s perception of events and re-align his worldview on the spot.

“You’re not enjoying yourself,” Yoshi noted.

Shikamaru sighed. “Thinking.”

“Dark thoughts?”
“Not dark.” Shikamaru shook his head. “Just heavy.” He reached out for Yoshi, because physical contact was reassuring. This was difficult – he was not accustomed to giving anyone promises. “Did you know I once told Ino that if she didn’t want you, I would take you for myself? I’d like to do that.”

Yoshi initially laughed, but gradually realised that Shikamaru meant this earnestly. Lines appeared on his forehead. “When was this?”

“About twelve years ago,” Shikamaru said nonchalantly, flicking his fingers dismissively like that didn’t even matter.

Yoshi gaped. “How do you even remember that?! Oh Izanagi…”

“Of course I remember it. It was the first time we met.” Thank gods (and his Mother) for Shikamaru’s ability to say shit like that and look like he couldn’t hear how it sounded.

He just had to hope Yoshi wouldn’t laugh in his face again.

Yoshi didn’t laugh. He contemplated for a while, and then he asked: “You’re leaving for a mission later, right? So, come back safe, and I’ll track you down. We’ll talk then-”

And he body-flickered away.

Shikamaru would have preferred being laughed at.

x

“Dad?”

This was becoming a habit, Inoichi thought. Only instead of occupying himself with something he could readily put down, tonight he was in the middle of checking the shop accounts; owing to Rikuto’s specific style of record keeping it meant that if he stopped now, he would have to start from scratch… “Yes, Yoshi?”

Yoshi trudged into the study, droopy like an unwatered plant. Oh, well, romance was a thorny road for everybody, and Yoshi was rather like a hawthorn himself – bloomed beautiful, but drew his pint of blood when you tried to hold him too tightly.

“I…uhm. The people who know about…” He patted his stomach.

Inoichi’s breath hitched. Of course he had considered – and planned contingencies for, and woke from nightmares of – what would happen if anyone found out Yoshi’s birth name, or even ‘just’ somehow discovered what was sealed inside him. How had he not seen what an impact the need for secrecy would have on any romantic relationship Yoshi might try to establish?

Merciful Izanagi.

Why couldn’t his son be more like his daughter? It would have been so much easier on the boy. A little flirtation here, a little affair there – a game with stakes low enough that he would not need to wager his entire life.

Yoshi’s eyes remained glued to the floor for a while, before they lifted to look at Inoichi, reflecting all the conclusions Inoichi was just arriving at. “I… I know I can’t talk about it. But that means I can’t… Dad, can I afford to disclose what my favourite restaurant is?”
Inoichi was out of his chair and holding his – now crying – son to his chest. Yoshi came up to his chin – when did that happen? – but he trembled in his arms just like he used to when he was a tiny boy whom Inoichi would cart around under one arm (and who would squeal with joy at being treated so).

“And what if somebody licks through the wasabi and discovers the peanut inside-”

“I trust you not to put your family into danger,” Inoichi cut him off before he sustained more visual-imagination-related trauma.

He instantly felt ashamed. Could he have said anything crueler?

“Trust is so hard, Dad,” Yoshi complained. “People break it all the time.”

“Not…” Inoichi swallowed. “Not the people who matter. It’s up to us to only let the people that won’t break our trust matter to us.” Well, thus he proved he could have said a crueler thing.

Somehow, though, it seemed to help. Yoshi pushed away from him, and even though there were still tear tracks on his face, he looked like he was scheming already. “That does put things into perspective. Thanks, Dad!”

Inoichi had no clue what he had done, but he smiled and said: “Anytime, son.”

Then he dropped back into his chair, glared blearily at the accounts, and started again from the beginning.

Shikamaru saw more of Naruto than nearly anyone else, because they had known each other before Naruto had been fully trained to present himself as Yoshi. Chouji only had hazy memories of that time, but Shikamaru actually remembered Yoshi well enough to know that he had not just changed – that he was undercover.

Their families already trusted each other with almost everything. Shikamaru’s parents knew about Naruto, and Shikamaru himself had never given any reason to not be trusted just as much, so rather than a big dramatic reveal, it would be enough for Naruto to sort of let Shikamaru back in-

“Thinking hard?”

Naruto startled at Ayaka’s voice, spilling a little fertilizer over the rim of the flower bed. Then he realised that he had poured far too much into the flower bed, and if he didn’t want the begonias to overeat and probably die, he would have to replant the whole thing.

He groaned.

Ayaka-nee patted his shoulder. “Anything you want to talk about to a human being?”

“Why do you think the Ino-Shika-Cho team assignment is so necessary?”

Ayaka paused in examining the over-fertilised flowers. “I always assumed it was a compatibility thing? And, also, the perfect combination of skills, or something?”

That would have made sense if Ino was just like Dad, and Shikamaru just like Shikaku-ji-san and Chouji just like Chouza-ji-san. But they weren’t. They were different people and their skills were different, too.
“They’re all Clan Heirs,” Naruto mused. And he knew that it wasn’t that his parents loved him any less than they loved Ino, but in the bigger scope of things Ino was more important to the Clan, so she had to be better protected. “They were born around the same time, to make sure they could be on a team together.”

“Hm,” Ayaka replied. She knelt at the opposite end of the flower bed and started shoveling the contaminated soil out. “I never thought about it that way, but it makes sense. Maybe with the other clans, too, although they don’t have such close relationships between them, and the politics shift a lot…”

Naruto nodded, mirroring Ayaka’s movements from his side, and quietly apologising to the begonias for having been so distracted that he put them into danger. Even though he felt a little guilty, he still couldn’t stop smiling. “We can trust the Cho- and the Shika- more than anyone else.”

And if Shikamaru needed a reminder? Well, Chouji wasn’t using the nickname anymore, but that didn’t mean that Naruto had forgotten it.

“You don’t deserve him,” Ino said, so calm and direct that Shikamaru immediately reconsidered fobbing her off.

And he had noticed the army Ino had led here and left stationed at the edges of the square (just out of earshot but within sight) to ensure that nobody would bother her if she decided to take her time with him. There was Sakura, of course, and Hinata, but unexpectedly also the entire Team Shibi and three more young women that Shikamaru could not identify, one of whom was a civilian.

The kunoichi guarding the Gate pretended she hadn’t noticed anything.

It was a subtle reminder of Ino’s social power.

Shikamaru knew Ino (knew her better than he knew Yoshi, and that was something he would have to remedy as soon as possible), and he had seen her like this before. She probably would not kill him, at least not directly, but she was perfectly capable of ‘fucking’ with his mind, as she liked to put it. He was not sure if he could defend himself effectively.

He needed to sleep sometime.

There were many women.

The Yamanaka siblings were universally beloved, and Ino could fake grief at Shikamaru’s funeral so convincingly that nobody would ever suspect her of murdering him. Or of having commissioned his death.

“Nobody does,” Shikamaru replied, which had the advantage of being the truth, sufficiently flattering to Yoshi, and not casting a judgment of Shikamaru’s own relative worth as compared to that of other potential suitors.

“He said once that he likes people who are strong and kind. Strong I’d give you, when you can be arsed. But kind?” Ino scoffed. “I’ve seen rabid tanuki kinder than you.”

Shikamaru reached out for the shadow of the tree above them, just in case.

“You will learn,” Ino hissed, implying that her first loyalty would always be to her family, and that he was not included in that. “You will become the paragon of kindness. And you will worship him
like he deserves, or I’ll find the kindest person in the Land of Fire to help him get over how you tragically died on a mission. Got it?”

Women, Shikamaru had always suspected, were going to be the death of him. He would be entirely unsurprised if this turned out to be literal.

But he agreed with Ino on several points. Mainly that an unsmiling Yoshi would be a tragedy, and that if anyone ever made Yoshi resort to drinking out of ceaseless frustration, Shikamaru would slit their throat in the dead of night himself. He and Yoshi would not be like Shikamaru’s parents. Shikamaru would not let Yoshi’s melancholia fester like that.

“Hey- Damn, guys, are you fighting again?”

“Hi, Chouji,” replied Ino.

The tone of her voice was enough for Chouji to let it go. He glanced fearfully at the congregating girls, and decided to pretend that he had not seen anything at all.

Well, Chouji had always been the smart one.

x

Half a day after Team Asuma’s return from their dirty, muddy B-rank, Shikamaru found himself sitting at the counter of a small ramen stall. He had eaten here before, of course – he had eaten at every non-contaminated food place in Konoha. That was what being friends and teammates with an Akimichi did to you.

There was a cheerful young woman behind the counter who greeted Yoshi by name, and jokingly told Shikamaru: “Don’t offer to pay for this boy before you see him eat.”

“Too late,” admitted Shikamaru, and felt a sliver of dread when she laughed at him.

Yoshi ate eight bowls of ramen. Eight. He looked like he was considering another, but when he saw Shikamaru’s incredulous stare he chuckled sheepishly and, tugging at his ponytail, muttered: “I did go sorta overboard, huh?”

Shikamaru paid, feeling awed rather than dismayed (where was Yoshi putting all the noodles?!). “I’m taking it as a life lesson.”

“He went easy on you!” the vendor lady called after them in a singsong voice.

Shikamaru gave Yoshi a quizzical look, which was answered with another sheepish chuckle. Very well. That was it. Shikamaru was at the point when he would have to wave a white flag or pull out all the stops, because nothing could be done halfway when it came to this reality-defying creature.

“I promised you a talk,” said Yoshi.

“Let’s find some privacy for this,” Shikamaru replied instead of denying the need for a conversation.

They ended up on top of the Hokage Mountain, a leaf’s throw from the Yondaime’s head, which was uncomfortable for a slew of reasons Shikamaru was not at liberty to reference. Instead he kissed Yoshi for a while – glad that this hadn’t changed – and focused so hard on not thinking of the Yondaime that he managed to trick himself into pulling out the ring before his conscious mind registered what he was doing-
Yoshi spotted it out of the corner of his eye and reacted to the unexpected glint of metal like any trained shinobi would. He almost broke Shikamaru’s arm, kicked his feet from under him and barely pulled the blow that would have shattered his jaw if allowed to land full-force.

Yoshi froze for a moment, then turned away and started pacing up-and-down, up-and-down, like a caged tiger. He muttered several phrases that would have made Ino blush, while Shikamaru gingerly sat up and checked that nothing was broken. So far so good – he could deal with a few bruises.

It took Yoshi a minute to exercise off the surge of adrenalin; then he came back and looked at Shikamaru as if nothing about him made sense.

“I’ve never dated anybody because I never wanted anybody but you,” Shikamaru tried to explain. It felt at the same time like taking off weights after taijutsu training, and like taking another step closer to his executioner.

“How long have you been planning this?” Yoshi asked breathlessly.

Shikamaru laughed with just a tinge of hysteria. He placed his clenched fists on his knees and lowered his head between them – that was what you were supposed to do to prevent hyperventilating, wasn’t it? “I have notes on preliminary wedding arrangements and the floor plan for our shared apartment from when I was five. I bought the ring with the payout from my first B-rank. So, this is for you.”

He opened his left hand. The ring lay in it, a bit sweaty by now, but no less glittery.

Yoshi squatted and took it, fingertips brushing against Shikamaru’s palm. “You’re kidding. No, wait, I don’t mean that, obviously you’re not kidding-”

Shikamaru cupped Yoshi’s cheek and gently turned his head so that he could meet his eye. “Don’t panic. I’m not asking you any questions right now.” Making himself understood was difficult. He had it all mapped and annotated in his head, but language was too imprecise a medium to convey his thoughts concisely. “It’s just an explanation. Of what I mean. Of how serious I am about this.”

“Holy Izanagi.” Yoshi stared down at the ring for a while and then put it on. He experimentally moved his hand to watch it glitter.

Obviously, it wasn’t to be worn on missions. But it matched the necklace Yoshi wore, and that had been on purpose. Shikamaru had a rationale behind it, citing the symbolism of family and wishing to belong to it, and making accessorising easier. Yes, he was aware that he tended to overanalyse everything.

The prosaic truth was that this was the ring he thought would fit Yoshi. And it did, yellow gold and sky-blue zircon and all.

Yoshi leaned in, gave Shikamaru a short, close-mouthed kiss and whispered a secret: “Ichiraku’s Ramen is my real favourite restaurant.”

“And,” Shikamaru extrapolated, “your real favourite food is ramen. Not dango.” Not any of those offerings he had brought to the Yamanaka Flowers in the late evenings, hoping to stumble upon the correct answer to Ino’s leading question.

“No,” Yoshi admitted, “not dango. Don’t tell anyone?”

As if Shikamaru ever would.
Naruto liked living in a clan compound. There was *family* everywhere, and even if you didn’t get along, you weren’t nasty to one another. If you ever felt lonely, it was easy to find someone to spend time with. It was good.

It was *not* private. There was family *everywhere*. Yoshi could not have brought home a guest without everyone knowing about it within ten minutes of their arrival.

“What do *you* do?” he asked Ino while she touched up his roots.

“Sometimes hotel, but that can get kind of sleazy,” Ino said, unashamed of her wide array of experience. She handled Naruto’s hair deftly (she didn’t even pull anymore, unless she was particularly annoyed with him) and about five times more efficiently than Naruto could have done it himself.

Maybe he should have asked her to show Sakura how to do it, or Sasuke – honestly, Sasuke seemed like the type that might enjoy hairdressing or barbering, what with the sharp blades in close proximity to people’s jugulars – but Naruto liked these brother/sister moments.

“Mostly, though,” Ino continued, a little muffled through the pins she had stuck between her teeth, “they’ve got their own apartments, so we go there.”

