Gem of the Eddy

by beetlebee

Summary

"The fall of Uzushio collapsed our economy, our protections. You might think I'm being rosy, but they really cared about us. And they knew how to party. You know they had a seal that could swap body parts? Wildest night of my life,” the boatman’s eyes go distant for a long moment, “...but you kids are too young to hear about that.
“Anyway,” he continues, “our economy’s been a shambles since; maybe gets going for a year or two before it collapses again. No security of stability, so assholes like Gato think they can waltz in here and take charge. Boy, he’d be singing a different tune if the Uzumaki were still around.”

Sakura’s eyes widen a bit at that, and even Sasuke looks up. Naruto opens his mouth to say something, but Kakashi puts a firm hand on his shoulder.

“What an… illuminating piece of history,” says Kakashi, “Thank you for sharing.”

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(Kiri may have won the battle, but not the war. The island of Uzushio might not be as dead as previously believed.

All Kakashi knows now is that he really should have refused that mission to Wave.

An island lives, people change, foxes laugh, and Team Seven goes on a wild journey!

Notes

Ahh, I'm so excited to get started with this! The first part is a bit brisk; I wanted to get through most of the wave arc, where I start to change things. Then we get to get to the really meaty bits halfway through this chapter, where we take a real hard left turn from canon. Well, you'll see. This gets... odd.

Please strap in!!
Chapter 1

Tazuna may have underestimated these shinobi types, especially the brats, and he feels a little bad about lying, but they still agreed to come with him to Wave than abandon him to his grisly fate. He’ll take it.

Even if that Kakashi guy’s been giving him the murder eyes when no one else is looking.

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“Hey, Tazuna, I see you made it back with the shinobi!” An old boatman with leathery tanned skin and a couple missing teeth grins as they walk up to the dock.

Tazuna smiles with a wince and says, “Yeah, uh, I did. So! What’s new with you, Hadō?”

“Eh, same shit different day. Hey, spotting more foxes near shore this week, though.”

“Ooh,” says Tazuna, excited, as they all climb into the boat.

“Foxes?” Sakura asks with a curious frown.

“Oh, you Konoha folk don’t tend to like them, that’s right,” says Hadō.

Naruto hunches his shoulders.

The boatman continues, “Well, you all keep that to yourself. People here like foxes; they say some of ‘em are the spirits of fallen Uzu folk, looking out for their families and allies even in death.”

Naruto’s shoulders drop a fraction, and he asks, “Uh, Uzu?”

“Uzushio; you kids gotta know about that.”

“Yes, but why is Uzushio important to Wave?” Sakura asks, curious.

The boatman scoffs. “They teach you kids to kill with your pinky finger, but they don’t tell you economics? Ah, well, not like Konoha cares one lick about Wave anyway.”

“That’s not true!” Naruto argues as he scowls at him.

Hadō holds up a hand. “Peace. I get it. You’re kids. Young enough to think your village could do no wrong.”

“Well—” Sakura starts to say.

“I’m not mad; just a fact of life. The fall of Uzushio collapsed our economy, our protections. You might think I’m being rosy, but they really cared about us. And they knew how to party. You know they had a seal that could swap body parts? Wildest night of my life,” the boatman’s eyes go distant for a long moment, “...but you kids are too young to hear about that.

“Anyway,” he continues, “our economy’s been a shambles since; maybe gets going for a year or two before it collapses again. No security of stability, so assholes like Gato think they can waltz in here
and take charge. Boy, he'd be singing a different tune if the Uzumaki were still around."

Sakura’s eyes widen a bit at that, and even Sasuke looks up. Naruto opens his mouth to say something, but Kakashi puts a firm hand on his shoulder.

“What an… illuminating piece of history,” says Kakashi. “Thank you for sharing.”

Hadō grins. “Of course; if it helps you at all with killing Gato or whatever you’re here to do, I’ll be happy. The bridge will be good for trade, if anything.”

Kakashi gives Tazuna a pointed look. Tazuna sinks lower in his seat.

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And then Momochi Zabuza attacks them.

Tazuna starts to fear that Kakashi might not stop at the murder eyes by the end of this.

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Sensei is stuck injured in bed after the fight with Zabuza, resting for the predicted Round Two in just under a week. Sakura, Sasuke, and Naruto all agree: now is the perfect time to corner him about the Uzumaki.

Uzumaki? A clan? Sakura didn’t expect it, though in hindsight it makes sense. Uzushio, Uzumaki.

“Maa, you all want to know about the Uzumaki?” Kakashi asks where he’s sitting up in bed, reading his gross book.

Sakura nods her head emphatically; Sasuke tips his the slightest.

“Yeah, and there’s nowhere to run, Sensei!” Naruto declares.

Sensei gives them an unimpressed look. Sakura starts to sweat a bit, but she doesn’t break, and not just because Sasuke and Naruto are also holding their ground. She’s so curious; she has to know.

Sensei sighs, then looks like he’s weighing his next words. He shuts his book with a snap.

“Maa, let’s start with Uzushio. What did you learn about it in the Academy?”

“Uh, the spiral was important?” says Naruto. Sakura wants to facepalm.

Instead she says, “They were one of our greatest historical allies.”

Uzushio fell because Konoha couldn’t arrive to help them in time,” Sasuke adds.

Kakashi nods, “Correct, well, correct enough, to all the above. The fall of Uzushio is Konoha’s greatest failure. Kiri and Iwa ambushed the island, reportedly wiping out every living person on it.”

“Why did they do that?” Naruto asks, aghast.

“The Uzu people, especially the Uzumaki, were masters of fuuinjutsu. I’d say beyond mastery. Their prowess is what made Uzushio a target for elimination. It also makes the Uzumaki name a very dangerous one to reveal in some parts of the world.”

“Oh,” says Naruto, a bit pale, “good to know, Sensei.” Then he brightens, “But it’s okay to be an
Uzumaki in Konoha, yeah? Maybe there’s—oh, wait. I would’ve run into them in the village by now. Aww,” he hangs his head.

Sakura thinks a moment, then suggests, “But maybe there were survivors. They could still be somewhere; maybe they relocated elsewhere? Or maybe they changed their names?”

Sensei shakes his head, “No, I don’t believe so. In all the places I’ve been, I’ve never seen evidence of any other living Uzumaki. And despite our original failure, Konoha would have reached out to them to provide aid.”

“Oh.” Naruto deflates. “I’m happy to finally find out about my name, but… they’re still all gone, huh?”

They all sit there for a bit in silence, letting Naruto’s words hang in the air. Sasuke stares at Naruto for a moment, and then looks away, a strange look on his face. Sakura wonders what it means.

“...Maybe we can look on the Memorial Stone for their names, at least,” Sakura tries, attempting to sound hopeful.

“Yeah,” Naruto mumbles, downcast, “maybe.”

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Kakashi is tired.

Naruto looks… so disappointed. Kakashi sees Kushina in that face, disappointed in him. Actually, Kushina would kick Kakashi’s ass to Tea Country and back if she could see this sorry display, and Kakashi would deserve every second of it.

His students get up to leave, mood still heavy. “Naruto,” he says before he can stop himself, “would you stay back a moment?” All the kids hesitate, but Kakashi shoos the other two out with a wave of his hand; this is something Naruto should hear first. If he shares it, that’s up to him.

Kakashi is tired of running away.

“Uhh, what is it, Sensei?” Naruto asks, looking a bit nervous.

“Hang on,” Kakashi pulls out a little slip of seal paper from a pocket. “Stick that on the door; we still have some cute little eavesdroppers outside.” He watches Naruto go to the door, and he thinks about what to say next.

Naruto may never have memories of Kushina, but he can have stories. Naruto shouldn’t have to search for piecemeal information about his own mother; he should hear about her from Kakashi. Kakashi fiercely tamps down on the rising grief he’s still yet to heal from. He needs to do this, no matter how much it hurts, no matter how late he is. He owes Naruto this much.

Naruto sits back down, a mixture of nervous and curious, as he looks at Kakashi expectantly. Kakashi can’t let himself back out now, but how should he handle this?

Fuck it; he decides to take a page out of Kushina’s book and say it plain: “I knew your mother.”

Naruto startles. “What?” He looks like he can’t believe what Kakashi just said.

Kakashi lays it out. “Her name was Uzumaki Kushina. Her nickname was the Red Hot-Blooded Habanero. She had the reddest hair I’ve ever seen, but she’d throw you off the Hokage Monument if
you ever dared to call her Tomato. She was the most terrifying kunoichi I’ve ever known and she loved ramen even more than you do.”

Naruto doesn’t scream at him, asking him why he’s only saying something now.

Naruto doesn’t punch him in outrage for keeping this from him.

Naruto scoots over to sit next to Kakashi and says, incredulous, “…She liked ramen more than me?”

Kakashi nearly laughs. Leave it to Naruto to surprise him. He eye smiles instead, and says, “Oh, she did; there was this one time Teuchi held his first—and last—ramen contest and…”

Kakashi tells story after story, the tidbits he can think of. He shies away from mention of Minato. He—he can’t. But somehow… talking about Kushina hurts less with every sentence. He watches Naruto’s face brighten again, and Kakashi feels his own grief begin to slowly ease.

Maybe Kushina will kick his ass slightly less in the afterlife.