Naruto latched onto the idea. It made perfect sense! They were legally adults, almost-adult by civilian standards, too, and perfectly able to take care of themselves. The only reason why Ino wasn’t chomping at the bit to move out was the convenience of sharing resources and the short trip to her part-time job behind the Shop counter.

“So,” Naruto said two days later to Shikamaru, “about that shared apartment with that floor plan you drew when you were five…”

Shikamaru opened his eyes a sliver. “I didn’t expect to be fielding this question just yet.”

Naruto thought this was unusually short-sighted of Shikamaru, because he might have kept his questions silent, but there was jewelry and extremely valuable, unique weaponry obtained under suspicious and probably life-risking circumstances. Shikamaru could hide behind his flimsy alibi, but Naruto knew what was happening.

This time. For a change. Finally, after years of acting seemingly irrationally, Shikamaru had deigned to share the blueprints behind his actions.

“I’ve decided,” Naruto informed him, “that you’re being deliberately obtuse. Because the alternative is that you think I am stupid, and I doubt—”

“I wouldn’t like you if you were stupid.”

Naruto rolled his eyes at the wording but didn’t waste his breath arguing about it. He had more important things to discuss. “Does that mean it’s a hypothetical apartment, or just that you literally didn’t expect me to ask yet?”

“It’s theoretical,” Shikamaru allowed. “We’d have to sign papers and I’d have to transfer the money—”
“So it’s all set up and primed and waiting for me to say something before the trap springs? And I have savings. You’re not paying for everything.”

As opposed to the Hyuuga, the Yamanaka were not a **Noble Clan**, and thus could fund themselves by operating businesses (and most of the clansmen part-timed for those businesses without pay). Naruto wasn’t required to surrender all he earned to the collective and justify what he spent on his gear to the holder of the bank accounts.

He and Ino had a lot of opinions about the Hyuuga Clan.

Shikamaru finished his brief foray into self-reflection and admitted: “I might have gone a little overboard.”

“You went ‘a little’ overboard when we were eight and you stopped being my friend. You went ‘a lot’ overboard for Yondaime’s kunai. This is just straight up insane.”

Shikamaru shrugged, unselfconscious, closed his eyes and pretended to fall asleep.

Damn Ino. She really was right about the relative attractiveness of messed-up people thing. But Naruto would never, ever tell her.

Naruto grinned. “Let’s do it.”

x

Shikamaru went from napping to staring wide-eyed.

There was no arguing with that mischievous grin, even if he couldn’t believe that Yoshi was actually going along with this fanciful scheme. **It was** insane.

But it wasn’t as though Shikamaru would protest. This was like some of his wilder daydreams coming true around him, and he was absolutely going along with it.

x

“This,” Naruto said as they turned into the exterior hallway, “is Kakashi’s apartment.”

“…not anymore?” Shikamaru pointed out. He moved to reach for the door, but Naruto grabbed him by the back of his t-shirt and pulled; then he had to catch the lump before he hit the ground.

“Please tell me you don’t want me to carry you over the threshold,” Shikamaru deadpanned. “You can carry me over the threshold if you must.”

Naruto snorted and settled him back on his feet. “I’d prefer not to spend the day extracting your unconscious body from the traps.”

“They remove traps when the previous occupant moves out.” Shikamaru failed not to use his ‘I’m talking to stupid’ tone of voice.

Naruto laughed so hard he clutched at his belly. Oh, that was a good one. “You don’t know Kakashi. Trust me… or at least trust my professional paranoia.”

Just as Naruto expected, there were traps. They were milder than the adjusted seal he had left for Kakashi – he had never heard of the outcome of that, by the way. He might have to bribe Iruka-sensei. Or Anko-san. In any case, the extant latticework of seals was inconspicuous and vindictive as though Kakashi had decided to pay it forwards to the unfortunate next occupant of the apartment.
Naruto spent the next three hours untangling that mess without setting off anything. He had half-expected that Shikamaru would get bored and move off to watch clouds or something, but when he finally sat back and wiped sweat off his forehead, Shikamaru was curled up against the banister and watching him intently.

“I’ve never seen anything like that.”

Naruto shrugged. “It’s what I do. Or, like, part of what I do. That’s… that’s why you gave me Yondaime’s kunai, isn’t it?”

“It was the perfect gift,” Shikamaru non-explained. “So, is it safe to enter now?”

Naruto grimaced. “It’s safe to open the door.”

Their apartment was hard-won, but it was safe and theirs and… empty.

Shikamaru slumped against a door frame. “I’ve spent hours just watching you and I’m tired…”

Yoshi finished drinking from the tap and grinned. “My brain’s sludge. I’m not doing any more thinking today. But tired? Nah. We’ve just been lazing about.”

Shikamaru had known what he was asking for when he set out to win Yoshi, so he once again only had himself to blame. “We’d have less than two hours before stores close…”

“And you have a mission starting tomorrow,” Yoshi pointed out. “My team’s leave is over the day after. When will be the next time our days off will coincide and neither of us will be injured?”

Shikamaru groaned. He hated logic. It was difficult to argue with. “I need to stop by the bank—”

“I told you I have money,” Yoshi cut him off. “Stop looking for excuses and let’s go. If you need me to carry you—”

“I’m going…” Shikamaru wasn’t yet so far gone that he would subject himself to the slew of uncomfortable questions that would inevitably follow if he were spotted being lugged around Konoha by his teammate’s brother.

But walking was a drag, so maybe in a couple of months…?

“Of course, my students are menaces,” complained Kakashi, kicking off his sandals.

Iruka blinked up from where he was trying to wash an odd purple stain out of his trousers. “That is almost word for word what I was going to say.”

“Oh?” Kakashi discarded his vest and then flopped down onto the tatami so he could dourly stare at the ceiling and feel unappreciated. “Did they destroy hours of your meticulous work, laugh about it, and go off to plan a coup?”

There was a while of silence only filled with sounds of running water and splashing. Then Iruka said: “Actually, yes. That’s a good description of what happened.”

Kakashi had thought that infatuation was a thing that went away. But apparently he was dysfunctional about this, too. He decided to at least not be bitter that Minato-sensei’s and Kushina-
nee-san’s son was talented enough at seals to completely pulverise Kakashi’s work of art, or that he would probably become Hokage within a few years… Come to think of it, Kakashi would endorse Yoshi if it would save himself from the Hat.

“Is Konohamaru-kun plotting to assassinate Tsunade again?” he inquired.

Sandaime’s grandson was about to graduate, and he seemed to be using every single opportunity to create mayhem while he had the chance.

Iruka huffed a rueful laugh. “No, no. He diversified. His class put Daikoku into hospital, and Suzume asked for a week off for her mental health, so if I don’t come home tomorrow, it’s because I’m sleeping on the desk in my office, protecting those few test papers that have escaped immolation and trying to keep the Academy from being taken over by pre-gennin.”

“Hmm,” Kakashi mused, “assassinating pre-gennin *en masse* can’t be higher than a B-rank. Take a commission, and I’ll put my team on it. Might keep them out of trouble for a couple of days.”

“Oh, are Yoshi, Sasuke and Sakura plotting to assassinate Tsunade-sama?”

Kakashi would have liked to definitively say no but, sadly, he was not sure. And now that they had suborned Nara-kun, they were well capable of staging a coup if they wanted to.

x

“No, we even need a sofa?” asked Shikamaru.

They hadn’t even discussed whether they would go traditional and get a kotatsu, or modern, and that felt like something they should talk about before they made any purchases. Why was this so complicated? He could already predict an argument about chairs-

Yoshi scoffed, grabbed Shikamaru by the loose fabric of his shirt and dragged him down the length of the warehouse directly toward the futons. “K-I-S-S.”

“Don’t call me stupid, Blondie,” Shikamaru grumbled. But it was a token protest. He agreed with *keeping it simple*.

Right. The rest of the furniture could wait until later, when they had larger funds and a better idea of what they wanted (after Yoshi had had a chance to give his input on the floorplan). For now they really only needed… hmm… towels, bedding and toilet paper.

x

“Hi, Dad!”

Inoichi paused with the chopsticks halfway to his mouth, and warily watched his daughter skip across the kitchen, examine the contents of the pot and avail herself to a bowl of chicken soup that Inoichi had painstakingly created from his late mother-in-law’s recipe.

“Enjoy your meal,” he said dryly as Ino dug in.

“f wffm!” she informed him.

“Somewhere,” he mused, “your Mother has just sneezed, and has no idea why she feels despair creep upon her.”

She didn’t outwardly react – far be it from Inoichi’s princess to show an ounce of shame – but she
did swallow before she spoke again. “It’s awesome. You’ve got really good at chicken soup, Daddy!”

Inoichi snorted. “Try harder, darling. I shan’t be bought that cheaply.”

Ino unrepentantly shrugged. “Oh, well. It was worth a try.”

“Spill,” he ordered.

“It’s not like you won’t notice that Yoshi’s not coming home today,” she shared with false nonchalance betrayed by effervescing excitement.

They grew up so fast, Inoichi thought glumly. Just a little while ago they were both tiny and innocent – well, innocent for two spawns of hell – and now even the second one started spending his nights off-mission elsewhere. He had known it was coming, of course, and abstractly was glad for it, but he couldn’t deny his apprehension. At least Ino knew where Yoshi was and who was there with him.

“You’re not worried, then?” he inquired. He wasn’t fishing for any secrets – his kids had a right to their privacy – but he would have liked a little reassurance.

Ino snorted. “About Yoshi? Are you kidding, Dad?”

Inoichi reflected on this for a moment, and then decided that he felt sufficiently reassured.

There were two empty take-out boxes in a plastic bag by the front door (because they didn’t have a rubbish bin) and two glasses of water on the floor (no bedside) next to the spread futon, on which was lying a drowsy Yoshi.

Shikamaru watched him and felt unprecedentedly adult.

“I’m bringing Midori-sensei,” Yoshi announced, staring at the opposite corner of the room. The monstera would fit there… if they gave up on any other bedroom furniture. “She’s been with me forever.”

Why not? Shikamaru thought. They could make do with just one bedside. “Of course. She’s part of the family.”

“Family… heh.” Yoshi grinned up at him. “This is going to be a little strange for a while, I guess.”

“Will it?” Shikamaru did not think it would be too great a change. “It seems to me like we’ve been family since the Yamanaka adopted you. Not always close, but always loyal.” He brushed Yoshi’s hair out of his face. Unlike in the past when he was mostly focused on moving it away so he could see those eyes and that smile, this time he took the opportunity to stroke the skin of Yoshi’s cheeks. He palpated the invisible whisker-scars.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Yoshi agreed, by rote, completely distracted. He gave Shikamaru a little time to indulge, and then caught his wrist in a vise-like grip. “I want to tell you my real name.”

Shikamaru leaned down and kissed him so that he wouldn’t see the eye-roll. “Yamanaka Yoshi is your real name, Blondie.”

Yoshi, on the other hand, didn’t bother to hide his eye-roll at all. “Ugh, I’m not smart enough to debate philosophy with you. Also, sludge-brain, Deer-hart.”
Shikamaru cringed at the awfulness of that pet name. It was all the more awful for being admittedly clever.

“All those kinda things – who am I, why am I here, where are we all going… It’s only important when people make it important.”

“It is important,” Shikamaru argued, referring to the name-change rather than all those rhetorical questions Yoshi had suggested. “It shaped you. Whoever you used to be-”

“If you don’t want me to tell you-” Yoshi cut himself off. He sat up and scrutinised Shikamaru’s expression so closely that his eyes crossed and their noses bumped. “Is my real name a burden, Deerhart?” he asked with a stinging bite. “Will it bother you to have to keep my secrets? Because if so, we might as well-”

“No!” Shikamaru snapped. He knew he was being manipulated, but damn it, he didn’t see another way out of this conversational trap. “That’s not what I meant.” He took advantage of their positions and wove his hand in Yoshi’s wild mess of hair.

“I want to tell you,” Yoshi implored in a tone that went straight to Shikamaru’s cock. “That’s why I brought it up. Let me?”

“Why now? If it’s because of-” He grabbed Yoshi’s hand and raised it so that the ring glinted in the light of their bare light-bulb. “This was not supposed to be an exchange.”

“If we do it right, it’s always gonna be an exchange. And why ask, if you already know the answer?”

Shikamaru’s diaphragm hurt, so hard he tried not to laugh. He leaned closer, so he could whisper in Yoshi’s ear: “We both know the answer, Naruto.”

Yoshi froze. Thanks to the damn good hold Shikamaru had on him he didn’t even try to get away, but it took him a couple of minutes to crunch through all the implications of this – Shikamaru understood – potentially fatal intelligence leak. At least he didn’t protest being petted while he thought.

“Damn,” he said eventually, pulling away just far enough that he could look Shikamaru in the eye. “And I was looking forward to this.”

Shikamaru slumped in relief. It had been a pretty dangerous test of Yoshi’s trust, and he was glad that he had passed. He pressed an apologetic kiss to Yoshi’s nape. “Can I make it up to you with sex?”

Yoshi raised his eyebrows. “I don’t know. Can you?”

Shikamaru wasn’t entirely sure, but he was eager to try.

“Pekopeko,” Yoshi whispered and bit the edge of Shikamaru’s jaw hard enough to leave toothmarks.

Shikamaru groaned, but in exasperation rather than lust. “Must you…?”

“You’re looking… perky,” his Mother blurted, a little frightened, as she spied Shikamaru swaggering
in for a change of clothes before his team meeting.

“My twelve-year-long campaign has borne fruit.” Shikamaru smirked and took a loud, crunching bite of his apple.

“Oh my gods!” she exclaimed, and through tears of laughter demanded: “Who’s the lucky lady?!”

“How don’t you know that yet, woman?!” Shikamaru yelled back, and practically floated up the stairs to his bedroom.
“It is… good to see you well, Father,” Shino said tentatively. They were not usually prone to such effusiveness, but in this situation Shino felt moved to articulate his feelings clearly, as he had learned to do from observing Yoshi-san.

His Father appeared momentarily taken aback, but upon giving the sentence due consideration accepted its content with a nod. “I have lost an entire colony. I have nearly lost my team. I would have, if not for Ami-kun’s expertise.”

Shino lowered his head in respect.

“S-sensei…? Oh.”

One of Shino’s Father’s former students – subordinates now, since they had all achieved the rank of chunin – stood in the doorway of the nearest hospital room, appearing unhealthy in the extreme and evidencing several injuries. It seemed inadvisable for her to have left her bed, as she was clearly in danger of losing consciousness.

“Keiko,” said Shino’s Father, and moved to offer his arm for her to hold onto.

“Ami-chan is crying again,” the kunoichi reported faintly. “The nurse is threatening to sedate her.”

Sparing Shino a nod of acknowledgment, his Father – with Keiko-san partially suspended from his elbow – moved inside the room.

Before the door was closed, Shino saw the weeping woman. He barely recognised her as his former classmate; her long hair had been shaved, presumably to allow the medics to treat the burn that stretched from the left side of her face toward the back of her head, over where her ear used to be. Shino had rarely seen a sight worthier of esteem: here was a kunoichi adept at handling explosives who had deliberately exposed herself to an explosion for the sake of her teammates.

Perhaps he should express this appreciation…?

He frowned.

He better ask Yoshi-san how one ought to proceed in such a situation.

x

Naruto bit the inside of his cheek to stifle his giggles. He more or less dragged Shino to the Shop and under Saiyuri-nee-chan’s watch armed him with a cute little bouquet of freesias.

“They’re Ami-chan’s favourite.”

“Thank you,” said Shino, looking at the bouquet as though it were an arcane seal.

Naruto sighed. “Look, Shino… You’re my friend, so I’m going to give you a bit of advice.” He had not been to see Ami, because Ino had warned everybody off. Ami was teetering on the edge of depression, and while she needed support, she also needed her space. “She’s in a bad place right now, and she will misinterpret any gesture that’s not absolutely straightforward.”
Shino’s clear-as-day admiration would become pity in her eyes.

Naruto tried to guess where Shino was looking through the sunglasses and approximate holding his gaze. “Put it in words. If you can’t tell her, write it down. Kamigami down the street sell some fancy stationery.”

Shino’s shoulders hunched.

It was the closest to embarrassed that Naruto had ever seen him. And it made Naruto a little happy; both he and Shino had someone to focus on, and he could blithely lay his childhood crush to rest.

Sasuke and Sakura were recalled so Team Kakashi could go back to taking joint missions two days earlier than had been planned (Shikamaru noticed the correlation with Team Shibi’s recent near-fatal failure).

But Team Asuma caught a short break. Shikamaru gradually populated the apartment with things, usually on the basis of what he expected to need that day: a small stash of spare weapons, toiletries, a change of clothes, a frying pan, a go board.

By the time Yoshi had a chance to spend the night again they ate out of porcelain bowls, and there was a sponge and a dishtowel so they could wash the dishes afterwards.

“I brought cups,” Yoshi said – redundantly – as he set them on the floor between them. “Because I brought a bottle of sake and we’re too adult to be drinking straight out of it.”

“We haven’t celebrated yet, huh?” Shikamaru raised his cup. He didn’t say a toast – everything that occurred to him was either too trite or too melodramatic. The alcohol warmed him up inside.

“I’ve figured out how I’m going to move Midori-sensei!” Yoshi exclaimed, apropos of nothing. “Thanks, Shikamaru!”

Shikamaru was glomped and thoroughly kissed, and happy to move things to the futon.

Only then he was abandoned for scrolls and a notebook full of notes and diagrams.

At least he had the sake to keep him warm…?

Such a drag.

Ino was not going to let her lazy teammate usurp her brother for the whole day, so she tracked the twosome down to their little love nest. Shockingly, they were both wearing clothes, and Shikamaru looked blue-balled to all hell.

It cheered her up, and her mood improved further at Shikamaru’s grumbling as she dragged them out. Sadly, they didn’t get far.

“What’s up, Ponytail Brigade?” bellowed Kiba, marching up the street with Akamaru behind him. They looked like someone had forcibly dragged them through a forest.

Ino ignored the way her brother and her useless teammate eyed one another’s ponytail with clear intent, and welcomed Hinata-chan home the way she deserved to be welcomed: with hugs and kisses. Well, one hug, but Ino made it an extra good one, with a momentary lift-off and petting
hands. She kissed around the Aburame-style sunglasses Hinata-chan had taken to wearing on missions (a gift from Shino, who had gently suggested that not letting everyone know at first glance that they had a Hyuuga was good strategy).

“You’re home early,” Ino said.

Hinata took her turn to kiss Ino’s cheeks.

“Where’s our warm welcome?” complained Kiba.

Akamaru concurred, but Ino knew that the ninken was smart enough to remember for the rest of his life what would happen to him if he dared nose at Hinata-chan’s bottom again. Since he wanted his own puppies one day, he kept a respectful distance.

“We’ve brought news,” Hinata whispered. “Kurenai-taichou and Shino-kun are at the Tower with the scroll. It seems bad~

“Wanna hear a joke?” said Kiba, ignored the negative responses he received and ploughed on. “So, a Rock army and a Leaf army walk into Orochimaru’s abandoned base, and the Leaf general says-”

“Surrender or we’ll release the Plague?” guessed Ino. There went her good mood.

Yoshi laughed so hard he scared off the birds perching on the roofs around them. Once he caught his breath again, he clapped sulking Kiba’s shoulder and walked away with: “I’m off to pack!”

Kiba stared after him. “Is it just me, or has Bleach Boy gone even weirder lately?”

Ino flicked her fingers at him. “It’s just you.”

“Admittedly,” Shikamaru added, staring after Yoshi like someone had stolen his pet shogi board, “it was a funny joke.”

“Too bad,” said Ino, “that the punchline is sending my brother to war again.”

“We could… volunteer as backup,” suggested Shikamaru.

The knife slipped out of Chouji’s suddenly numb fingers and nearly impaled his foot. “Are you sick, Shika?” he demanded. This was terrible! Was he feverish? Was he delirious?

Shikamaru glared at him. “I can use the word ‘volunteer’.”

“Not in reference to yourself!” Chouji pointed out. The only thing Shikamaru had ever put effort into willingly was the campaign against the reformation of Ino-Shika-Cho, and even that basically amounted to him getting tied to a tree and cloud watching all day instead of sleeping through class. Or, later on, playing shogi with Asuma-sensei and griping about Ino.

Shikamaru rolled his eyes. “Look, it’s Team Kakashi. Ino will volunteer us anyway.”

Ah. Now Chouji understood. It was not that Shikamaru was actually eager to go; it was just that this way he might spare himself Ino’s cruel and unusual persuasive techniques.

“I’ll finish my bento,” he said, retrieving the knife from where it had gotten stuck in the flooring (hopefully Mum wouldn’t notice the new hole), “and we can go.”
“I have good news and bad news,” Kakashi informed his three subordinates, who looked at him askance for being only twenty minutes late. Tragically, bad habits had to be curbed on a day like this. “The good news is that Rock has officially declared war, which means that come over here.” He body-flickered some fifty yards past the Gate.

Sakura and Sasuke stood in front of him a moment later; Yoshi appeared behind him, and Kakashi kicked out at him to get him to behave and join his co-conspirators.

“Now that war is officially declared and we’re in the field—”

“It’s a forest, taichou,” Sakura informed him pedantically.

“I officially field-promote all three of you to jounin. Congratulations!” He waited for their reaction.

Yoshi pouted ever so slightly, reached into his pouch, and handed a sealing scroll to Sakura, who secreted the scroll away and extended an upturned palm to Sasuke. Sasuke, with ill grace, paid up in ryo.

In hindsight, Kakashi should have expected this. Nevertheless, he was now peeved by having his fun spoiled. “The bad news is that Rock has officially declared a war, and all able-bodied jounin are expected to contribute to Konoha’s safety—”

“Weren’t we doing that anyways?” Yoshi inquired, appearing perfectly innocent, but Kakashi knew better.

“Report to Tsume—she’s holding the frontline,” he ordered, threw the mission scroll in the air and body-flickered away on his own, separate, solo assignment.

It had been a waste to keep a four-jounin team. Kakashi would probably miss them—life was bound to be boring without little monsters to annoy (and be annoyed by)—but they would be fine.

‘The frontline’ turned out to be a small campsite build with Doton and guarded by familiar faces. It overlooked the entrance to the abandoned base—formerly one of Orochimaru’s lairs, disguised by a genjutsu that had recently degraded enough for the structure to be discovered. The complex probably went deep underground, since the only visible buildings were barracks, which in no way explained the pair of tall chimneys.

“Hey, Tsume!” called out Anko-san, peeking from behind the mud barrier. “The Plague is here!”

Her voice carried over to the opposite side of the field, where the enemy were occupying a similarly fortified camp. Frantic activity started behind their rock wall.

“Congrats on the promotion, Punchy,” Anko-san said with unusual earnestness, but since Naruto had to dodge her playful stab a moment later, he didn’t really suspect her of being an imposter.


“Having a quiet day, Tsume-sama?” Naruto asked when the woman crawled out of a tent, bleary-eyed.

“More like a quiet half-hour,” she growled, and yawned. “Shit, couldn’t you have taken a few hours
longer? I haven’t slept in two days.”

“Well, we could have,” Sakura said, sweet as molasses, “we were just a mite concerned that you might be dying.”

The woman laughed. “Yeah, no. We got a hawk, but those guys over there don’t know the war’s been declared yet. And they don’t want to be the ones to start it. So we’re having us a quiet little stand-off, where nobody tries to get inside the snake’s hole and nobody else has to keep them out using violence.”

Sasuke glanced to the enemy camp. “If we kill them all now, we can be home for supper.”

It had the nice effect of making Anko-san laugh with genuine mirth.

Sasuke shrugged one shoulder under the incredulous stares of everyone conscious in the camp.

“Sasuke-kun believes in practicality,” Naruto explained with a wide smile. “Which is commendable, and makes him a great problem-solver in some situations. However, I believe this situation is more my purview, so let’s have a sitrep so I can see what my team can contribute?”

There was no small amount of glee in the fact that it was indisputably his team now that Kakashi-sensei had ditched them. It had actually been Naruto’s team even before Kakashi-sensei had ditched them, but they had made an effort not to rub it in their taichou’s face.

Ino was not going to stop giving Shikamaru shit ever. He was ridiculous. At least this time he did not attempt to run himself into utter exhaustion in some hilariously pointless attempt to ‘rescue Yoshi’.

Even without sprinting all the way, Teams Asuma and Kurenai arrived before any fighting started. And found that it was unlikely that any fighting would even start, because Ino’s (suddenly jounin-ranked) brother had decided that he didn’t give a fuck about some idiot diplomat somewhere deciding to have a war.

“I’m going to go talk to them,” Yoshi declared at one point.

“Are you crazy!?” howled Tsume-sama, who was apparently nominally in charge around here. “Yamanaka, get back here-”

Yoshi suicidally ignored her and strode off across the field toward the – already panicking – enemy camp.

Which just once again proved that politicians were morons. How did Rock mean to fight against Konoha if they were this terrified of a single Konoha shinobi?

This was Yondaime-panic all over again.

“Sasuke, guard,” ordered Sakura. She dropped to the ground to sit lotus style, and started spreading and organizing the contents of several storage seals in front of her.

Sasuke-kun shifted to stand watch, so that she could focus on her work and didn’t have to worry about a stray projectile coming from the enemy platoon.

Ino took the rear-guard position. It was unlikely that an attack would come from that direction, but unlikely was very far from impossible, and with Yoshi on a quest to either get himself stupidly killed
or miraculously prevent another damn slaughter, it fell to Ino to make up for his absence.

“What’s that?” inquired Asuma. His cigarette was snatched away from him before he could light it (Shino gave it to Akamaru, who ran off to bury it deep enough that its stink wouldn’t irritate the more sensitive noses).

“What’s that?” demanded Kiba.

“Yes, Sakura-chan?” Hinata obediently came over.

Sakura handed her a single senbon. “A prick for a prick, and we’ll have a few hours of silence. Use at your discretion.”

Hinata smiled sweetly. “Thank you, Sakura-chan. I will.”

Shockingly, none of the men standing around had any smart comment to add.

By the time the sun began to set, Yoshi had talked the Rock ninja into pulling down their fortifications, pooling both camps’ officially non-existent alcohol stashes, and sending out a mixed Rock-Leaf party to reconnoiter Orochimaru’s barracks for available accommodations, because why should they sleep on the ground if there were empty beds just a few hundred yards over?

Sasuke tacitly watched it happen, in the equally tacit and exasperated company of Shikamaru and Shino.

“My first mission as a jounin,” Sasuke remarked as the scouting party set off. “I won’t even get to kill anyone.”

“It’s still early?” suggested Shikamaru, dragging himself to his feet so he could join the scouts. Admittedly, even he did not believe what he was saying.

“It is Yoshi-san,” said Shino and, really, that was about all that could be said about it.