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Kakashi-sensei’s been nicer the past few days. Or Naruto thinks he’s been a bit nicer. He acts the same, but he’s ruffled Naruto’s hair a bunch of times.

Naruto is pretty happy, too. Kakashi-sensei has so many awesome stories about his mom; Naruto wants to be just like her now. Maybe he can convince Teuchi to do another ramen contest if he promises not to knock out a load-bearing wall in a fist fight against another contestant. Or get glitter everywhere.

Naruto does stop once to wonder how Kakashi-sensei knows his mom but Jiji doesn’t. Huh. Weird. He shrugs it off for now.

Kakashi-sensei also has them tree climbing, which sucks. Sakura already figured it out, because she’s Sakura and amazing. That jerk Sasuke is having just as hard a time, at least. He’s being weird, though. Quiet. Not his dumb brooding, exactly. A weird kind of quiet.

Naruto takes a break after a few hours, sweaty and frustrated, not much farther up the tree than before. He stomps over to the river to cool off.

He’s later drying off in the sun when he hears a noise and looks over to see a fox digging around in the tall grass. Naruto thinks about what that boatman said, about Uzumaki coming back as foxes, and he wonders.

“Hey, hey fox,” he calls to it just above a whisper. He doesn’t want to scare it off. Its ear twitches, and it swivels its head around to look at him. Naruto holds his breath. Animals usually run away from him. But this one edges the slightest bit closer, cautious. Naruto squints at the fox. It seems pretty normal to him, and not like a creepy spirit.

Still, it wouldn’t hurt to try, right?

"Hey fox, I know it sounds dumb, but..." he whispers as he plays at the hem of his jacket, "if you’re an Uzumaki, do you know my mom? Her name’s Kushina. And… if my mom or dad are still around, could you tell 'em... I said hi?"

The fox stares at him, then leaps into the brush, darting away.
"Dumb fox, dumb Uzushio." Naruto kicks at the dirt with his heel as he leans back in the grass, disappointed.

Still, he wonders.

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Haku notices the blond boy from Zabuza-sama’s fight passed out in the grass. Not the smartest move; an enemy could sneak right up on him. An enemy like himself, Haku muses. Still he crouches down and shakes the boy’s shoulder.

The boy snorts awake and sits up. He looks wildly around, and then sighs. “Aw, man, I was still hoping the fox came back…” he mutters.

Haku cocks his head. “A fox?”

He scowls at the river. “Oh, I just wanted to ask it for something. It’s dumb.”

Haku is unsure what that means, but he plays along, “I’m sure it’s not dumb; would you like to tell me?”

“I was hoping it was an Uzushio fox. I asked if it knew my mom and if it could, uh, send a message to her if she was a spirit, too. Sounds dumb, right?”

Haku vaguely knows about Uzushio. Zabuza-sama had mentioned Uzumaki and ghost stories, once. He doesn’t like talking about it, so Haku doesn’t ask.

Haku shakes his head. “I don’t think so. It’s not dumb to want to speak to your mother, if she’s no longer with you.”

The boy smiles. “Alright, so it’s not dumb? Anyway,” he scowls again, “I don’t think it worked, which sucks. She’s the only family I know about so it would be nice to at least say, I dunno, hello.”

“No family?” Haku asks.

“Yeah. Everyone related to me is apparently dead, so,” he shrugs.

“Family doesn’t have to be by blood. You have people you care for? People you want to protect?” Haku presses.

“Oh sure,” the boy says, “my team! I definitely want to protect them.” He furrows his brows. “Even that jerk Sasuke.”

“It might not be a stretch to consider them as family. They don’t have to replace your parents, but they can add to the family you already have.”

“Kind of like making a bigger family, huh,” the boy contemplates. “Yeah, maybe my team is like my family.”

Haku thinks fondly of Zabuza. He may be a tool of shinobi, but… “Of course. Family is what you make of it,” Haku says with a gentle smile.

“Yeah, I like that. Thanks!” He grins. “But still, it would be really cool to meet my mom if I could.” He grins wider, “Uzumaki Kushina was really amazing, you know! She threw people off mountains if they made her mad!” He blinks, and adds. “Oh right, I’m Uzumaki Naruto, what’s your name?”
Haku blinks at the boy’s enthusiasm. “Oh, I’m Haku.” Then he blinks a few more times as the name registers.

This boy... is an Uzumaki?

Oh dear.

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At the end of the week, like Kakashi-sensei expected, Zabuza appears at the bridge site. And Haku from the river too, which Naruto thinks is really uncool of him.

They all get into position, ready to defend Tazuna and the bridge.

Zabuza doesn’t move to attack. He instead says, “Yeah, no, hang on.” He walks away from them all, ambling over to the edge of the bridge site. It becomes more confusing when a fuming Gato walks out to meet him, alone.

“You think you can call me here early?” Gato calls out as he crosses his arms in angry posturing.

“You came, didn’t you?” Zabuza scratches at his chin. “Anyway. I quit.”

“You... you quit?” Gato squawks.

“I’m not going up against even a baby Uzumaki for any amount of money.”


“Quit, eh?” Gato reaches into his pocket. “You can’t quit when I fire you.” He smirks as he brandishes a handheld detonator. “I’ve got this bridge rigged with so many explosives that you’ll—”

Zabuza deftly plucks the detonator from Gato’s hand and snaps it in half, elbowing Gato once in the face in the same movement. Gato shrieks in pain and scrambles away, while pulling out an ornate scroll from his jacket.

“Ha!” he crows as he shakes the scroll open, wiping at his face with his other hand. “I have other insurance!” He smears the blood from his nose over the design, holding his hand in place as the scroll lights up with an ominous glow.

Kakashi-sensei’s eyes widen in recognition. “That fuuinjutsu scroll is—you idiot!”

“Scared of Uzu, huh, then get a taste of this scroll! The seller promised a guaranteed death! Hahaha —AUGHH!” Gato clutches at his chest and he falls over, the scroll hitting the ground with a clatter. But the scroll doesn’t stop moving, and Naruto hears a thunderous rumble. He looks up at dark clouds forming impossibly fast overhead and rain begins to fall.

Zabuza takes a step back. “Oh, fuck. Haku, we have to go—”

“Zabuza-sama!” Haku pushes Zabuza out of the way as a streak of lighting runs through him. He collapses in a heap as Zabuza shouts in horror. Zabuza kneels over him, desperately looking for any signs of life. Naruto can only watch helplessly. Haku can’t be dead, please—

“Run!” Kakashi-sensei cries, pushing Naruto to move. Rain pelts down in sheets as they try to run for it. There’s another rumble, and the ground trembles with it. Sakura trips, and Sasuke pulls her to her feet, holding onto her hand as they push against the wind in futility.
Naruto squints through the sweeping rain and sees the crackling energy shoot across the ink-black clouds and begin to gather. He can see from where he is that—oh god, it’s going to strike Sakura and Sasuke!

Naruto doesn’t even have time to shout a warning when Kakashi-sensei darts in front of them, taking the lightning strike dead on.

Kakashi-sensei collapses backwards. Sakura and Sasuke go down with him as they grab at him to keep his head from hitting the ground. Naruto can hear Sakura’s scream even above the wind. She’s trying to hold Kakashi-sensei up by his flak jacket, visibly trembling as she attempts to read for a pulse. She tries and tries again as she starts to sob. Sasuke shakes as he brackets Kakashi-sensei’s other side, too shell-shocked to even move.

Naruto doesn’t think, he doesn’t have a plan; he just needs to get to his team. He crosses his arms over his face, bracing against the brutal wind, picking up faster against him and pelting him with bullets of rain as the rumble starts again.

“Sasuke!”

Naruto flails out a hand and Sasuke reels him in. Sakura’s eyes are clenched shut in absolute terror, tears and rain streaming down her face as she grips them both. Kakashi-sensei is braced between them all; he’s still not waking up. Sasuke clutches Naruto’s arm and looks right at him, his Sharingan spinning wildly. Naruto stares back; he sees the fear in his eyes and watches the new tomoe take form. He can’t look away, and Sakura holds them tighter.

They need help. Any help. Anything.

Sasuke’s Sharingan spin faster. Sakura’s grip turns punishing. The skin of Naruto’s stomach burns.

And everything stops.

In that moment, the wind stills, the thunder halts. Even the rain, impossibly, pauses mid fall, like the world is holding its breath.

A bell chimes.

Then the rain around them shudders, ripples and contorts inward. It shapes into a violent vortex, a whirlpool, pulling them all in as they hang onto each other for dear life. The lightning strike hits the vortex and shoots wildly off course, unable to touch them.

“What the fuck is that!” Zabuza cries over the whistling wind, refusing to let go of Haku’s too-still body as the maelstrom drags them closer. Sounds of screaming and shrieking laughter reverberate around them, glowing shadows streaking past the swirling water, just outside his vision, but Naruto isn’t looking at anyone but his team, his family, as bells chime, louder and louder and louder.

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Fuzzy. His head is fuzzy, buzzing. Naruto’s not sure what happened; he’s supposed to be at the bridge site, right? He tries to remember.

Naruto opens his eyes, and is startled to see a face he knows. Startled, because he’s seen that face on the Monument almost every day of his life.

The Yondaime is standing above him.
The Yondaime, who takes one look at Naruto, blinks several times, and says, “Uh oh.”