“Is this really happening?” asked Kotetsu, looking around himself at the drinking and conversing Rock and Leaf ninja. There was a couple by the hazel bush that grabbed the chance to have a bit of a nookie. Ninety percent of everyone were tipsy enough for it to screw with their skills.

There definitely wasn’t going to be a battle tonight.

Izumo shrugged. “It’s Yamanaka Yoshi. It’s what he does… although, granted, I’ve never seen him do it on such a scale. I don’t think even Inoichi-sama would just take this in stride…”

“His team seems fine,” Kotetsu pointed out dubiously. The Uchiha took everything with numb acceptance, and the pink-haired medic placidly chattered with a pair of Rock medics, as though this was something she did every day. At least the two Team Leads (where was Kakashi-san, anyway?) seemed absolutely perplexed – although that might have been because Tsume-sama had just finished a second bottle and was still going strong.

“Yeah, but have you seen the other kids? Freaked out, all of them.” Except maybe that Aburame
boy, but that was always a tossup. He might just have been good at not looking like he was freaking out.

“Heeey, guys…” Yamanaka-kun ambled over. He narrowed one eye at them suspiciously, surveyed them from the toes peeking out of their sandals to their hair, and then brightened. “Oh, right, you’re those Gate Guys!”

“Gate Guys,” Kotetsu repeated desolately.

“Mnyeah, whatevs,” Yamanaka-kun waved his hand. “You drank?”

Izumo and Kotetsu shook their heads in stunned synchronization.

The boy nodded, eyes momentarily sharpening. “Good. I need couriers – to Konoha and back with this-” He pulled a scroll out from under his shirt. “-within the next fifteen hours. I know it’s a hard trip. Can you make it?”

“What is it-?”

Izumo elbowed him and nodded. “We can, Yamanaka-kun. Rank?”

“I’ll be humble and say A,” replied the boy. “But don’t be surprised if the Hokage sends you back with an S, yeah?”

Kotetsu felt his heart thudding somewhere in the vicinity of his knees. What had just happened?

Izumo next to him seemed similarly affected, but was a little better at hiding it. He took the scroll, sealed it inside his belt and threw the boy a little salute that didn’t come off as mocking, even though it had been initially meant that way. And, uh, what a time to realise that ‘the boy’ was actually his superior officer.

“Yeah, don’t die, guys,” Yamanaka-kun ordered. “See you tomorrow.” And then he melted into the shadows like a goddamn ANBU.

“What… just happened?” asked Kotetsu after a while, when he didn’t seem to be waking up no matter how hard he pinched himself.

Izumo sighed. “I think it might be politics.”

Shikamaru strategically snagged for himself what looked to have been the bedroom of someone high up the food chain while they were clearing the barracks, and let his comrades enjoy communal living. He was napping when someone entered.

There was a pair of eerie eyes in the blue-grey moonlit darkness, and Shikamaru released the shadows he had instinctively grabbed for before they got a good grip on Yoshi. It was usually harder to find shadows in the dark, but the moon was very bright tonight.

“Have you negotiated peace yet?” he inquired, lifting himself on his elbows. That initial shot of adrenalin had washed away all drowsiness, and he was already wide awake.

Yoshi closed the door behind himself and stuck a seal over the seam between door and wall. “Just ceasefire and cooperation. This guy doesn’t have the authority to negotiate proper armistice.” He walked over to join Shikamaru on the narrow bed. He stank of alcohol.
“How much sake have you had?” demanded Shikamaru. He didn’t have a lot of water on him, and going to search for a bathroom was highly inadvisable. Not to mention the fact that this had been Orochimaru’s base, so the plumbing itself was probably a trap. It wasn’t exactly safe to drink from the tap.

“Doesn’t matter,” Yoshi muttered, climbing all over Shikamaru, pushing him down and kissing along his throat. “I don’t get drunk.”

Shikamaru had expected the benefits of having walls between the bed and the potential involuntary voyeurs, really, he did. He just also had a myriad of questions he would prefer to get out of the way so he could focus better. Ino had been right, damnit – he didn’t know Yoshi half as well as he thought he did.

Already his life was more exciting than he had ever wanted it to be, and Yoshi was just getting started.

“I’m just really, really full of energy right now,” Yoshi informed him, grinning brightly. His hands went for Shikamaru’s pants. “You just hang on and enjoy the ride.”

Ino had taken the last watch, so she was there when Anko-san started the fire and then bullied a couple of mildly hungover tokujou into cooking breakfast.

Akamaru came to beg for scraps, but his puppy eyes used to work a lot better when he actually was a puppy. Ino took pity on him and gave him a strip of jerky, with the strict warning: “If you rat me out, I’ll shave your entire left half, and dye the right one bright pink. And I’ll make you think you’re a cat for a whole day.”

The ninken whined piteously.

Slowly, roused by the noises of activity and by the rising smells, ninja all over the field began to wake up – some surprised by the positions in which they woke up – and mill around, unable to believe that yes, they had done that yesterday.

Ino found herself smiling at the tableau as Sakura and Hinata joined her, and then Chouji blindly stumbled over, led by his unerring food-compass. Shino appeared, quiet and ravenous. Then Kiba, practically dragged by Akamaru, who had loyally gone to get him before the good food was gone and he was left with porridge.

Finally, once the sun had risen over the mountains on the horizon, the main star of the show arose from his lair. And by his side…

Ino nearly shrieked with laughter, waking up the last few sleepers. “There is Shikamaru! In all his bow-legged glory.”

Chouji promptly abandoned the food and went into mother-hen mode. “Umm… are you okay, Shika?”

Shikamaru absently patted Chouji’s upper arm. “I think maybe my hair doesn’t hurt. But I don’t mind. It’s a beautiful day…” He turned his face to the sun.

Yoshi sniggered, and attacked the food – notably gathering enough of it for two.

“What?!” Chouji grabbed his best friend by the shoulders. “Ino, get Sakura-chan! Shika, do you
have a fever? How many fingers am I holding up-?”

“Nah, he’s fine,” Ino assured him, not even peeved that Chouji forgot that she was a medic in her own right. “Just extremely well-fucked.” She didn’t want to think about her brother being good in the sack, but seeing the incontrovertible proof in front of her forced her to at least acknowledge the fact.

“Hey, it’s Gate Guys!” exclaimed Yoshi, staring in a different direction and pretending that he hadn’t noticed the glorious commotion he had just caused (with some small help from Ino). “You’ve made good time. Do you have-”

The hairier one of the chuunin duo waved a scroll. “One S-rank missive from Hokage-sama for you, boss, and please next time send somebody else…” He seemed ready to cry. Or fall over.

His companion didn’t look much better. Yoshi casually seated them by the fire, commented on how good a job they’ve done – Ino was pretty sure the two guys hadn’t noticed they were beaming at the praise – picked up his momentarily displaced bowl and went to rescue Shikamaru, who had only just noticed that his private relationship was not private anymore. Yoshi gave the bowl to Shikamaru – who sat down (gingerly) and used eating as an excuse not to answer any questions – and now that he had free hands, he unsealed the missive.

“No, but Nara…?”

“Is that…”

“It’s got to be a joke!”

“It’s not a joke – have you seen him!”

“Ino’s right!” Obviously.

“I see!” Hinata-chan piped up brightly. “So that is why we intimidated Shikamaru-kun!”

“Yeah, cool!” Yoshi said happily, although not actually in agreement. He managed to completely ignore the clamour, even as he grinned the gathered audience into silence. “Awesome, I’ve got the go ahead. Ino, brief Tsume-sama when she wakes up; I’ll be over with the enemy leader, negotiating. Hopefully Rock ninja got coffee. I think a bunch of them have thundering headaches right about now.” He looked immensely self-satisfied. Disgustingly self-satisfied.

Shikamaru watched him go with a deranged little smile.

x

“You okay?” Ino asked quietly.

Chouji wiped his cheeks and sniffled a little, feeling eight years old again. It was like one of his oldest hurts was finally healing, and it hurt a bit, but it was a good hurt. He nodded.

Ino kissed his cheek.

Chouji was stunned. She had not done that ever before. She consented to hugs sometimes, but kisses were for Hinata-chan and sometimes Sakura-chan…

She laughed at his expression (and that was a good hurt, too). Then she leaned on Chouji’s shoulder and looked over to where Shika was sitting with a bowl in his lap, too busy watching the Rock camp
Sakura-chan stopped by and handed Chouji an apple with a scary, medic-nin glower (‘eat it or else!’). “I feel like Shikamaru is every day walking a very thin line between seeming cool and embarrassing himself horribly over how much he adores Yoshi.”

Ino laughed. “I know, right? And, believe it or not, he's been like this since we were toddlers.”

When they were little, Shikamaru had hoarded Yoshi. But the thing was, it occurred to Chouji, that Yoshi had always let himself be hoarded. And when Shikamaru stopped talking to him, Yoshi’s heart had been absolutely crushed.

That was a long time ago, but looking at them now, Chouji couldn’t help but think that they hadn’t changed much.

A week – or a month? two months? – ago he did not see that Shikamaru was pining for Yoshi, or that Yoshi thought of Shikamaru as anything but a distant friend – and yet they were both so settled together that those feelings must have been there all along.

Chouji sniffled again, blew his nose, and buffed the apple against his shirt. “Ino, how did I never notice that my best friend is totally dumb?”

The girls, predictably, just laughed.

“Did you stop being friends with Yoshi because you had a crush on him?” Chouji demanded, expression thunderous enough to give Shikamaru a pause.

Shikamaru raised an eyebrow. “I had a crush on him since we were four. So, no.”

But also, yes. The break had come four years later. It had been the moment when Shikamaru had, in all seriousness, decided that he was one day going to marry Yoshi. For that he had to let them grow a little apart.

…and, alright, he might have panicked. A little bit. But he didn’t regret it. He had had a taste of life without Yoshi, and now knew to value him all the more. Besides, Yoshi had needed the time to catch up.

It had worked out perfectly.

“Have I unwittingly been your wingman this whole time?” Chouji inquired, a little stumped.


“You know what I don’t understand? How did I not see it? In hindsight it’s completely obvious!”

You didn’t notice it because it had never changed, Shikamaru thought. It has always been there, and why examine status quo that closely?

“You two are perfect together, and belong together, and I’m so happy for you, brother!” Chouji announced tearfully, and squeezed Shikamaru in one of his special bones-busting hugs.

Chapter End Notes
Hey, everyone! I'm going to be travelling for the next two weeks, and internet access will be uncertain, so I can't promise when the last two chapters will be added. Don't panic if they don't appear as scheduled. I will update as circumstances allow.

Cheers!

Brynn
Hello everybody. Thank you for the well-wishes!

I'm back home, I'm in one piece, and I finally have time, energy and internet access concurrently. Have a chapter. Cheers!

“You fucking little arsehole!” howled Godaime-sama as the ‘victorious army’ passed through Konoha’s gates.

She stormed down the street, scattering pedestrians, enveloped in a cloud of rage – she was not quite radiating killing intent, since the Hokage was not supposed to knock out her own civilians, but the effect wasn’t so far off.

A few of the fainter-hearted passers-by lost consciousness.

“She’s got that the wrong way ‘round,” pointed out hot-Sakura.

Ino snorted. “One point of evidence is not enough to form a theory. Unless you want to share more observations?”

“The fucking little arsehole had not even bothered to tell us anything,” hot-Sakura hissed, crossing her arms over her chest. “Sasuke-kun is probably going to impregnate someone in revenge.”

“W-well… he won’t lack for volunteers,” pointed out Hinata-chan.

“Ladybug is correct,” agreed Shino, because he was at heart a subversive bitch. No wonder Yoshi liked him.

“Do you just not know how to chill…?” lamented Kiba, just as Tsunade-sama reached the crossroads and descended upon Yoshi.

Yoshi dodged the punch (apparently the Hokage wasn’t that angry, since she must have been going intentionally slowly). “Your orders did not say ‘kill all Rock ninja you meet’, Hokage-sama. And isn’t this better?”

“You can talk about ‘better’ when it’s you schmoozing with these arse-backwards diplomatic types all day! I’ve had more papercuts in the last two days than I had in all my life before!”

“You made your teammates write all your reports for you, didn’t you?” Yoshi said sagely.

“That’s it!” Tsunade-sama grabbed Yoshi by his vest and shook him so hard his teeth rattled. “I’m making you sort this out! Go! I’ll make a detour to replenish the panacea stores, and when I get back to my office you better be neck-deep in my paperwork, boy!”

“Hmm,” opined Ino.

“He’s not been a jounin for a week, and already gets a promotion to Hokage’s assistant?” cried Kiba.
“There is no justice in the world!”

“What they don’t understand…” Ami spoke after half an hour of sitting there mutely and letting Ino chatter at her about flowers and fashion. She didn’t finish the sentence.

Ino let her think and critically looked over the two-page spread on Fujikaze Yukie in her magazine. That one dress did not flatter her figure at all.

“They keep thanking me and telling me how brave I was,” Ami rasped, “but they’re wrong.”

“I think you were plenty brave,” Ino pointed out airily, eyes still glued to the glossy pages.

Ami coughed. “There was no… no noble decision to sacrifice myself for the team. It was just reflex.”

Ino hummed and turned the page. “You do realise that everybody save… like, the Yondaime… who ever saved their teammates did it on reflex? That’s the point of training the way we do. That’s why we’re allowed to keep team formations even after we’re promoted – because you don’t get those reflexes easily.”

“…oh.”

Ino shrugged, and finally looked up. “Maybe you weren’t brave in that moment. Maybe you were just reacting. But then that says even more about you and – frankly, what part of what you did is less admirable than, say, the Nidaime sacrificing himself to let his team get away?”

Ami’s jaw fell. She tried to protest, and almost choked on her words.

Ino sharply closed the magazine and let it flop onto Keiko’s recently vacated bed. “Listen, the point isn’t whether you were brave then. The point is, are you going to be brave now? And I don’t even have to ask, because I know you, and I know you’re going to walk out of this room and let your team help you train back up to where you were, and next time you’re sent out on a mission you’re going to blow a motherfucker sky-high. So?” She spread her arms and shrugged, like that was all a huge non-issue.

Inside her head she crossed her fingers.

Ami stared at her for a while and then laughed, subdued but on her way back up. “Are you licensed, Ino-chan?”

Ino shrugged again. “Tomorrow this time I can be. But so could Yoshi. Are you sure-”

“Yes,” replied Ami. They saved her eye, and now both of those eyes – dark and shadowed – bore into Ino. “We’ve been friends since we were six. If someone’s going to shrink my head, I want it to be you.”

“…”

“…”

“Inoichi?” inquired Chouza.

“He said something about a training session with a nephew of his,” replied Shikaku. For a moment he regretted being Inoichi’s designated messenger, but if that was the price to pay for being able to damn-near read one another’s mind, he would deal.
“Likely story,” grumbled Mayu, ladling rich, strong-smelling stew into their bowls. “He disappears right when Yoshi-kun becomes the talk of the village! Speaking of…"

There was a moment of silence, eventually interrupted by Chouza raising his favourite pair of chopsticks and bidding them to enjoy their meal.

Shikaku seized upon the excuse to postpone talking a bit more and dove into his bowl. The food was delicious – as it always was at the Akimichi house.

“Did Shikamaru-kun say anything about…?” Mayu left the question unfinished, but apparently Yoshino understood what she meant.

“I haven’t seen him since. Which reminds me that I’m going to skin him when I get my hands on him, but…” Yoshino carded her fingers through her loose hair and looked at Mayu from behind the curtain of it. “Shikamaru once broke a tiny little heart. But tiny little hearts are resilient. A lot more resilient than older hearts. And I don’t need to know if he underestimated the strength of Yoshi’s attachment, or if it was a test. I know that either way Shikamaru is extremely lucky.” She leaned into Shikaku’s side.

Shikaku flattered himself that Yoshino felt lucky to have captured him. He hoped it was that; he hoped she would never have a reason to feel differently.

Chouza slurped down the rest of the gravy in his bowl and frowned at them. “Am I the only one who’s really worried that Shikamaru-kun thought that way when he was eight?”

“To be honest,” Shikaku replied, “Yoshino and I were a lot more worried about the fact that our eight-year-old fell in love with all the trappings of it and none of the usual opportunities. After we figured out what the problem was, of course.” His son, so small and fragile, already living with that particular noose around his neck – with that unceasing fear of losing his reason to live, should anything happen to Yamanaka Yoshi, and the bitter knowledge that if something did happen to Yoshi, Shikamaru would not have been able to do shit about it.

No wonder the boy had fought the team assignments with such destructive single-mindedness. Shikaku did remember what sort of an unstable mess Uchiha Sasuke used to be. Everybody had been worried about Team Seven – Shikamaru must have been going out of his mind at least as much as Inoichi, and Inoichi had spent half of his time off drinking with Yoshino.

Mayu’s jaw sank. “You mean… you knew?”

“Oh,” Yoshino shrugged one shoulder. “You didn’t?”

Chouza took a deep breath-

“Dear,” Mayu admonished quietly. She eyed Yoshino. “I do remember how much pain there was in the beginning. How much sadness.” She blinked repeatedly to do away with the tears welling in her eyes. “Oh, but look at them now. And I do understand – if we saved them from that sadness then, would they be nearly as happy now?”

They turned to Shikaku, but for once he had no answers for them.

Perhaps the boys would have lost that spark, just like Inoichi had stopped hanging onto Shikaku’s every word and started offering constructive input instead some time before they graduated from the Academy. Perhaps they would have rushed it at fourteen (thirteen, even?) and messed it up. Perhaps they would have devised a working plan for changing the team assignments together – and died in the wars.
Shikaku was discomfited by how callously his son had acted, but at the same time he thanked the
gods for Shikamaru’s decision. In hindsight, it was a well-chosen path to travel.

“The truth is,” Mayu said like she was reading his mind, “we don’t know. We can’t know. We can,
however, be happy for them.”

x

Shikamaru did not even see Yoshi for a week after their return to Konoha, so when Yoshi finally
came home – to the apartment, which was now apparently home – Shikamaru jumped him.

Literally. Shikamaru leapt out of the futon, scattering go stones, grabbed onto Yoshi and dragged
him down for mutual ravishing.

“Ow, careful there!” Yoshi hissed. “You’ve got sharp claws, Deer-hart, and parts of me are really
sensitive-”

“Next time the Hokage tries to steal you, just take over the office,” Shikamaru insisted, trying to pull
off Yoshi’s mesh shirt. Jounin uniforms were not designed to be easy to take off, and he had no
hands-on experience with removing them yet (he hoped that he would manage to put off his own
promotion for a while yet). “Then we could have sex on the desk-”

“Is this a power kink?” demanded Yoshi, pulling the mesh over his head.

“I loved you before you were powerful!” Shikamaru protested, and then was shut up by the addition
of a second tongue into his mouth.

x

Kurama half-opened one eye, took stock of what was happening, and wished he could brain himself
hard enough to lose consciousness to put himself out of his misery.

Sadly, the grass was soft, and even if it weren’t, he was a chakra construct.

He pulled his tails tight around his head and cursed at the top of his voice to drown out the sound.
That was what he got for demanding access to his host’s senses.

Couldn’t they just rut like the mammals they were? Was the mushiness necessary?

Why, Sage? Why him?

x

They shared a shower in the morning – another novel experience – and Shikamaru felt himself
getting wound impossibly tighter around Yoshi’s finger.

He wished he could mind. But he couldn’t. Oooh, heaven is a place on earth, went his body, and his
poor mind had no choice but to fall in line.

He followed Yoshi without even asking where they were going – not quite blindly, but faithfully –
and that was a pretty good metaphor.

The whole of Konoha Twelve met at Training Ground Nineteen. Sakura and Sasuke were already in
the process of destroying it (they would probably call it a spar, but then, they were borderline S-class
shinobi), and Yoshi jumped into the fray without so much as ‘bye’.
“Again?” Ino laughed at him.

Shikamaru shrugged. He was at the same time more exhausted and more refreshed than he usually would be. Sex with Yoshi was more intensive than most of his training, and there had been a lot of it. A lot.

“It’s like he’s catching up on all the years he’s missed,” Ino mocked. Because Ino had been enjoying other people’s genitals since she was a bit too young for it, probably, but she was also clever enough about it that she had a reputation as a satisfying and high-maintenance date rather than an easy one.

“You look like you’re on drugs,” Chouji said. “Eat.” He pushed a carton of spring rolls into Shikamaru’s hands.

Shikamaru ate, wondering when he had incubated a tapeworm; there was no other explanation for this sudden onset of hunger.

He had had such plans, such noble plans! He was going to go as slowly as Yoshi wanted to, letting him set the pace, discovering all these new things with him… It hadn’t occurred to him that Yoshi just needed to take the seal off his sexuality to turn into a… an… a sex god. After minimal practice.

Shikamaru was fucked. Both figuratively and literally. And Yoshi – well, Yoshi was not at all interested in being noble.

Not in bed. Or in the shower. Or, really, probably in a glade while the deer were watching, which was a thought Shikamaru could not afford to ever verbalise, and that reminded him that letting Yoshi into his head again also wouldn’t have been safe. He drew the line at being judged by his Clan’s herd.

It was as though Yoshi had decided to accept Shikamaru’s (not actually offered) proposal, and inferred that he now owned Shikamaru and could do with and to him whatever he wanted.

“How did I fall for that innocent façade?” he moaned. There was nothing soft, nothing fragile about Yoshi. He was all light and power and energy. He was the Will of Fire personified… but somehow still managed to paint himself in pastel colours.

Ino laughed at him, loud and mean. “No idea. Blinded by infatuation? It’s not like he even really tries that hard to sell that persona. He’s always been a monster.”

Shikamaru had almost taken that personally before he realised that Ino didn’t mean it like that. That Ino didn’t, it seemed, even know about the bijuu.

Ino suspiciously narrowed her eyes. “Are you getting cold feet?”

Maybe? Shikamaru was couldn’t deny that he was intimidated. It was going to be terribly troublesome….

He had outsmarted himself, but he was not going to change his mind. He had been considering Yoshi an integral part of his life for so long that it was far easier to integrate these new facets of his lover’s personality into his worldview than even contemplate the notion of living without him.

Yoshi was about as axiomatic as gravity.

“Well, whatever,” Ino said loftily, reading his answer from his face. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you, lazyarse.”
“Your warnings came years too late.” And Shikamaru was fairly certain that Yoshi would calm down somewhat. With time. One day. It was all still so very new and exciting and they were both swimming in hormones up to their eyeballs and he wasn’t even actually complaining, just…

Eh. Effort.

Pain in the arse.

Shikamaru grinned.

“You’re looking deranged again,” Ino informed him, and turned away in disgust.

Teams Kurenai and Shibi – with Haraguchi and Yoshitami still looking half-dead – joined them in watching the spectacle that was the newly established Team Yoshi’s training. None of the Konoha Twelve were slouches, but Ino was probably the only one who did not feel awe as they tried in vain to figure out what was happening on the field in between the speed, the clones and the genjutsu (and even that was because Ino was incapable of feeling awe). Shikamaru thought they were switching alliances – different two on one every time – but could not tell how they signaled a switch.

The Plague went at it for more than thirty minutes, before the person sitting behind Shikamaru’s back whistled sharply, and Shikamaru realised there were only Yoshi’s shadow clones on the field – and they were all popping in a sequence of percussive sounds – while the real Yoshi had come over here at some point, without Shikamaru noticing.

“Man, I’m glad you’re on our side,” professed Kiba.

“Seconded,” said several voices.

“Thirded,” Aburame added quietly. Quite a few of his kikaichu were already roaming Yoshi’s exposed skin and searching for ways under his clothes, and Shikamaru was going to murder Aburame one day soon.

Yoshi was barely out of breath (at least Sasuke and Sakura looked a step from keeling over – that was somewhat reassuring). He snagged Shikamaru around the hips and pulled him over to sit on Yoshi’s thigh. Shikamaru reoriented himself, and realised that this had distinct possibilities that he had completely overlooked.

Safe in Yoshi’s strong, warm grip, Shikamaru swatted (gently, because he did not want to start a feud) a few bugs off of a nice, handy shoulder, laid his head on it, and for all intents and purposes went to sleep.

“Are you two dating?” asked Keiko, who had not been there for the dramatic reveal and spent the subsequent gossip explosion at the Hospital.

“Nah,” Yoshi replied, and laughed.

Shikamaru froze.

“We’re engaged,” Yoshi added, and raised his hand to show off his ring.

Shikamaru reminded himself how much he loved this man, because if he forgot for even a second there was a good chance he would strangle him with a shadow for putting Shikamaru through this much emotional upheaval. He wasn’t built for this.

He hoped the pesky consciousness would just go away and he could sleep for real, but that was
unlikely while he was the centre of attention. His instincts wouldn’t let him. He pretended, setting all his dead weight on his – apparently – fiancé in retaliation for the scare.

“So,” Keiko spoke after a giggly, whispered conversation with the other girls, “somehow, Yoshi-kun turned the fourth most self-contained person I know into a mushy pile of thoughtless public display of affection.”

“It’s the oxytocin,” Ino explained dryly. “Half the time you see him, Shikamaru’s still high.”

“Right. I said he looks like he’s on drugs,” agreed Chouji – the traitor. But he deserved to get in a few good digs after all that Shikamaru had put him through.

“Chemically speaking, he is,” Sakura concurred, still sounding a little out of breath.

“Hn,” informed them Sasuke.

“Why isn’t Yoshi-kun like this?” inquired Ami. Her voice had changed a little, although Shikamaru probably only noticed it because he wasn’t looking and therefore focused on auditory input. The fire damage must have been extensive. She wore a bandana, too. “Or is that why he’s fine being kikaichu food?”

“Yoshi-san has experienced no discomfort from my colonies’ feeding in years,” said Aburame, oddly defensive. “He claims to have become accustomed to their presence.”

“Yeah, no, Ami-chan, kikaichu don’t bother me at all,” Yoshi said happily, inciting Shikamaru to murder. “They’re a part of Shino, so it’s easy to like them.”

No, really, Shikamaru would make it look like an accident. Jealousy was too troublesome; he would solve his problem once and for all-

“I… know what you mean…?” Ami said uncertainly.

“Brother’s not acting stoned because he’s got insane metabolism,” supplied Ino, heading off the impending blow up.

She was underselling it a little, if it was true that Yoshi could not even get drunk. It might have been some strange blood limit (neither Ino nor anyone else in the Yamanaka Clan had anything similar, so it was not a technique), but Shikamaru would have bet that they were seeing one of the side-effects of sealing a bijuu into a person.

“You okay, mate?” asked Kiba.

“I think,” Hinata replied in Aburame’s stead, not even hiding her amusement, “that Shino-kun just realised how narrowly he avoided the fate of public humiliation.”

Shikamaru’s hand tightened on Yoshi’s shoulder. He tried to convince himself that he had no reason to act aggressively possessive. He could just catalogue all the aches in his body to remind himself of that. And good thing that Yoshi had so much hair, so that people couldn’t see Shikamaru gritting his teeth when he was supposedly napping.