Naruto shrinks back. No, please, if not even the Yondaime can stand to be near Naruto—

The man immediately holds up his hands in placation. “Goodness, not that it isn’t wonderful to finally see you again, Naruto!” he says with a genuine smile.

Naruto blinks, now confused. The Yondaime is… happy to see him? Huh?

But if the Yondaime is here, then, “Did I… die?” Naruto asks, beginning to panic.

“Oh, no, not in the least! It’s just, well.” He laughs a little nervously, and turns his head to call out, “Uhm, Kushina…?”

Naruto jolts. He knows that name now, thanks to Kakashi-sensei. That’s his—

A red-haired woman shoves a yelping Yondaime out of the way with one hand, “Oh, is he here? I wanna see him! And mouth shut; you’re catching flies like your toads, pretty boy!”

Naruto’s mom could push a hokage around like it was nothing. He likes her already.

She doesn’t hesitate and kneels down in front of Naruto. “Naruto, my little noodle bowl! So good to see you all grown up!”

Seeing her, having a face to a name, having anything after all these years…

“Mom…” Naruto manages to choke out, as he squeezes his eyes shut and tries not to cry. He can’t believe it. The fox from the river had listened. It must have answered his plea; he gets to meet his mom.

“Oh, baby,” She leans forward and scoops him up, holding him close and rubbing soothing circles into his back. “There there, you’ll be alright, you know?”

Naruto rests his head against his mom’s shoulder, because now he can.

She continues, “I want you to know your dad and I are rooting for you!”

Naruto blinks. “Huh? My dad?”

“Oh, yeah, he’s right there, you know!” she jerks her head to the side at—at the Yondaime.

“You—the Yondaime’s my dad!?” Naruto is awed for only a few moments when—

“Hey! You sealed that shitty fox in me!” he shouts over his mom’s shoulder.

She turns around to join in. “Yeah, Minato, you sealed that shitty fox in him!”

Minato flails, “Ah, I’m so sorry, Naruto; it really seemed like the best idea at the time and I—”

“Don’t worry, I already punched him in the head for it,” Kushina stage whispers, conspiratorial, to Naruto.

Naruto loves his mom.

Minato settles down and coughs awkwardly. “Er, Kushina, what about the whole…” he gestures to Naruto.
Naruto, confused, looks down at himself, finally realizing—

“Gah!” Naruto flails in his mom’s arms until she’s holding him upside down.

“Oh jeez, watch the claws, kiddo!” She flips him back over and sets him down on the hazy ground.

He spins around in place, only to flop over, trying to look at all of himself at once. “How—what the hell?!” Naruto shouts, his tail—and that’s weird—whipping about wildly.

“Oh yeah, bit of a hiccup there,” she says as if she’s talking about the weather.

“...Our son turned into a fox,” Minato says faintly. “I mean, I’ll love you no matter what, Naruto, but. That is not supposed to happen.”

Kushina shrugs. “Could’ve happened to me, you know. Could’ve been married to a fox.” She waggles her eyebrows as Minato makes a strangled noise. “Plus you messed with Uzu fuuinjutsu; what do you expect, pretty boy?”

Minato rubs at his temples with a sigh, “I’d like to say I expect for it to work with any logical sense, but I should really know better by now.”

“What’s more strange to me,” Kushina says to Naruto, “Is why you know who I am but you don’t know your dad.”

“Oh, Kakashi-sensei only told me about you, uh, a week ago?”

“A week ago?” Kushina shrieks, making Naruto’s ears pull back. “No one told you? Where was Jiraiya? Where the hell was anybody?”

“Oh no, I think I see what’s happened,” Minato groans, “did Hiruzen decide it needed to be kept top secret?”

Kushina growls. “Ugh, he so would do that! I wanna punch him in the head now too, you know!”

Naruto’s ears swivel—which feels so weird—in confusion. Who is Hiruzen? Maybe Jiji knows. He has an idea though, “Oh, hey, can I ask Kakashi-sensei about dad too; he’s got stories, right?”

“Oh absolutely—wait, Kakashi-sensei? He’s teaching?” Kushina guffaws.

“I’m sure he’s... doing fine... as a teacher,” his dad says with a smile that’s more a grimace. “Kakashi-kun’s an excellent shinobi, at any rate. If there’s anyone I’d trust to look out for you, it’s him.”

“He was an intense kid, yeah,” says Kushina.

Intense? After that Zabuza fight, Naruto could maybe see it. Maybe. And his dad has a point; when it comes down to it, Kakashi-sensei said he’d protect his team with his life—

The world shudders once and it all comes crashing back. His team, the storm, the bells —

“Wait, oh no, Kakashi-sensei and Sakura and Sasuke!” Naruto looks around wildly. “I gotta—I gotta go make sure they’re all okay!”

Kushina nods. “Good idea. That’s our cue that time’s almost up here, anyway. As for the fox thing: go to Uzushio; you should be able to get on the island, and there ought to be something there to help you out.” Kushina turns to Minato, “Any last-minute fatherly advice for our kid, pretty boy?”
“If you can work with others as a team, and be a good friend, I think you'll go far,” his dad says with a warm smile.

“And after that, love is all you need!” his mom adds with a wink and a grin.

Naruto nods. Uzushio, teamwork, love. No sweat!

His parents run up and hug Naruto together. “We love you so much, noodle bowl!” They let him down and take a step back. “Good luck! Say hi to Kakashi for us!”

“Bye mom, dad!” he calls out as the world around them grows hazier. His parents wave as everything fades away.

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The storm... stops.

Tazuna looks up from where he’s hiding behind a pillar of the bridge, and lifts his arms away from his head. His ears are ringing; he wonders if it’ll ever stop. He scoots forward and peers around the pillar. Besides the debris carried in from the storm, there’s... nothing. Not a soul besides Tazuna remains.

...Maybe that isn’t quite true. He thinks he sees things dart away out of the corner of his eye but they’re long gone when he turns to look. Maybe it’s better he doesn’t see. Maybe he doesn’t really want to know. What he already saw in the eye of that storm—

He hears tinny shouts over the ringing in his ears. He turns to see two crowds form; those bandits of Gato's are finally arriving... at the same moment as the villagers, who don’t hesitate to attack.

“Uh, hang on,” one of the bandits eventually shouts over the cacophony of battle, “where’s Gato?”

“Yeah… and didn’t he have the detonator?” says another.

“That asshole. He ditched us!”

“I’m not losing out on pay again!”

“Nah. Let’s go raid his hideout.”

The rest of the bandits like the sound of that and summarily abandon the fight. The villagers, bemused, watch as the still-standing bandits run off into the distance.

“Uh, well. And stay out!” a villager calls after them. They all then look at each other, at a bit of a loss. One of them halfheartedly kicks an unconscious bandit in the side. Tazuna figures that’s the end of that. Good. He can finish his damn bridge and then go drink for a month straight.

“Huh. So what happened with Gato?” Tsunami asks.

“...The shinobi took care of it,” Tazuna decides to say. They sure as shit did something.

“But where did those shinobi go?” asks Inari, craning his neck around the build site, frowning at the scorch marks.

“I dunno. Maybe they’re not into goodbyes,” Tazuna lies. He lies because that was some of the freakiest shit he’s almost died from, and he partied with Uzu people back in the day. He isn’t about to scare his grandson.
“Aw, I wanted to tell them that I was sorry,” says Inari.

“Hey, it’s okay, kiddo. They helped us and I’m sure they know we all appreciate it. Maybe we could name the bridge something to honor them.” Tazuna scratches his head a moment then grins. "Hey, how 'bout this: The Great Uzumaki Bridge," he declares, stretching his arms wide out.

“You don’t think that might make anybody from Kiri or elsewhere angry?” a villager says, worried.

Tazuna waves a hand. "Screw 'em. The world will know where we stand. Besides,” he says with a helpless laugh, “we got the gods of Uzu on our side!"

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Zabuza lurches awake to the honks of birds. He pulls himself up, and squints through the bright sun, heart racing, to see… a flock of flamingos wading about a tide pool. One or two give him the side eye but otherwise they don’t give a shit about him. He stares at them for a long moment, trying to figure out where they came from. His gaze shifts, and he stares out at a violently churning sea in the middle distance.

This… this doesn’t seem right at all. It was raining, with that stupid bridge, those stupid Konoha brats, and Haku was...

He tenses; oh fuck, last he remembers, Haku was… Haku was—

“Zabuza-sama?” Haku calls out from where he’s slowly sitting up, farther down the beach.

“Haku!” Zabuza says as he scrambles to his feet, not caring in that moment if he sounds too relieved. Haku is here; somehow, he’s still alive.

Haku smiles, beatific, “I’m happy to see you’re well too, sir.”

Zabuza trots across the beach and holds out his hand to pull Haku to his feet. "Any idea how we got here?"

Haku frowns slightly as he brushes sand off of himself. “I’m afraid I don’t know, but I don’t believe we are in the Land of Waves anymore.”

“Yeah,” Zabuza agrees. He doesn’t know how the fuck it’s possible, but the eddies alone confirm his suspicions. “I think this is Uzushio.”

Haku’s eyes widen, and he looks around in newfound wonder. Zabuza just wants to get out of here as fast as possible. The place gives him the creeps, and Haku didn’t endure years of stories of the Uzu boogeymen from teachers and parents in Kiri.

Zabuza stares out at the sea. They’re far from other land, but, "...Can you use your ice to get us across to Wave?"

Haku shakes his head. "With that amount of water to contend against, and with the whirlpools moving that quickly? I'm afraid not, Zabuza-sama."

With Uzushio gone for years now, it didn't matter in Kiri to learn techniques to surmount the eddies anymore. It wasn’t like anyone could access the island anyway, with whatever freaky seals the now-dead Uzu people left behind in their wake.

Zabuza has the sinking feeling that may have been short-sighted of Kiri. He sighs. “We better find
some shelter at least, if we’re stuck here for a bit.”

They walk a bit farther inland, past a sparse copse of palm trees and into the sprawling wilds of the island. They could always eat coconuts and flamingos at least, if they find nothing else.

Haku suddenly tenses, and stares at the ruins of a little shrine Zabuza didn’t notice before. “Sir… do you see what I’m seeing?”

Zabuza squints in the direction Haku is looking. “No, just some broken garbage. What is it?”

"Ah, well.” Haku hesitates. “A ghost is speaking to me."

Zabuza’s brow raises. A *ghost*? He doesn’t normally doubt Haku, but *seriously*?

"Oh, I’m sorry,” Haku says to thin air. “She says she’s a chakra impression. Now she’s saying only the young and innocent can see her—"

Zabuza snorts loudly at that. "Innocent. Yeah, right. Pull the other one."

"Oh. She just doesn't like you."

“Really,” Zabuza says, flat.

“You called her shrine garbage,” Haku winces ever so slightly, “…so she thinks your face is garbage.”

Zabuza shouts, “Then she can *say* that shit to my face—ow!” A seal flares and a rock shoots out of the shrine, pelting Zabuza in the arm.

Haku bites his lip. “She says she didn’t wait around for 30 years to talk to a rude idiot like you."

“Oh, I’m the rude one?” Zabuza mutters, rubbing his sore arm, but he suddenly gets chills. Some creepy invisible chakra impression managed to last here *all this time*? It’s supposed to be stupidly difficult to make a *normal* chakra impression in the first place. Zabuza knows about the extended life force of Uzu people—making Kiri consider their bloody victory all the sweeter—but to do something this incredible?

...Perhaps Kiri won the battle, but not the war. The island of Uzushio might not be as dead as previously believed.

And now Zabuza is stuck on it.

Fucking wonderful.

Chapter End Notes

Cue the island music!
Chapter Notes

This starts heavy and then gets... hmm. You'll see.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ah.

Kakashi is dead.

There’s no relief, no great exhale, like he might have felt even a month ago. He just feels sick. He left his students behind to brave an Uzushio storm by themselves. And for all his affinity, it means nothing when he jumps in front a lightning strike with no other defense ready. He just… reacted.

He just hopes that bought them time. He hopes they somehow made it out alive.

“Kakashi?”

Kakashi turns sharply to see, by a bonfire, the only source of light in this vast space, someone very familiar. “...Dad.”

Sakumo looks distraught. “You’re here, so young...”

“Struck by summoned lightning,” he says blankly, “while trying to protect my students.”

“Students?”

“Yeah.” Kakashi sits down next to him and doesn’t say any more for a long moment. Sakumo doesn’t press. He thinks about the one thing he wished he could say to his dad.

“Your mission,” Kakashi begins. “You did the right thing.”

Sakumo stares at him, surprised.

“It took me awhile to understand it. Way too long. I learned an important lesson from a dear friend: those who break the rules are trash, but those who abandon their comrades, their friends, are worse than trash.”

Sakumo smiles. “Sounds like a very wise friend.” He huffs a humorless laugh. “I could have used those words by the end of it. I’d say I’m worse than trash for abandoning my family.”

Kakashi remains silent. His father left him, yes, but Kakashi didn’t help things; he had turned his back on his own father. He could have seen the signs, done something different.

But Sakumo can still read him like an open book. “Kakashi, you were only six.”

“But—”

“It shouldn’t be on you at that young an age, or any age, to fix the mistakes I made. I had others I could’ve reached out to.”
Yet the ones who could really make a difference, who couldn’t be swayed by public opinion, The Sannin, were all out of the village at the time.

...How conveniently inconvenient.

“Isn’t that…” Kakashi starts to really think about the circumstances of his father’s death, “Isn’t that strange that you were singled out—vilified—for that mission out of any others you may have failed? Of any missions other people have failed?”

Sakumo sighs, “But what I did started a war—”

“No.” Kakashi interrupts. “No.” He looks right at his dad. “You, you specifically, were made into an excuse for one.”

Sakumo stares back, then looks ahead into the fire thought. “I wonder…” he trails off.

Kakashi waits.

Sakumo sits back and rubs at his face with one hand. “That mission, something about it… it never sat right with me.”

“What was it?” Kakashi presses.

“Ah, no proof, just a strange feeling.” He smiles wryly. “Not much we can do about it now.”

Suddenly, a brief flash lights up the campsite from behind them.

Sakumo blinks and looks around. “That’s... different.”

“That hasn’t happened before?” Kakashi asks.

“Nope. Just me and the bonfire for twenty years.” Sakumo says with more cheer than that statement really warrants.

Quiet flashes of distant lightning erupt overhead. A steady jingling sound moves closer, growing louder. It’s the sound of little bells, and with it… a grey mottled fox?

The fox looks at Kakashi and then Sakumo and back again, the fur on its back sparking every so often with static.

“What on earth…” mumbles Sakumo. Kakashi wonders the same thing.

The fox, turns, jumps with an even louder chime of bells, and twists into a dive, disappearing into the ink-black ground. The ground ripples, and warps, contorting into a growing spiral. Water begins to flood in from all sides, a growing ocean pouring into a vortex. The fire extinguishes, throwing them into darkness only relieved by the growing flashes of lightning, echoed by the chimes of bells. They both stand up, alert and wary.

“What—ah!” Something jerks Kakashi forwards and he plunges into the water, now impossibly deep. He breaks back up to the surface to discover he’s already ensnared in the tide.

“Kakashi!” Sakumo cries out, diving in after him.

Kakashi tries to fight the current, but it’s so fast, he’s caught in a stalemate, and losing. Kakashi wrenches his arm out, and Sakumo grabs Kakashi’s hand as they’re pulled closer to the center. They’re tumbling, the vortex wrenching. Their grip is going to fail any moment.
“Whatever happens,” Sakumo gasps over the water, “just know I love you, okay?”

Kakashi can only nod and squeeze his father’s hand one last time. Their fingers slip apart, and Kakashi is dragged down, down, down into the center of the eddy.

----

Sakura wakes up, and hunches over the grass, coughing up water.

Caught in that storm…it was all she could do to hold onto her team, refusing to let go, praying for help. Anything.

She doesn’t know how this happened, or what’s going on, but somehow… somehow she knows she kept them all together.

She looks up and her heart leaps to her throat. Sensei still isn’t moving. She tumbles forward, forcing her limbs to work the short distance through the grass. She nudges at his side, desperate. “Sensei, Sensei, please…”

He twitches.

He coughs a few times—no water in his lungs, thank goodness—and huffs and breathes for a few moments.

She sobs in sheer relief. Whatever—whatever happened, he’s okay. He isn’t dead.

----

Kakashi hears his student’s voice. “Sakura?” he asks hoarsely, not quite able to open his eyes just yet. Something is… peculiar. His chakra is… off, but it’s not genjutsu. And somehow, he has an awareness of all his students, a sixth sense that they’re here.

And, by some miracle, they’re all alive.

Kakashi’s eye snaps open. And blinks. Sakura is… that can’t be right.

Kakashi looks down at himself. His brain stalls. And refuses to start up again.

Okay. Kakashi is not going to freak out about this.

He’s not.

He opens his other eye. Nothing happens. His Sharingan feels like it’s there, but strange, dormant.

Alright, freakout levels rising, but he’s still—Oh no.

He doesn’t even have a mask.

“Sakura,” he says with incredibly forced calm. “You’re alright? Any injuries?”

“No—no injuries, Sensei,” she says wetly.

“…Can you tell me what happened?”

“I—I don’t know! There was so much water and the lightning and you didn’t have a pulse and I don’t know!” she wails.
“Breathe, Sakura, breathe. Focus on that.”

She nods and starts taking measured breaths.

“Wha—Guys! Sakura! You okay?” Naruto calls out as he startles awake.

“No, I’m not okay!” Sakura shrieks back at him as she huffs through breathing exercises.

“Naruto, what did you do?” Sasuke yells next.

“It wasn’t my fault!” Naruto the—Naruto the fox shouts back too quickly from where he’s sitting up.

Now Kakashi knows some part of this is Naruto’s fault.

Because Kakashi, and all of his students, have somehow... been turned into foxes.

His ninjens are going to laugh at him, he just knows it.

----

“Alright,” Kakashi calls to order after he allows everyone a good screaming session, “who can tell me what happened.”

“Uhhh,” says Naruto, “I talked to my mom and dad?”

Kakashi nearly falls over in shock. “Is that so?” he asks lightly, his newfound claws in a death grip in the dirt.

“Yeah, they say hi, by the way.”

“Ah.” That’s nice of them.

“Mom laughed really hard when she heard you were a teacher.”

“Hmm.” Yes, he always assumed she would laugh if she knew. Thanks, Kushina.