“Guys, Shino’s definitely interested in so-”

“I shall express my gratefulness to Shikamaru-san for saving me from this fate,” Aburame cut off whatever morsel Yoshi had been about to share, thus proving that it would have been interesting. “Why? Because-”
“Yoshi was about to wear you down. If Shikamaru hadn’t stepped in, that—” Here Ino presumably pointed at the floppy man pretending to be conked out on her brother’s shoulder. “—would have been you.”

There was a moment of silence.

Oh, Shikamaru thought. Ino was wrong. Very well, Aburame was allowed to live.

“You look disappointed,” suggested Keiko.

“Eh,” Ino replied resignedly, “I knew Shikamaru was into Yoshi since we were kids. Had a lot of time to get used to the idea.”

“Is that why you were so pissed about Shika cold-shouldering him?” asked Chouji.

“He was playing games with my brother,” Ino announced, in the tone of the prosecutor listing the defendant’s crimes.

Because, apparently, the only one allowed to play games with Ino’s brother was Ino. She had not changed all that much since they were four, had she.

“The way you two play games with everyone?” inquired Fuyumi.

Oh, snap. Someone should offer Ino some ice for that burn.

“We,” Ino said, coldly enough to treat the burn with it, “as opposed to most, actually know what we’re doing. I thought he would fuck it up. He did fuck it up, a few times. And when he improbably got yet another chance, because Yoshi is a softie—”

Several people in the circle snorted at this blatant lie.

“-I thought he’d be too lazy to make a move until it was way too late. He needed so much help, oh sweet Izanagi, don’t get me started…” Ino made a melodramatic disgusted noise. “But I’ve had time to come to terms with it, because the writing’s been on the wall since he got the stud.”

“Oh my god, how did I miss that?!” cried Keiko.

“No idea.” Although Ino did make it clear that she was unsurprised by yet another proof of her own superiority to everybody else. “That was a plain public declaration of intent.”

“And still everyone except Ino missed it,” Shikamaru muttered into Yoshi’s neck.

“I know.” Ino heaved a heavy and fake sigh. “I mean, some days it’s like the people in Konoha are not trained ninja. Remember that time Chouji said he was never going to marry because girls were annoying—”

To be fair, that generalisation was based mostly on Chouji’s experience with Ino.

“-and Shikamaru told him he’d change his mind when he met the right person, all knowing?”

“Wait,” Sakura snarled, “I think I remember that. Wasn’t that at the Academy?”

Ino cackled. “Yes! That’s exactly my point. Thank you, Sakura-chan.”

Shikamaru groaned. “Why are you subjecting us to this?”
“So they’ll get it out of their system and don’t keep pestering us later, Deer-hart,” Yoshi replied sweetly.

Shikamaru sat up to glare at him-

Sakura doubled over, laughing. Even Sasuke snickered into his collar.

-and promptly closed his eyes in defeat.

“Condolences on your commitment, Nara-kun,” concluded Hatake-san who got here gods knew when or how, and must have come by specifically to add another layer of humiliation to this.

“You could just admit that you miss them,” Iruka pointed out with far too much logic for so late in the day.

Kakashi, who wasn’t interested in being judged for his stalking habits again, gulped down a mouthful of his soup. “Too much risk of the Hokage saddling me with replacements.” He suppressed a shudder. He had managed not to get his students killed, but it had been a close shave a few times, and their survival was definitely down to their own exceptionality rather than his presence.

Without Yoshi, both Sakura and Sasuke would have died half a dozen times over the years. And vice versa.

Iruka gently blew on his spoon before he put it into his mouth. It was such a pointless gesture. The soup wasn’t that hot anymore. He just did it by rote.

Kakashi had since resigned himself to being forever amused by this man.

“Are you…?” Iruka fell silent, as he realised that he hadn’t thought his inquiry through, despite the length of the preceding silence. But for all his innate politeness, Iruka did not actually have a timid bone in his body, so after a bracing moment he asked: “Are you going back into ANBU?”

“Oh.”

Kakashi had not actually thought that far. On one hand – what else would he do? On the other, he was not exactly eager to return to that time. It had not been a good time. That might have been because it was Iruka-less time, or because most of it he had spent convinced that Minato-sensei’s son was either dead or being brainwashed… but whatever the case it held little attraction now.

“I see,” Iruka said dryly, raising one eyebrow, like he was questioning Kakashi’s otherwise infamous mental acuity.

“Quite,” Kakashi agreed.

Iruka nodded sagely. “Indubitably.”

“As they say,” Kakashi countered.

“So it goes.”

They ate, both trying to not laugh and choke. Or spray vegetable soup over their kitchen table.

“Probably not,” Kakashi admitted after a while. Tsunade was eying him as a chair-warmer for Yoshi (despite his quiet campaign for skipping the charade and just putting Yoshi in the big chair straight
away), and while Kakashi would prefer not to have to do it, it was as good an argument as any to not get sucked back into black ops.

Iruka watched him like he was trying to read between his lines (they were good lines, but symptomatically empty of meaning). Then he shrugged and turned his attention back to his bowl. “Just tell me when you make a decision.”

Actually, Kakashi was going to ask for Iruka’s input before he made a definitive decision. But he didn’t know how to put that into words without sounding soppy, so he just nodded.

x

“Thank you,” Neji said after Ino decided to end the lesson for that day.

“You’re picking this up unfairly fast,” Ino complained, but smiled at the same time to reassure him that she wasn’t ‘doubting his worth’ or ‘only valuing him for his skills’, which was the cocktail of mistreatment and misperception that had initially messed him up so badly.

Neji was a minefield of issues, and his self-image might as well have been made from spun sugar, it was so fragile.

Neji nodded, and accepted Ino’s gestured invitation to accompany her inside to the kitchen for post-training snacks. “It is fortunate; otherwise our team ran the risk of being disbanded.”

One of the side-effects of Tsunade-sama’s decree that every team had to have a medic was that a lot of people had to become medics very fast. Between Gai-san, Lee and Tenten, Neji really did not have a choice about picking up a brand new skill set.

The fact that he had come to Ino and asked for tutoring on his own accord – well, that was her little coup. While Yoshi had been off fighting a war, she had managed to get as far as to have Neji publicly acknowledge that they were friends. It also had the pleasing side-effect of making both Hinata-chan and Ino’s Dad happy.

Much to Ino’s surprise, being friends with the fatalistic Hyuuga wasn’t a hardship. They had things in common. For example, Neji was really good at mixing drinks. And he always cheered up Yoshino-ba-san; Ino suspected that Ba-san saw in Neji what her son could have been if he were less of a lazy dick.

“That would be a pity,” Ino said honestly. “You’re a great team-”

“We seem to lag behind,” Neji protested. “Shinobi younger than us are already jounin, whereas we-”

“Yeah, because they got field-promoted when they headed off to fight a fucking war,” Ino cut him off.

She did not envy Yoshi his rank – it was well-deserved – she just hated that he was in every fucking Bingo Book by now.

She sighed and pulled two puddings out of the fridge. “Yoshi is a born leader – and he will be a great one. I’d rather focus on supporting him as he needs than try to keep up with him.”

Neji accepted the spoon and dug into the dessert. After a while of contemplation, he asked: “Is that why you cultivated his closeness with Nara-san, despite your… reservations?”

Damn geniuses.
Ino sighed, but in this instance she had nothing to hide, so she answered truthfully. “No. I wouldn’t do that. I don’t like Shikamaru, that’s true – but I could see right from the start that after a little cognitive therapy—”

Neji smirked, part sympathy and part schadenfreude.

“-he could make my brother happy. So, that was my dastardly motive.”

“Your selflessness is admirable,” Neji told her, and returned his attention to his pudding.

Ino turned to hers, not sure what to do with the compliment. She didn’t think she had ever heard Neji compliment anyone on anything, so this was a milestone. But selflessness was not exactly a trait she was interested in honing, and she was not particularly proud of it.

“I understand your dastardly motive,” Neji assured her. “I find that I, too, would be… moved to act in yours and your brother’s interests.”

Ino met his eye, which was not really a disconcerting experience after her long friendship with Hinata-chan. Yes, he was implying what she thought he was implying: the Hyuuga would stand with the Yamanaka in the years to come.

x

“I met your Mum in the kitchen today,” Shikaku mentioned, having come across his son napping on a roof of an apartment complex.

Shikamaru shifted a blade of grass from one corner of his mouth to the other and, without opening his eyes, replied: “You meet Mum in the kitchen every day, Pops. It’s one of her favourite places. I think she channels most of her violent impulses into cooking.”

Shikaku had noticed. He was also very glad that he had not married a poison specialist. “She’s angrier than usual.”

“Huh?” the interrogative sound was spot on, but the smirk betrayed that his contrary and inapprehensible son knew exactly what he had done – and left Shikaku to deal with the consequences alone.

“It seems that at some point her son disappeared from the Compound and didn’t bother telling her that he was moving out. And left behind a mess.”

“What a jerk,” Shikamaru agreed, deadpan.

Shikaku smothered a snort. It was only funny if he didn’t have to deal with Yoshino’s absolutely fair volcanic rage. “I know you’re all giddy with the first flush of romance, son – but don’t be an arsehole to your Mother, okay?”

“First flush of romance?” Shikamaru repeated. He half-opened one eye. “Pops, you’re so late even Hatake-san arrived before you.”

“’s what we get for being lazy,” Shikamaru countered, taking no shit. “You couldn’t even be bothered to pull his pigtails. Easier to daydream, I guess.” And wake from nightly nightmares. And beat up training posts.

“Resource management,” his son corrected him, seriously enough that Shikaku accepted the explanation rather than counter with another witticism. “Strike before the iron is hot enough and
you’ll break it. Timing is crucial.”

Shikaku would argue that the metaphor was completely off base, but the fact remained that Shikamaru had accomplished his goals with minimum teenage angst and barely any casualties along the way, and Mayu had a point when she suggested that the end justified the means in this case.

“Talk to your Mother,” Shikaku said uncompromisingly. “She spent fourteen hours in labour with you and, believe me, that was a bigger pain in the arse than anything she might ever ask of you.”
Naruto got used to the *living with Shikamaru* part quickly, and with only a few small snags. The harder part by far was getting used to *not living in the Yamanaka Compound* anymore. In his heart he still felt like this was temporary, and he would move back one day… only chances were that Shikamaru felt the same about the Nara Compound. And the stumbling block of it was that Naruto knew he *could* manipulate Shikamaru into giving him anything he wanted once the time to decide would come, but he also knew that he would feel shitty about it.

Never mind, though! That was a problem for future Naruto.

Present Naruto was having a day off missions, and spending it at the Shop like the actual Flower Shop Assistant that he still officially was. It was almost time to open, in fact.

“Give me the dirt?” inquired Ino, sauntering in with a fresh load of carnations.

Naruto answered the question she meant to ask rather than the one she asked: “It’s really good. I like almost everything, and a motivated Shikamaru is a force to reckon with.” He meant it about the relationship as a whole, rather than just the carnal part of it – and Ino understood.

She leaned against the counter by his side and surveyed the room full of smells and colours. “I still think you are making a mistake.”

“With Shikamaru?”

“With giving up on all other options before you tried anything else. What about Shino?”

“I like Shino. I’m just…” Glad to see him trying to court a kickarse girl. Shino and Ami would be so good together.

Besides, Naruto wasn’t sure how to explain that if he had ever dated Shino, it would have been as *Yoshi* rather than *Naruto*, and this was better. He and his sister were cut form a different cloth, for all that they were stitched together damn near the same. “I’m not made like that, Ino, and you know it. I’ll flirt and fake-date for the fun of it, but a real relationship? I don’t need more than one.”

“And you’re going to marry the first person who asks you out?” Ino spread her hands as if to suggest the magnitude of the folly he was committing.

“Shikamaru is hardly the first person to ask me out. But, look…” Naruto grinned. “Concept. The most brilliant man we know would do damn near anything for me.”

“You’d have to stop fucking him for three seconds so his brain comes back online,” Ino deadpanned.

“You were right,” Naruto admitted, and that finally made her relent. “The power I’ve got over him – it’s *so* heady. Falling in love was just a matter of time, and it wasn’t even a long time. I scheduled it for the Saturday before last.” He shrugged and grinned unrepentantly. “It’s too late now.”

She slumped in defeat. “You’ve cared for Shikamaru since we were tiny. That never went away. Even when he was being a dick. Otherwise his being a dick wouldn’t have bothered you. If it had been anybody but him, you would have just turned on your mojo and twisted him around your finger
again – it only took you a few hours to convert a group of enemy shinobi with your creepy unorthodox technique.” She stabbed him in the chest with a blue-nailed finger. “What will you do if he does it again?”

Naruto rubbed at his pectoral. He’d have a bruise. For, like, ten seconds. Thanks, demon-san! “If he does what? If he walks away from me, or if he uses me in one of his plans without telling me?”

“Okay, I admit he didn’t actually walk away from you, and I can almost see his logic there, and it’s hard to argue against his results, but-”

“We know him Ino,” Naruto implored, “and we have the best training. If he tries manipulating either of us, we’ll make him in seconds.”

“Don’t let him get away with it!” Ino ordered through clenched teeth. She really didn’t like Shikamaru.

Naruto was amazed at how far she had gone to help them despite that antipathy, and concluded that Ino knew exactly what he was like and what would make him happy, and was willing to inconvenience herself with a brother-in-law whom she scorned for the sake of her brother’s happiness.