“She also punched dad in the head when she found out he sealed—” Naruto’s mouth suddenly snaps shut with a click and he hunches his shoulders, refusing to say any more.

Sakura looks at Naruto quizzically but then says, “I—I don’t really remember much after the water started to spin around us.”

After a moment, Sasuke starts to speak. “We were in the storm, and something changed. There were these… bells. The rain, all the water, started to move inward, pulling us into the current, into this whirlpool.”

Kakashi listens, stunned. This sounds distressingly similar to what he experienced… dead.

“There were things—foxes—running all around us. This... giant fox head grew out of the middle of the whirlpool, and it opened its jaws, water rushing into its mouth. It carried us all in.” Sasuke’s eyes grow haunted. “It ate us.”

Alright, Kakashi is glad he wasn’t awake for that part.

“Before it formed, I saw… the Kyuubi,” Sasuke says as he stares at Naruto, “When I looked at you. In you. I thought that’s what I saw, with my—” he grimaces, “—with my Sharingan.”
“Uh,” Naruto’s ears droop and he hunches up further, “Maybe?”

Sakura gasps. “You, you’re—”

Well. There goes that secret.

Kakashi cuts them off before they can misunderstand further. “Do you two know what a jinchuuriki is?”

He takes their silence as a no.

“A jinchuuriki is like a human container for a tailed beast. While they might have access to large amounts of chakra or other abilities, that doesn’t make them a demon in human form, or possessed. They’re still their own person. Naruto is Naruto. He’s not the Kyuubi.”

“I see. So the fox isn’t him.” Sakura nods in comprehension. “It’s just sealed in him.”

“A seal? That makes... more sense with what I saw,” says Sasuke, bewildered.

Ah. Kakashi wonders if Naruto and Sasuke together had done something with the seal...

...Who is he kidding; Kakashi never understood how Minato-sensei managed to make any Uzu fuuinjutsu do what he wanted. He’s not even going to begin to guess what the kids stumbled into.

“Yeah,” says Naruto, perking up from his teammates being understanding, “but I still don’t know what my dad was thinking, sealing that shitty fox in me.”

Sakura pieces it together. “Wait. The Yondaime was your DAD?”

“Yeah, neat, huh. Hey, Sensei? Will you tell me more stories about my parents later?” he asks.

“Maa, I can do that,” Kakashi agrees. He turns to look at Sakura and Sasuke as well. “Once this is sorted and we’re back in Konoha, it would be prudent of you all to keep this secret. Not only Naruto’s status as a jinchuuriki, but the Yondaime had a lot of powerful enemies who might seek his son out for revenge.”

“Oh, good to know,” says Naruto. “Wait. Really? I mean, I guess he was Hokage, but he seemed kind of like a dweeb.”

Kakashi wants to laugh. Naruto is so much like his mother sometimes, it’s scary.

“But, um, how do we fix this, Sensei?” asks Sakura.

...Good question.

“Oh! Mom said to go to Uzushio!” Naruto cries happily. “She said something there could help!”

Uzushio? Kakashi hasn’t the faintest idea how they’ll manage that, especially now, but he’ll just have to find a way. He trusts Kushina to not steer them wrong. They’ll have to plan an effective trajectory to the island from where they are now, and they certainly aren’t in Wave anymore. South Tea Country, if Kakashi has his ecology right. How they ended up here is another mystery.

But the kids look worn out, and could probably do with a longer break. “Before we do anything else, we’ll eat. You wait together here. I’ll go catch some food.” He hums to himself. “Maa, rabbit or something.”
Sakura grimaces as she watches Sensei trot away to find food. "Raw rabbit. Eugh."

Naruto shrugs. "I bet it’s not bad. I’ve eaten way worse. Like old food thrown out from shops and stuff."

"What?" Sakura asks, aghast. "Why?" Why would anyone choose to do that?

"Rent’s expensive. The landlord guy is always adding extra fees or raising it."

Oh, right. Naruto lives by himself in an apartment, but, "...Isn't that illegal?" she asks.

"I dunno. It's annoying though."

"It is illegal." Sasuke suddenly cuts in. "You should have legal protections as a renter that prevent added costs or stipulations without contract renegotiation."

Sakura and Naruto look at him in surprise.

Sasuke's ears pull back, defensive. "What? I have to know all those rules. I have a property to maintain."

Naruto tilts his head. "Huh. Good to know, jerk."

Sakura starts to giggle. She tries desperately to stop and then starts up again. "I-I'm sorry, but it's—we've been turned into foxes and we're discussing tenant's rights, of all things!"

Naruto laughs. "Oh man, can you imagine me going up to that guy as a fox demanding he stop his bullshit fees?"

"You could bite his ankles, just as effective," says Sasuke.

"...did you almost make a joke?" Naruto asks, shocked.

"I'm pragmatic," he says flatly. It only sets off Sakura into another peal of laughter. Foxes.

Oh god, they're foxes.

It all comes crashing to the forefront again and her next laugh comes out as a sob. She starts to tear up. "...Am I ever going to see my parents again?" she asks in a small voice.

"Aw, Sakura," Naruto sidles up over to her. "We'll get to Uzushio, fix this and get back to Konoha."

"You don't know that!" she warbles.

"Nope! I don't! But we gotta try, right? We can't give up already. We gotta—we gotta be a team on this because we only got each other now."

Naruto is stupid most of the time, and she doesn't understand how he can be so optimistic, but his words make her feel just the slightest bit better. She’s not alone. "...You're right," she sniffs. "We can't give up."
Sasuke looks at them both silently. She’s a bit embarrassed she’s cried in front of him, but he looks more contemplative than judgmental.

---

Sasuke is unsure what to think of anything at the moment.

He’s a fox. His Sharingan is there but *not*. He’s a fox. He has no means to kill That Man anymore. *He’s a fox*. His whole life’s goal is now wrenched out from under him.

He sees Naruto, though, still at ease through any pain, still going despite it all, shrugging off his own father sealing a demon fox in him, bouncing back from the learned extinction of his clan, and laughing in the face of transforming into a goddamn animal. How he’s rallying Sakura to not give up.

How he’s secretly, quietly, no-one-can-ever-know-about-this, inspiring Sasuke not to give up either.

In any case, he’s got absolutely no choice but to play Wilderness Survival with his team for the indefinite future.

That is until about thirty minutes later, when he and Sakura turn to listen to Naruto suddenly yelling at himself.

Naruto gets up and starts to pace around. “What? I dunno what happened… you tell *me* what the hell happened! …At least a fox is an *improvement*? I don’t get thumbs, asshole! …Huh, you get thumbs?”

“What are you doing,” Sasuke says more than asks.

“How? Oh hey, Sasuke, talking to the shitty fox. …Yeah I’m talking about you!”

Sasuke freezes. “…the Kyuubi is talking to you?”

“Oh, yeah! He just woke up!” Naruto says as if that isn’t absolutely terrifying. “He’s being more annoying than anything.” Naruto’s eye twitches. “Well you are!” he shouts aloud.

Kakashi-sensei saunters up and drops another dead rabbit from his mouth. “What is Naruto doing now?”

“Talking to the *Kyuubi*,” Sasuke hisses. Sakura eeps.

“...Ah,” says Kakashi-sensei, a bit faint.

They all watch, baffled and alarmed, as Naruto argues with a *demon fox*. Sasuke can’t believe this idiot.

“If you’re just gonna be an annoying asshole then—eh? Foxes?” Naruto goes and looks over the cliff, “There’s nothing down there but trees and—”

---

The soft ground starts to give way under Naruto. Kakashi darts forward and grabs Naruto by the scruff of his neck as they both topple over the side.

They slide down. It’s less a cliff and more a large ridge; it isn’t too steep, but as Kakashi tries to snare the surface with his claws, the loamy soil is too soft to maintain any grip. They come to a stop at the bottom, and Kakashi sets Naruto down on the ground.
“Please be more careful,” Kakashi says, exasperated, as he shakes out his dirt-covered fur.

“S-sorry, Sensei,” Naruto says, abashed, ears flat.

“Maa, well,” Kakashi looks up, “we’re not getting back up that way.” Add that to Kakashi’s wishlist: useable chakra, thumbs, thumbs, and thumbs.

“Should we come down there, Sensei?” Sakura calls out. Sasuke peeks out overhead.

“Might as well; just be careful,” he replies, watching them from below, ready to catch them if they fall too fast.

The kids tumble to the bottom of the ridge not too worse for wear. They have no choice but to walk into the forest ahead of them, growing darker from the dense canopy.

“This is creepy, Sensei,” Naruto whispers. Kakashi is on edge, watching for predators.

Chittering and shrieking laughter suddenly surrounds them. Kakashi moves to stand in front of his students, coiled tight in tension.

“Ooh, who are theyyyyy?” a red fox calls out.

“Ooh, yeah, weird foxes sneaking into our forest? That’s no good!” a white fox says, guarding a cave entrance.

The red fox comes slinking up, laughing eerie. “No good at alllll. We’ll have to—”

Kakashi lunges forward and smacks the fox hard in the face. The red fox shrieks in shocked pain and darts up a nearby tree. The white fox looks just as stunned.

"Dog-fox plays dirty!" the red fox accuses from a high branch. “Dog tactics!”

“Maa, I do train ninken,” Kakashi says, now a bit more amused than worried. The kids peek out from behind Kakashi, Naruto starting to laugh and Sakura giggling. Even Sasuke’s tail swishes slightly.

"A fox with dog friends? Such power," the white one says, awed, from her perch.

Naruto laughs harder. “Oh man, I can’t believe the Kyuubi said to come here.”

"Kyuubi?" the red fox says suddenly from behind them, where he's scooting forward on his belly trying to sneak up on them again. “You know the—”

Kakashi smacks him in the face again. The fox squeals and scrambles back halfway up the tree trunk.

"Stop that!" the fox shouts, frazzled. "And I'm sorry, I'm sorry; I didn't know you knew Kurama!"

Several more foxes poke their heads out from their hiding spots. "Ohhhhh!" they chitter, suddenly impressed, "They're with Kuraaama!"

The white fox's tune immediately changes and moves away from the cave entrance. "Want to come in?"

"What the hell; just like that?” Naruto says.
Her tail twitches, "Of course! You aren't weird strangers now! You're just dumb, right?"

Team Seven is ushered inside by happy foxes, all trying to ask them questions at once.

"Ack! Were you bothering them, Maru, Rei?" a frail old fox with many tails limps forward. "They're gonna help us!"

"I wasn’t bothering them, Suzu," says the red fox, Maru. The old fox gives him the stink eye. Maru pulls back his ears. "Okay, okay, not anymore. They know Kurama!!"

"Oh, that makes sense, huh." Suzu coughs, and then amends to, "Hmm, hmm, of course, totally knew it."

"No you didn't!" the white fox, Rei, shouts.

The old fox coughs again and ignores that statement. “Hmm, we got an Uzumaki boy here, yes?” He looks at Naruto. “No one has called on Uzu gods for a long time, you know. The power available to the foxes is nearly gone. So,” he says gravely, “we need your help!”

“Uh, help that turned us into foxes, you know!” Naruto says, angry. “Why should we?”

“You three called the gods for help, and now they need yours! It’s not a damn freebie!” Suzu gestures to Kakashi. "I heard bringing that guy back from the dead was more than a little tricky, you know!"

"Ooh, that always takes a bit of work, yeah," Rei nods.

"Ooh, not just a bit!" Suzu complains. "Just had to be difficult.”

The kids take a moment to absorb that comment, then:

"What?!" Sakura shrieks. Sasuke looks at Kakashi, vaguely horrified.

"Sensei, YOU DIED?" Naruto shouts.

"Maa, well..." Kakashi trails off, a bit sheepish.

"Mmm hmm, so really, they help you, you help them,” says Suzu.

“Not that we don’t sympathize with your plight,” Kakashi lies, “we’re just looking for a way to become human again—”

“Oh, you want to have a human form again? I see, I see,” Suzu nods his head. “Then yes, bringing Uzumaki to the island will totally help.”

Somehow, Kakashi isn’t reassured by that statement.

“Uzumaki—aren’t they all, um, dead?” asks Sakura, looking nervously at Naruto when she says it.

“Oh no, there are some left, otherwise we’d really be in trouble, hoo boy. Any people who claim Uzu as home could count... but Uzumaki would be the most helpful first.”

“So there’s still—there’s still Uzumaki?” Naruto asks, excited.
Kakashi starts, “Naruto—”

“I mean. Mom said to go to the island anyway, Sensei; we could find them too,” says Naruto, pleading.

“It might be nice to help,” Sakura adds.

“This is our only lead on becoming human,” says Sasuke.

Some more foxes gather, trilling delightedly.

“They’re gonna help?” asks a hopeful fox.

“We’re gonna be okay?” says another, relieved.

Kakashi sighs, resigned. His cute students are too enthusiastic for their own good. “Maa, it seems so.” It looks like their only option. For now, anyway.

----

Shinobi skills do not include making a raft.

Zabuza is so glad Haku had immediately vetoed Zabuza’s suggestion to escape the island via ice, because something about their chakra is *fucked up*.

Zabuza had tried a simple water jutsu while Haku was still chatting to the chakra impression and it… just *exploded* on him. Haku had tried next, and lost enough control that he froze a palm tree to the point of it shattering it in seconds.

They both agree to shelve experimentation for the time being.

So Zabuza had asked Haku to ask the chakra impression about it. Apparently Zabuza didn’t ask nicely enough or something, or she is into being cryptic and *completely* unhelpful. Some creepy shit about a heart. So Zabuza had *maybe* threatened to cleave her shrine in two, but she didn’t have to drop Zabuza into a seal-triggered pitfall!

Haku suggests they let her cool off for a bit and he steers Zabuza back towards the beach.

Now Zabuza is working on his new project and Haku is fanning a fire as he readies to grill some fish. Haku didn’t even have to hunt for it. The flamingos just *gave* it to him. And a damn monkey thing stopped by to drop off some mangos.

What’s with this place.

Shinobi skills definitely do not include making a raft out of coconuts and palm fronds. He keeps ripping the leaves, and he’s not sure the damn thing will even float, let alone get past the eddies of death. He just needs to make something, do something, to try and leave because this island is nightmarish and definitely cursed. Not that he believes in curses.

He tears another frond entirely in half. Zabuza yells incoherently and throws the raft into the sea. The current pushes it immediately back to shore, and Zabuza just stands there, looking at it. Mocking him.

“...Zabuza-sama?” Haku calls out, tentative. “May I have one of the intact coconuts if you are done with it? Uzumaki-sama gave me a recipe for a fish curry to try.”
“Yeah,” he sighs. “...Can I have some of the curry?”

“Of course, sir.”

---

“Hey, didn’t you say Kurama was with them?”

One of the foxes peers at Naruto, then to the rest of Team Seven and back again, with eerie eyes, which then widen. “Oh no, is he still stuck? That’s no good; we’ll help you!”

Another fox rolls up a star ball. “Good thing we’ve got one of these left!” It brings it up to its mouth, getting ready to throw it.

Suzu sputters, “Is that my star ball? Don’t you dare—”

The star ball shatters, sending the glittering energy within it across them. His students yelp, and Kakashi braces himself. A menacing red cloud of smoke erupts in front of Team Seven, with maniacal laughter emanating from it.

“I’m free, hahaha—oh what the fuck,” the demon fox hisses, in a voice so much less booming than it should be.

The foxes murmur to each other.

“...Is he supposed to look like that?” Maru stage whispers.

“Uh, Kurama is so...” Rei trails off.

“Tiny!” another fox blurts. They all nod their heads.

Kurama the very normal-looking fox swivels his head around. “Tiny? You say I’m tiny?” he shrieks at them, swishing his single tail in aggravation.

"Eep!” the foxes fall over themselves as they scramble back.

“Tiny for you! Still bigger than all us!”

"But nothing wrong with little, you know!”

“You’re compact!”

“Travel-size!”

“You might want to quit while you’re ahead,” the Kyuubi says, voice dripping with venom as he takes a threatening step forward. They screech and scurry away, leaving Suzu and Team Seven standing there.

“Kurama, good to finally see you again.” Suzu slowly says, clearly stalling. “...I’m sure you have questions—”

“Talk. Now.”

Suzu coughs, “Well. The power we had is nearly gone, so... it seems we borrowed it.”

“Borrowed it,” the Kyuubi says flatly.
“Look. The kids asked for a lot—”

“Borrowed it?” the Kyuubi shrieks.

“Yes, I wondered how we got any of it done. But ooh, now you can all work together to restore Uzushio!”

Team Seven disagrees. “Uh, not with the shitty fox that destroyed our village!” Naruto shouts.

“Who you calling shitty, you little brat!” the Kyuubi barks back.

“Oh, hmm, Konoha? Weren’t you being controlled by someone at the time?” Suzu asks almost absently.

“Controlled?” Sasuke and Naruto ask at the same time, then look at each other.

“What? No! No I wasn’t!” the Kyuubi squawks at them. He turns and hisses to Suzu. “What the hell! Don’t tell them that!”

“The gods would hope you could work together,” Suzu says with an exaggerated solemnity, but his eyes sly.

“You are so dead when I get my tails back. And your gods can kiss my—”

The foxes scurry back up to the Kyuubi, and skitter about him in excitement. And despite his posturing, the Kyuubi—Kurama—hasn’t actually hurt any of the foxes. Or even Kakashi and his students. Kakashi isn’t quite sure what to think about that. Or any of this.

“They’re gonna help, Kurama!”

“Uzushio is gonna come back!”

“And you’re helping too, right?”

All the foxes turn to stare at Kurama, expectant.

Kurama looks at all of them, turns, walks out of the cave and shouts for a very long time.

Suzu ignores the outburst. “Mmm hmm, and you’re all in luck, there’s a young lady with Uzumaki blood nearby.”

"It's little Tsunade," Maru sighs.

"Aww, poor Tsunade," Rei says with drooping ears.

"She's not doing so good," says another.

"Tsunade?" Kakashi’s ears perk up.

“You know her, Sensei?” Sakura asks.

“Tsunade of the Senju. Of the Sannin. She’s an unrivaled medic-nin who was also an incredibly strong front-line fighter.”

“Ooh,” Sakura marvels, starry-eyed.
“But,” Kakashi hums, “she hasn’t returned to Konoha in a long time. This must be where she’s been.”

“Here sometimes, yeah. We’re so weak, she can’t hear us; it’s so sad,” says Maru, as Kurama stomps back in from his shouting.