She was the best sister. And if she one day brought home an insane S-class nukenin and declared she was going to marry him, Naruto would be firmly on her side (unless it was Madara, but Ino had better taste than that).

“I won’t,” he promised. “If Shikamaru wants to share a life, he’ll share all the plots, too.”

“So,” she moved over to the flowers and started picking roses for a bouquet, “you’re finally going to start campaigning for the Hokageship?”

Naruto came back from work in a good mood – a whole day with plants! – and spied Shikamaru lying on the sofa – they had a sofa now! and also a silent agreement that no one would ever be exiled there! – with his arm over his face.

He took off his sandals and-

“Not now,” Shikamaru grumbled. “I’ve got a headache.”

Naruto stopped and thought about this. “Are you cliché-ing me?”

“Noo…” Shikamaru moved his arm a little until one eye squinted out of its shadow. “I’ve got an actual headache. If I just wasn’t in the mood, I’d tell you so.”

“Good.” But also not good, because now Naruto was worried. “Is it like a migraine? D’you want me to turn off the light?” Then he noticed the state of the apartment, and it occurred to him that barely anything had changed since he left in the morning. “When did you last drink anything? Because if you are dehydrated because you were too lazy to get off your arse and grab a glass of water, you absolutely deserve it.”

Shikamaru groaned and rolled over so that he was facing the backrest.

Naruto decided that it didn’t count as exiling if he just left him there, but he also wanted Shikamaru to be functional some time in a not too distant future, so he filled two field flasks from the tap, left
one at the foot of the sofa and pushed the other between Shikamaru and the backrest, where he wouldn’t even have to reach out for it.

Then he went to the bedroom and took the opportunity to carve a new seal into the flooring.

x

Naruto was woken in the middle of the night by Shikamaru crawling into the futon with him.

He didn’t feel like opening his eyes, but he didn’t have to – just grabbed the intruder, pulled him closer and rubbed his cheek against the nearest patch of skin. “Mmm… pekopeko.”

Shikamaru made a sound of intense emotional pain. “Why did you have to make that into something lascivious?! The only people who ever used that nickname were toddler Chouji and my Mother…”

Naruto just kissed him, because he didn’t think ‘your low-grade trauma pleases me’ was a good thing to say to his significant other. Especially with the inherent shades of Ino in such a notion. He preferred Ino as much out of his bedroom as it was possible to keep her.

Also, it was too early, so he muttered “nite” and went back to sleep.

x

“You’re here again?” demanded Ino when Yoshi walked into their parents’ house for the second day in a row. “Don’t you ever take missions anymore?”

“I won two wars,” Yoshi pointed out, entered the kitchen, and discovered that Ino wasn’t alone. “Hi, Hinata-chan. Did you girls have a sleepover?” He waggled his eyebrows – conspiratorially, because at a second look his backpack turned out to be a sleeping Shikamaru getting a piggy-back ride.
Hinata-chan blushed, but she didn’t cringe or avert her eyes or try to hide under the table, so Ino pressed a kiss to her cheek and explained to her brother: “They’re tearing down and rebuilding part of Hiashi-sama’s house, so Hinata-chan is staying with me for a while.” The alternative had been the guestroom of one of her aunts, and that was sufficient motivation for Hinata to stand up for herself against her Father.

Yoshi mimicked one of Shikamaru’s meditation poses, and then said, in an intentionally fake tone: “It wouldn’t happen to have anything to do with unkillable mold, would it?”

Hinata-chan looked stunned for a moment, and then giggled so hard she nearly asphyxiated.

“Go sit, Hinata-chan. Ino and I’ve got this down to an art. We used to make our own bento when we still went to the Academy.”

They liked cooking together. It was a little nostalgic for them – it was the first activity they did together that required actual cooperation, and they probably became as close as they were thanks to it. Ino suspected that Yoshi had cultivated Team Plague’s closeness by similar means.

Shikamaru seemed to wake up somewhat, as if something had caught his attention – something other than what was in Yoshi’s pants, even.

Yoshi tapped his thigh to get him to dismount and, once unburdened, sighed melodramatically. “I can’t believe I missed the fallout of the mold prank.”
“Too busy doing your fuck-toy?” Ino suggested.

“I-Ino-chan!” Hinata-chan protested, but at least she wasn’t mortified bycrudeness anymore.

“So mean, Ichimatsu-chan,” drawled Yoshi, smirking, and bumped Ino’s shoulder with his.

Ino was gratified to see the flash of insecurity on Shikamaru’s face, before he lumbered off toward the nearest unoccupied chair. Ha! Served him right.

He had fucked around with Yoshi’s feelings for years; it felt good to give him a taste of his own medicine.

“Too busy stopping a war, I guess,” Yoshi said after a moment, shattering the levity with a single somber statement. He was still smiling, but there was hardness in his eyes that Ino recognised – that she relied on. She bet many of her dreams for the future on that hardness.

Shikamaru suddenly groaned and buried his face in his hand. “Mold. My room. Mum’s going to kill somebody.”

Ino cackled. Hinata-chan just placidly smiled, but she was definitely cackling on the inside.

Yoshi lit up. “Oh. Now I get why you had an apartment lined up!”

x

Shikamaru was wide awake and still extremely annoyed at Ino managing to get one over him by the time Yoshi dragged him up to his room. He had not been told what to expect, but he had had hopes.

Those were dashed immediately.

Yoshi gathered a few stray objects from the floor and deposited them all on his bed. Then he went and struck up a one-sided whispered conversation with Midori-sensei. He must have accepted the monstera’s silence as an affirmative response, because he waved Shikamaru over, knelt down, and clasped the edge of the huge flower pot.

“Hey, Deer-hart?”

“Yes?” Shikamaru said, skeptically looking down at the hand that had grabbed his ankle.

Yoshi grinned up at him. “Don’t blink.”

Shikamaru was sucked through a tube of vacuum. He couldn’t have screamed if he tried. He couldn’t have blinked if he tried, so thanks for useful advice, Blondie, really, that was great. A split second later they were in breathable air again, inside their apartment, and Midori-sensei was perfectly positioned in the corner where Yoshi had wanted her.

Shikamaru opened his mouth to say several very vulgar words, but they all stuck in his throat.

Oh gods. Yoshi had been so excited when he had devised a method for transporting the monstera, and he had thanked Shikamaru and – had he found the motivation to finally figure out the Hiraishin because he missed his plant?!

Shikamaru recalled how Yoshi had casually laid waste to an entire enemy army before he could teleport, and realised that the world would never be the same.

“Celebration now?” Yoshi suggested, pupils blown wide with lust.
Yuuki came home from her trip with a wagon full of exotic seeds and seedlings and sealed scrolls full of interesting intel. As always, her third question (not counting the absent ‘why do we have two open cartons of mango juice in the fridge?’ to which Inoichi did not have a satisfactory answer) was about what had changed in her absence.

Inoichi floundered. ‘Too much’ was the answer that occurred to him first, but he could do better than that for his beloved wife. Of course he would tell her everything. He simply wished that he had that ‘everything’ sorted out inside his head.

Perhaps talking about it would help him make sense of the past years?

“I’m so glad we ended the wars so fast,” she said, holding onto Inoichi as though she had been afraid for him.

He understood too well. There was a reason why he had told her to lie low and not try crossing either Earth or Wind country to get home, even if it meant she had been away three times as long as she had originally planned.

Inoichi himself had barely gone anywhere near the fighting, and that was mostly to act as Jiraiya-sama’s assistant for a couple of weeks when they were extracting strategic intelligence from captured Grass shinobi (since transporting so many prisoners all the way to Konoha had been unfeasible). That had left him in the position of sending one of his children to warn the other that he had been sent into a trap.

The children were the ones who fought for real.

“Yoshi has been promoted,” Inoichi reported. That one was easy enough. “He’s a jounin now. And Tsunade-sama unofficially conscripted him for some high-level administrative duties.”

Yuuki lit up with excitement. “Where is he?”

This one was less easy. “He’s… moved out. Mostly.” The other day Inoichi had gone to check on Midori-sensei, and the monstera was not there. How had Yoshi moved it out without anyone noticing? The plant was half the size of a room by now.

“Moved out…” Yuuki repeated, somewhat dismayed. “Oh, well. We’ll have to have a family dinner, then. You pick the restaurant and I’ll ask Mayu for reservations when I have a chat with the girls.”

A shiver ran down Inoichi’s spine.


His beloved wife raised her eyebrows at Inoichi.

“I gave him the Clan Talk!” Inoichi protested.

Yuuki gestured toward the boys, as if he hadn’t noticed them sit there all aglow and engaged. “I think you overemphasized the potential problems of teenage pregnancy and underemphasized the problems of whirlwind marriage. At least they had not eloped.”

The boys shared a look like they thought elopement was an excellent idea. Fortunately, Ino would
never stand for it, and Inoichi trusted in his Princess’ powers of persuasion.

Inoichi had initially wanted to sit the boys down and talk at them until they realised how hasty they were being, and that they would change their minds, but… But Yoshi wasn’t Inoichi, and Shikamaru wasn’t Hizashi. Shikamaru was just like Yoshino – more obstinate than a mule. Once he set his mind on something, the only one that could talk him out of it was… well… Yoshi.

And Yoshi seemed perfectly happy to go along with this craziness.

Inoichi shook his head and mentally pushed the staff to hurry up with their food. “I was so sure the likelihood of those two events would be reversed…”

Ino was somehow managing to keep her face straight. Or, and this option was a lot more likely, she was hiding her fit of hilarity under a genjutsu.

Yuuki sighed and let the annoyance go so she could properly enjoy the full comedy value of the situation. “Think of the silver lining, dear.”

“There is one?”

“There are several-”

Yes, Inoichi could admit that he found no fault whatsoever with Yoshi’s choice of partner – they knew Shikamaru well, and the young man was a good Konoha shinobi with an excellent potential. And a good enough man, too, which was admittedly rarer.

Not to mention that Inoichi had once sat that brat down and intimidated him into never ever even considering intentionally harming one of his children.

“-but, chiefly, the boys are saving another generation from a decade’s worth of Saturday Suffering.”

For all that the previous generation of Ino-Shika-Cho had instated the conditioning day to save their children’s lives, their wives would never, ever let them live it down. And Yuuki was wrong, because there would be plenty of other Nara even if Shikamaru did not father a child.

But this was absolutely not the time to point it out.

“Besides,” Yuuki planted one callused hand on top of the tablecloth, leaned closer to Inoichi and whispered into his ear, “it’s not as though we girls haven’t seen it coming. Yoshino predicted this exact outcome almost thirteen years ago.”

“When Shikamaru makes Yoshi Hokage the point will be moot anyway,” Ino quipped over the end of her Mother’s sentence.

“Hokage?” Yuuki repeated, surprised.

“I think it’s fairly obvious. In hindsight. Shikamaru does not want the hassle, but he likes the challenge of it. He will be a great grey eminence, and…” This time it was Inoichi who leaned closer to his wife and whispered: “It’s in Yoshi’s blood, isn’t it?”

Yuuki nodded. “I haven’t thought of it that way. But I can see it.”

Then, blessedly, the waitresses appeared with their first course, so Inoichi was temporarily off the hook.
Yoshi body-flickered into the training ground and smiled when he saw Shikamaru dozing in the afternoon sun.

Chouji waved at him.

“Hey, Deer-heart!” Yoshi called out, skipping over, and then leaned down to kiss the top of Shikamaru’s head-

Shikamaru jumped like a scalded cat and fell into a defensive crouch three yards away. He shuddered. “Don’t ever do that again, Ino!”

“Seconded,” said a second Yoshi, hopping down from a tree.

Chouji’s eyes flickered between them, and he finally figured out what had happened. This was even creepier than Ino’s usual jokes.

“Thirded.” Ino cancelled her Yoshi-henge. She was also shuddering. “I didn’t want to, but Mum asked me to, and if I didn’t do it-”

“Then Mum would have done it herself,” Yoshi filled in, wide-eyed, and gulped. “And Shikamaru would have failed the test.”

Ino nodded with a grim set to her mouth. “You’re welcome.”

Shikamaru took a deep breath. Chouji could tell that he was fighting with himself over something, but Shika was a lightning fast thinker even though he made it look like he wasn’t, so he quickly came to a conclusion.

He stood up straight, looked Ino in the eye, and said: “Thanks.”

Ino replied by miming the universal ‘I’m watching you’.

Chouji and Yoshi just grinned at one another, happy that their friends were finally at least sort-of getting along.

x

Yoshi had been trying to steer the conversation somewhere for a while now, and though Sakura was content to play along and discuss village policies, Sasuke had about reached his saturation point.

“…but supervision of the Office, or its limitation by laws would make it too inflexible. It would be eaten by bureaucracy-”

“What is the point of hoarding all that power,” Sasuke cut her off, “if the Hokage then turns around and tasks his Council with the actual hands-on problem-solving? Which, going by past experience, translates into them running black ops against our own people?!?”

That should derail the conversation completely. Sasuke tried not to overuse his personal technique of reducio ad Itachi, because it was about the only weapon that worked against Yoshi, and he did not want it to lose its impact.

“The Hokage should be better than that,” Yoshi said, which despite the wording was an agreement.

Sasuke put him out of his misery and asked him the question he wanted to be asked: “How about you?” Maybe now they could move onto a less infuriating subject.
“What?”

Sasuke rolled his eyes. As if he would fall for that. “You’d be ‘better than that’ if you were Hokage. With your… Yamanaka stuff… you might not be half bad at it.” This was torture.

And bitch-Sakura better stop laughing at him in the next two seconds, or he would give her something to cry about.

“You really think I could do it?” asked the greatest confidence man of their generation.

“Hn.”

Sakura snorted. “And Sasuke and I will be there to punch your face in if you even think about ordering the slaughter of a whole clan.”

“Good.” Yoshi grinned, finally satisfied (and it only took an hour of utter despair). “If I try shit like that, just have me assassinated in the twilight, yeah?”

Sasuke smiled. “It will be my pleasure.”

x

“That’s your plotting face.”

“I don’t have a specific plotting face,” Shikamaru protested, turning away from the window.

“That’s true,” Yoshi agreed solemnly. “All your faces are plotting faces.”

“I only have one face, Blondie. You should know that, since you’ve got exclusive rights to it.”

“You win in semantics. And in plotting—”

“Debatable, if you are the competition—”

“That’s a moot point, ‘cause we share all the plots now. No more your plots or my plots. There’s only our plots.”

“Then you should tell me about the Hokage plot.”

“You already know about the Hokage plot.”

Granted, Shikamaru did know about it, but not because he had been told of it. He had had to put it together on his own. “Then you know I’m plotting your plot, which is now our plot, and that should give me equal plotting rights—”

Yoshi broke into giggles, which he tried to muffle in Shikamaru’s chest. Shikamaru held him closer, set his chin on top of that blond head and wondered what the hell had happened to him. He hadn’t known he even possessed the capacity for ridiculousness, but here he was, acting like a lunatic. Worse, a talkative lunatic.

Troublesome.

“That answers the question I was going to ask you,” Yoshi said, pulling away far enough that they could have an actual conversation. “You think I can do it. And, like, be good at it.”

Shikamaru rolled his eyes. There was no one in this village that could be better at it. “You’ll surpass
Yoshi blinked in bemusement. “But Dad… Wait…?” He turned his head to look out of the window, and although they could only see the very top of the Hokage Mountain, it was clear what he was searching for. “Oh.”

“I… didn’t know that you didn’t know,” Shikamaru said. He was *not* sorry. “I would have told you sooner.”

“The kunai,” Yoshi whispered, awed. “The *Hiraishin!*”

Shikamaru shrugged. “I told you. The perfect gift.”

“And I loved it, but now I feel like I didn’t love it enough!”

x

“Dad?”

His son didn’t even live here, and this still happened. Inoichi couldn’t have suppressed his smile if he had tried.

“Did you know that I am the Yondaime Hokage’s son?”

Wow, that smile had fallen off his face fast. *How did you find out?* he wanted to ask. At the same time he was glad that the wait was over. He could finally talk about it. He could tell Yoshi – tell *Naruto* – all that he remembered about his blood family. It wasn’t much, but he had been hoarding the memories like a treasure, so that there was at least a little bit of Naruto’s legacy waiting for him down the line.

“Minato-san’s, yes. And Uzumaki Kushina-san’s.” Inoichi beckoned his son to take a seat. He broke out the bottle Yuuki had brought for him; he had never before drunk alcohol with either of his children, but this felt like a good time to break that seal. “Before you ask, all who knew or suspected had been forbidden from speaking about it by the order of Sandaime-sama. The dispensation we got for telling you about the…”

He had been about to say ‘you-know-what’, as he had done for so long for fear that someone might overhear, but he was not afraid now. What could those eavesdroppers do? Yoshi was stronger than his enemies, and even if he faltered, he had a circle of friends that were nearly as strong individually. All together the group was nigh on unstoppable.

“The dispensation for telling you about the Kyuubi did not cover the identity of your parents.”

Yoshi sipped expensive booze from a place neither of them had ever heard of, and contemplated. After a while he tugged on his ponytail. “If I stopped dyeing my hair, it would be kinda like his, right?”

“Yes.” Inoichi remembered the four-year-old with a head of bright yellow. Like a dandelion. “Just like his.”

“Dunno.” Yoshi shrugged and smiled. “Maybe one day. Ino and I still have way too much fun with the twin act. Even though she’s a couple of inches taller than me even without wearing heels.”

“Neither of your parents were tall,” Inoichi said sympathetically. He hoped that, wherever those two
were, they were at least as insanely proud of this amazing kid as he was, and that they would be okay with how Inoichi had done by him.

“Go on, Dad,” Yoshi bade him. “You’ve got to have some stories. Dish.”

Inoichi thought about the first time Kushina-san had publically rejected Minato-san’s proposal. He had been there. And managed not to laugh. Too much.

He started talking, and it was only his training that kept his eyes from welling with the relief he felt. Yoshi wasn’t angry. Yoshi understood. Yoshi wasn’t leaving – and most importantly, Yoshi still considered himself Inoichi’s son.

x

“I want to tell you my real name,” Yoshi said out of blue.

Ino looked him up and down. He had just returned from a mission, obviously, and although he didn’t seem wounded now, there were enough holes in his uniform to prove that he had been wounded.

Only then she registered what he had said. That was why he had mysteriously appeared inside Greenhouse Three while she was cutting daffodils? “Wait, like before you were adopted? You said you didn’t remember!”

Yoshi solemnly nodded. “As long as Dad’s order was standing, I didn’t remember a thing. I remember now, though.”

That was actually an acceptable excuse.

Ino set her shears down to minimise the risk of unintentional maiming, and stood straight. “What… ah… what was your name?”

And Yoshi told her genealogical information so crazy she couldn’t believe it – for all of three seconds, because then it was suddenly so stupidly obvious she couldn’t believe she hadn’t figured it out herself.

She punched him, but at least nobody was stabbed.

x

Shikamaru had been under the impression that watching fireworks was supposed to be romantic (certainly Aburame and Haraguchi seemed to act like it was). He realised quickly that between Ino and Sasuke both sides of Yoshi were claimed, and he would have to make do with standing behind him.

He did not mind too much; Yoshi wore geta, so his shoulder was at about the right height for Shikamaru to rest his chin on without having to straighten up.

“I spent so long resenting the memory,” Sasuke said quietly, barely audible over the explosions. His face betrayed nothing, but no one stared at fireworks with quite that much intensity without emotion driving them.

Yoshi made an understanding sound.

“Maybe try and remember him this way?” suggested Sakura.

Sasuke nodded.
And there was probably a reason for Sasuke and Yoshi holding hands. Seeing as Sasuke was holding Sakura’s hand on the other side, Shikamaru expected that it was another Plague thing, and didn’t remark on it, even as his mind catalogued the hints so he could put the puzzle together later.

“Is this weird?” Shikamaru asked once the fireworks were over, Sasuke had pulled away to be dour and unapproachable, Ino was preoccupied Sakura, and Hinata had snuck away to meet Lee. “Given the context of the celebration?” His arms were wound around Yoshi’s waist, so his stomach (and the seal on it) was right there for Shikamaru to pat.

Yoshi shrugged. “It used to be, a bit, after Mum and Dad told me. But it’s not anymore, not really, ‘cause it’s about people celebrating survival and remembering one of their heroes-”

He paused, and then slumped into Shikamaru’s hold – which wasn’t a good idea, since Shikamaru had already been slumped onto him and now they had nobody to hold them up. This was why Chouji was the designated Yamanaka-catcher between them – Shikamaru didn’t have the right sort of reflexes. Speaking literally, of course; when it came to metaphorical Yamanaka catching, that was provably Shikamaru’s domain.

Shikamaru did manage to keep them upright, because he was a jounin, and falling on their arses would have been too embarrassing.

“It is weird now,” Yoshi muttered. He stared over at the Hokage Mountain. “Namikaze Minato, huh?”

x

Sakura and Sasuke were in the middle of the inventory, having turned Sasuke’s living room into an exhibition of weapons and tags, when the door opened and spat out a Yamanaka.

And then in spat out another. Followed by a Nara.

“Hn?” inquired Sasuke. This was still his house, and he didn’t recall inviting anyone other than his team.

Yoshi clapped. “I had the most brilliant idea for a plan! Like, the best! The most epic! The cruelest most underhanded thing you can imagine-”

“Sit down and have some more sugar,” snapped Ino, kicking the feet from under her brother.

Yoshi, of course, hopped right over the kick, but he ended up in one of the few armchairs that weren’t loaded with sharp things. He accepted a pocky stick from his sister and obediently stuck it into his mouth, all the while grinning obnoxiously.

“I solemnly promised that all my plots are Shikamaru’s plots, too,” Yoshi explained, tugging his plus one down into his lap. His eyes met Sasuke’s, and somehow he managed to convey that this was the one and only chance Sasuke would have to protest, and also that Yoshi would accept the exclusion of his family from Sasuke’s revenge plan.

But Sasuke had already promised to support Yoshi as his future Hokage, and not trusting him now would be akin to rescinding that. Sasuke held his peace.

It was not as though these were random people brought in. Ino was one of Yoshi’s most fanatical followers (sometimes it seemed like they shared a brain, too), and Shikamaru was basically just an extension of Yoshi’s will at this point.
“And this really fucking awesome plan of yours somehow needs Ino?” asked violent-Sakura.

Sasuke considered inching away from her, but eventually decided that if she did try to molest him, he might as well enjoy himself. He didn’t really think she would; after years spent in close proximity to him, she was good at suppressing her baser instincts even when the personality in charge was more or less an amalgam of baser instincts.

He tried not to think about it, but the fact remained that if he wanted to restore his clan, he would have to deal with a female all up in his case. And why invite another one if there was already one there? Sasuke doubted he would ever learn to tolerate someone better than he tolerated Sakura.

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“Yup!” Yoshi confirmed cheerfully. “I consulted with Ino, ’cause I always do that when I need help mindfucking people, and then I asked Kurama about what scared Madara—”

“Kurama?” Sasuke, Sakura and Ino asked in unison, equally confused – and equally ignored.

“-and we can trust Kurama on this, ’cause I don’t think there’s actually anybody else in the world whom Kurama hates as much as that guy, and so he recounted all the people that Madara was at least worried about, which was a short list, ’cause that guy didn’t even take the Shodai all that seriously. Fair enough; the Shodai was sort of a wet tissue sometimes. Nidaime-sama thought so, too. Had a whole chapter about it in his—”

“Breathe,” Ino said about a second before Sasuke would have done so himself.

Bitch-Sakura simply pouted, denied her entertainment of seeing a teammate faint from self-inflicted lack of oxygen.

“You mean Uchiha Madara?” Shikamaru put his face in his hands and groaned.

“And, anyway,” Yoshi blithely continued, “we found the perfect way of psyching out the bastard. I need Ino to dye my hair red, and then help me put it into buns like Tenten wears. I’ve got these kanzashi—”

Sakura burst into wild laughter, apparently having figured out where Yoshi was going with this.

“-with seals, which probably don’t match entirely, but should be a good enough facsimile. Anyway, how much do you guys know about Uzumaki Mito?”

Sasuke found himself uncontrollably laughing right alongside Sakura. His team leader frightened him occasionally, but this – this – was the actual reason why Sasuke had no qualms about following the madman to the end of the world and beyond.

x

“Yoshi! Yoshi! Are you seeing what I am seeing?”

Ino barreled into his side, clung like a limpet, and stared across the Missions Desk room at the unfamiliar dark-haired, bare-bellied ninja about their age. Naruto had been watching that train wreck in utter fascination for a few minutes (he was in no hurry – he just wanted to see if there were any missions they could misuse as cover-up for their hunt on Madara).

Either this boy was the single best actor whom Naruto had ever met, leagues better than even Ino, or his emotional intelligence was in the negatives.

“Hé’s so fucking messed up,” Ino breathed, stars in her eyes.
“…and that is how my existence came to be declassified, Scarface,” said the stranger, and then was genuinely surprised when Ami punched him in the crotch.

Fuyumi very slowly, with a loud metallic sound, slid her kodachi back into its sheath.

The stranger stood straight, as if the – probably debilitating – amount of pain didn’t even register for him. He did something with his expression that could be theoretically called a smile (all the right muscles were activated), but which had obviously been learnt by a face that had no clue what to do without extensive and detailed instruction.

He pulled out a book.

“Casual violence can sometimes be a sign of friendship,” he read, and turned the not-smile at Team Shibi. “Thank you! We are going to be excellent friends!”

Since the altercation had drawn a lot of attention, a sudden horrified hush fell over the Missions Desk room upon this proclamation. The chuunin behind the desks paused in their respective activities.

“Let me guess,” Naruto muttered. “He’s-”

“Hot!” Ino finished for him, and then her grin widened. “I’m going to go say hi!”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks, everybody! This was a great ride; your response has been amazing right from the start, and I hope that I'll be back soon with something new to post.

About the pictures: I’m not good at this stuff, but I’m not actually ashamed of it, and if I didn’t put it here, it would have just molded away in my drawer. So, have pictures.

And also have a good summer! Cheers,

Brynn

End Notes

Warnings: forget canon – no, seriously, forget it; this is not a high school AU, because there are ninja who fight – really, they do; unrealistic romance; implied sexual situations (featuring old-enough and fully consenting people); canon-typical violence; character death; suicidal ideation; there’s a lot of sad moments, but most of it is like small-child level of sadness – this story is actually chock-full of all kinds of love; and mindfuck – but it’s for the victims’ own good!; alcohol abuse; naughty language; unreliable narrators; trace amounts of misogyny; inappropriate humour (like making fun of severe mental conditions or brainwashing); let me just warn for crack, because I feel like I don’t write anything but crack anymore, but that might just be the fact that everyone in RL seems completely insane to me lately; but even so KWK – Kaguya? What Kaguya? (because it’s not that cracky)...
...I think these warnings are indicative of my mental state, so take that as a disclaimer, please?

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!