“She’s so sad, but now it’s really not good!” Rei cries.

"She's got a shark after her!" Maru exclaims.

"A loan shark," Rei drops her voice to a whisper, horrified. "Sounds scary."

“...A loan shark,” says Kakashi, flat.

Kurama stops in his tracks, and mutters, “Sage give me strength.”

----

“Why are you following us, huh?” Naruto asks loudly to their demon fox tag-along. They’re ambling down a path that brackets the forest and rolling pastures, on the way to find Tsunade.

“I need to make sure you stupid fox brats use my power right!”

“What power?” Naruto snarks.

“Incredible power you’re too stupid to use!” Kurama snipes back, baring his teeth.

With the awe of the Kyuubi well worn off by now, the kids merely look incredulous at his statement. Kakashi eyes the supposed demon fox, who now looks like an unsettling and oversized, if otherwise regular, fox.

He suspects Kurama might be bluffing.

“Fucking brats,” Kurama snarls. He then declares, “I’m getting this shit over with and getting my tails. Maybe I’ll knock over a village afterwards. How nostalgic for all of us!”

“That you were controlled during,” Kakashi counters, not rising to the bait, though it opens up so many horrifying questions about that night.

“Fucking asshole had to say that,” Kurama seethes.

“Who did do it then?” Sasuke asks.

Kurama grins. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Yeah, actually, we wanna know!” Naruto says.

“You don’t get to. I’m not talking about this,” Kurama snaps.

“Maa, then stop bringing it up,” Kakashi says.

“Oh look, we’re here!” says Sakura hastily.

They crest the hill overlooking the modest portside village of Chaba. They should likely find Tsunade any of the village’s bars, if Kakashi recalls correctly.
As they start to sneak into the village proper, Sakura asks, “When we find Tsunade-sama, what if we just… tell her?”

“Huh, tell her what?” asks Naruto.

“Tell her who we are. We could trust Tsunade-sama, right? What if we just try and tell her what happened, and she can get us to Konoha where we could get more help?” Sakura suggests, excited.

“And then what, and be caged?” Kurama’s tail swishes, agitated, looking around at all of them.

“You know that’s what will happen. You really trust your precious humans to help you?”

“Of course I do!” Naruto says, outraged.

Kakashi considers it. There are a few he trusts, yes, but there are certain powerful people he doesn’t want anywhere near his students in any capacity, especially as vulnerable as they are now.

“It’s best we keep it secret,” Kakashi declares, hopefully curtailing any argument. Naruto turns to look at him and Kurama’s tail actually stills, surprised. “Secret until we fix this, alright?”

“We won’t get in trouble for that once we get back?” Sakura asks, anxious.

Kakashi hums. “It’s a bit of an extraordinary situation. Either way, as your team leader, I’ll take responsibility for any fallout.”

“But it’s not your fault, Sensei!” Naruto cries. “You didn’t do it!”

“But I should’ve been able to keep you from being forced into such a situation in the first place. Ergo, my responsibility. Alright?” Kakashi asks, firm, looking at all of them.

“…Fine,” Naruto mutters, sullen. Sasuke and Sakura reluctantly nod. Kakashi’s pretty sure they’re all just pretending to agree with him on his point. Subterfuge, how adorable.

Kurama hasn’t said anything, which is fine. Kakashi doesn’t need to hear whatever he’s thinking. He’s just going to focus on keeping his kids safe.

Team Seven is past due to return from their escort mission to Wave. Delays occur in any mission. It’s not necessarily cause for alarm, but this one—

This one, Hiruzen worries. He hasn’t gotten this far in life to not trust these instincts. Something has happened. Something is different.

In many respects, Hiruzen sees all the students of Konoha as his grandchildren. He cares for them, and of them, he cares for Naruto especially. The boy who is quick with a grin, who’s loud but tenacious. A boy with bold dreams, who calls Hiruzen Jiji.

Yet for the good of the village, that boy was vilified instead of held heroic, is held at arm’s length, cast into darkness on his own parentage. Hiruzen knows he’s failed this child, ever more cruel when the boy looks up to him as a grandfather. Family. And now he fears he may have lost any chance, however slim, to rectify what he’s done to Naruto.

For now, Hiruzen must keep his worries buried deeply. Danzo is quick to accuse, as he arrives unannounced to bother Hiruzen, inscrutable, in his office. Hiruzen is unsurprised he’s had his hands in mission assignments. “How could you let the boy leave, Hiruzen? Let such an asset to Konoha’s
defense walk outside its walls? You should have kept the jinchuuriki here—”

“Here to do what, Danzo? How would the boy grow, learn, become the best shinobi he can without these experiences?”

Danzo scoffs, but doesn’t yet elaborate on his thoughts. Hiruzen can guess. He’s well familiar with Danzo’s stance on jinchuuriki, on their “village’s greatest weapon.”

Damned if he does and damned if he doesn’t. An ongoing struggle for any kage, Hiruzen feels it weigh down on him, crush him, more as each new year passes. In his worst moments, Hiruzen fears he’s damned himself on all sides, irreparably, ever since Minato died. What would he think of Hiruzen, if Minato saw him now?

It’s a struggle Danzo never seems to understand.

In any case, Hiruzen is in no mood to hear him. “We’ll discuss this later. I have an appointment to see to.”

“Later,” Danzo promises, as he turns and limps out of the office. His next appointment gives Danzo a wide berth and then comes to stand in front of Hiruzen’s desk.

“Hokage-sama,” Asuma says, laid-back as always in demeanor, but still professional. Distant.

For all his supposed wisdom, Hiruzen doesn’t know how to begin to bridge the chasm between him and his son. The physical distance may have closed when his son returned to Konoha, but perhaps Hiruzen was a fool to believe that alone would make any difference.

“Asuma,” Hiruzen begins as he folds his fingers together, “I understand your genin team would like to petition for their first C-rank?”

“Ah,” Asuma smiles wryly, “it appears so. I guess Ino has been bothering the mission desk again?”

“Your team together, though young Ino is the instigator, yes. I’ve received the most interesting complaints.”

“Well, if they can show teamwork with that, even if it’s Ino dragging them along, then I don’t see why they can’t manage a C-rank.” He scratches his beard once in thought. “There’s a courier mission to Tea Country, last I checked. I think that would work well.”

“Very well. I’ll have the mission desk draw up the paperwork.”

Asuma nods. “Is that everything?”


Asuma’s cigarette slips the barest fraction. The hopeful coward in Hiruzen likes to believe Asuma can hear the words without him being audacious enough to say them. Instead:

Perfunctory. “I wish your team the best of luck.”

Distant. “Thank you, sir.”

Hiruzen watches as Asuma shuts the office door, leaving him to his thoughts.

Hiruzen is tired.
He’s tired, but he’s made his decision, hasn’t he, to remain? To put on the hat, to put aside the few for the many, no matter how much he hurts his remaining family, as it slips through his fingers.

Hiruzen is damned as a Hokage.

Chapter End Notes

Things got weirder!

Next time: The search for Tsunade, we learn more about Uzushio, and Team Seven fights a loan shark

(Edit: I realized while tooling around through ao3 that there was another fic I read quite a while ago with a similar initial concept of Team Seven as foxes called Skulk in the Leaves, and like other fics I've seen with foxes and fox characters over the years (like backslide and reverse), this one I definitely derived subconscious inspiration from and want to give it proper credit. It's completely awesome; you should go read it.)
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Jirōchō was borrowed from the anime, somewhat superficially, where he too deals with loan sharks that plague Tsunade. Meanwhile, this loan shark is wholly made up, which is probably for the best.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A portside town means many sailors and traveling merchants. And many sailors and merchants means many, many portside bars.

They’re creeping along the pier in the growing dusk, openly discussing their next moves as they look and listen for any hints about Tsunade or the loan shark. This lack of subtlety would rankle Kakashi, but as it turns out, no humans can actually understand them. Kakashi isn’t sure if that makes him feel better or worse.

“We’re sure Tsunade-sama is in a bar?” Sakura asks again, dubious.

Kurama rolls his eyes. “Where else with her? She’s either gambling or getting trashed.”

...Kurama would only know that if he was still well aware of the outside world when still sealed in a jinchuuriki. Kakashi is just... going to completely refuse to think about the implications of that right now.

“He, what if we split up to look for her?” Naruto asks, excited by his own idea. “We could find her faster!”

They could split up, but Kakashi thinks of his last moments as a human, the lost grip of fingers as he plunged into darkness. He isn’t ready to let any of his kids out of his line of sight.

He’s about to veto the idea when Kurama, surprisingly, beats him to it. “Yeah, fuck that. Let me show you brats how it’s done.”

Kurama peers around, opening his eyes wide then squinting a few times. This goes on for nearly a minute. “ Fucking—come on, work, Sage damn sight—ah HA!” he barks as his eyes go eerie for a sputtering moment, his abrupt fox shriek startling a passing sailor so badly he falls off the pier.

“Ah haaa,” Kurama says again, smirking. “Found her.” He ambles with a swagger right out into traffic, civilians gawking or scrambling to avoid running into him.

Kakashi wants to sigh as he and the kids start to follow. No subtlety whatsoever.

----

They push their way through the door of the seedy bar Kurama insists Tsunade is in.

“Hey, get the hell out of here.” A middle-aged patron, a merchant, tries to drunkenly shoo them out. Kurama hisses open mouthed at the patron, who swiftly leans far back in his seat. The bartender refuses to look up from the glass he’s cleaning, pretending he’s not seeing any of this.
They find Tsunade, of the Senju and of the Sannin, in the bar’s seediest corner, face-down at a grungy table, whose surface is littered with sake bottles and glasses.

“Is she okay?” Sakura asks, concerned.

“Maa, she will be.” Kakashi hopes so, anyway. That is an alarming amount of booze.

“How’d you find her so fast?” Naruto asks Kurama. Kakashi’s curious to hear this too.

“By her wretched misery,” Kurama declares proudly.

“What do you mean by that?” Sakura asks, even more concerned.

“You did something with your eyes,” Sasuke states.

Kurama did do something with his eyes, Kakashi thinks. Barely.

Kurama holds his head aloft, his face the perfect picture of smug. “You little shits dare doubt me, but one of my amazing powers is to see and detect emotions in people’s hearts! I always used hatred to —”

“Like you can tell if people are hungry?” Naruto interrupts.

“Wha—no, that’s stupid, why would you—”

“I’m gonna try it,” Naruto stares at Tsunade, straining his eyes open as hard as he can. Nothing happens. “Owww,” he whines. Sasuke and Sakura look skeptical again.

Kurama barks, “Don’t just stare, you idiot! You look, you see.”

“That doesn’t make any sense!”

They’re interrupted when a stocky man with grey hair and a worried expression rushes into the back of the bar, right for Tsunade’s table.

-----

Wasabi Jirōchō races down the pier.

He’s tried all day to distract the loan shark Socha, to convince him Tsunade wasn’t in town, but Socha’s caught on to the lies. Tsunade owes the loan shark more money than Jirōchō has to cover for her, and time is running out.

He finds her at her favorite bar at the back table, surrounded by—a bunch of foxes. They swivel their heads to stare at him in creepy unison. Beyond that, they’re kind of… cute, but the biggest one of them looks off; it has weird paws that almost look like hands. Jirōchō can’t bring himself to look at them for long.

He instead directs his eyes to his longtime friend. “Tsunade!” he hisses. He feels the gaze of the foxes, still staring at him. He ignores them as he tries not to sweat; he has bigger things to worry about right now.

“Tsunade!” he hisses again. “We need to get you out of here!”

“Heeey, Jirōchō,” she waves her hand, slowly blinking, then cocks her head. “Do you hear that?
Jirōchō listens. He hears drunken yelling and someone retching somewhere. “...There’s a man throwing up?”

“Nahhh, not that.” She shakes her head a bit. “Nevermind; wanna drink?”

He does, but not now. “Listen, Socha is after you, and he’s on his way here right now. We have to go.”

“Oh,” she slurs. “Oh shit.”

----

Jirōchō rushes Tsunade as best he can to his home. The foxes race underfoot after them, and sneak through the front door of his house before Jirōchō can shut it. He guides Tsunade to the couch, hoping she’ll stay there. He goes over and pulls back the window curtain a fraction, risking a peek to the front road. He doesn’t see anyone out there, but that doesn’t mean the loan shark and his goons aren’t on their trail.

She paws at the side of her head. “Ears are ringing, what the hell…” she mumbles.

“I’ll get you something to drink,” Jirōchō says as he walks towards the kitchen. Maybe he can sober her up.

“Oooh!” she leans her head back into the cushions. “Yes, please!”

He comes back with a glass of water. Tsunade hoists herself more upright, making grabby hands for it. She takes a swig and instantly spits the water back into the glass. “Blech.” She glares at him, accusatory, then says, “Got any gin?”

“...No.” He’ll try to distract her. He can’t take it anymore anyway, he has to ask. “...What’s with the foxes?”

Tsunade shrugs from where she’s listing on the couch. “Dunno; they were just there all a sudden, staring at me.”

“That’s—” he looks at the big orange one with the angry face and and immediately averts his eyes when it glares at him. “That’s... interesting.”

----

Naruto is still thinking about the whole sight thing. The shitty fox was completely unhelpful, so he’s just gonna keep trying on his own. He plods over to where Tsunade is starting to slide off the couch. He tries to look again. The voices of everyone else fade away, and this time, he sees. Oh no, the foxes were right. She’s so sad, it’s awful. His heart clenches. If there was something, anything, he could do—

Tsunade full body shudders and her gaze snaps to Naruto. “...What?” She slides fully off the couch to kneel on the floor and she squints at him. “What is—”

She rears back with a jolt, and stumbles to her feet away from Naruto, all the color draining from her face. “Nawaki…”

Naruto cocks his head. Who’s that?

“No, no, you can’t be… I can’t...” Tsunade backs away from him, drunkenly shaking her head,
clutching at her hair with her hands as a tear slips out of her eye. “Stop! Stop with the bells! I’m sorry, please, I can’t—”

“Tsunade!” Jirōchō tries to stop her. She shoves him out of the way with the barest shift of her shoulder and slams open the front door. They run out to follow after her, but there’s no sign of her. She’s already gone.

“Shit! Why did you that?” Kurama barks at Naruto.

“Do what?” Naruto shouts back. “I just tried the dumb seeing thing; I didn’t do anything!”

“You fucking did something, you—”

But Kurama stops as their ears flick. A strange noise just came from behind the house. They all creep to peek around the side, through some bushes. Naruto watches as three guys enter over the fence to the back garden. The leader directs one guy to come with him, and points the other guy in the opposite direction. They split up as they sneak around to the rear entry points of the house.

“Hey, Sensei,” Naruto whispers, “is that the loan shark guy?”

“Maa, it must be; it looks like Socha brought hired help as well. Mercenaries.”

Kurama’s tail swishes in sudden delight. “And look, they split up. Oh dear, a lonely thug breaking in to this nice home? Can’t have that.” Kurama smiles with bloodlust as he drops low and slithers through the bushes after the solo mercenary.

Team Seven’s ears flick sideways again when they hear a pained shout from the kitchen. It sounds like Jirōchō! They all scramble back through the open door towards the source of the noise.

Jirōchō winces from the surprise attack, his left arm crippled by a knife wound from the mercenary. But Socha is still loitering here, so that means he didn’t see Tsunade leave. Perfect. He can distract him.

“Like the gift from your new friend here? Give her up Wasabi, or you can make more new friends.” The loan shark turns his head towards the back door, waiting for someone. And waits. “...More new friends!” he shouts a little louder. Nothing happens. Jirōchō starts to edge away to the hall.

“...Where is the other guy I hired?” Socha barks to the mercenary, who shrugs, confused. He then turns back to Jirōchō, who has to pause his escape. “No matter. Last chance, Wasabi; where is she?”

“Never,” Jirōchō shakes his head. “I won’t tell you.” Tsunade has her issues, but she’s his friend. He’ll do what he can to keep her safe.

“If you’re going to protect her, then I’ll take her debt out of you and your own hide!” Socha laughs and laughs as he walks up the stairs to raid his home. The mercenary brandishes a knife and begins to menace Jirōchō, who’s unfortunately unarmed, and down to one functioning hand for combat. He’s cornered, with no escape.

He wishes, futilely, for any help.

Team Seven peeks out from behind the corner, where they see Jirōchō being held at knifepoint in the

“We gotta help and fight that bad guy off!” Naruto insists, all but vibrating in place.

Sasuke looks the barest moment at Naruto and says, resolute, “We could take him.”

Sakura hesitates, but nods with growing resolve. “We could fight… couldn’t we, Sensei?”

Kakashi eyes the mercenary. He got a lucky shot once on Jirōchō with the knife, but his movements and stance reveal him as a rank amateur, not to mention all his overcompensating posturing. He’s likely to be caught out by the unexpected. How unfortunate for him. “Maa, if you work together, I think you can take out one full-grown man.” His kids are getting squirrely anyway; they could use the outlet.

The kids look at each other one more time, and turn to scurry into position.

The mercenary waggles his knife about in Jirōchō’s face. “Scared, huh? Get ready for me to stab you agai—what the FUCK.” The man drops the knife, startled, as three fox kits attack.

Naruto runs up the mercenary’s pant leg, skittering up and down his body like a laughing furry cockroach in distraction. Sakura leaps from the table and catches the man ‘round the face, digging into his skin with her back claws. Sasuke focuses on biting at his ankles, narrowly and deftly avoiding getting kicked several times.

Kurama walks past from the hall towards the stairs, but he pauses and snorts at the kitchen spectacle. “You’re just going to watch?”

Kakashi doesn’t look back, keeping an eye on his kids and the flailing mercenary. “They’re doing just fine. It’s a good learning experience for them.”

“...You don’t want to do any work, you lazy asshole,” Kurama accuses.

Kakashi sighs, exaggerated, “I suppose I’ll give them a hand if I must.” His kids made an... admirable plan, but it’ll take awhile for the mercenary to actually go down at this rate. Plus that Jirōchō is just standing there in shock, staring, instead of doing anything helpful. He’s the one with thumbs here.

Kakashi stalks silently behind the mercenary, and presses hard into the back of one of the man’s knees with his front paws. The mercenary’s leg buckles and he falls with a shout.

Sakura takes advantage. She positions her paws and slams the man’s head into the floor with the ensuing momentum. Sakura looks at the man, and then to everyone, amazed and elated. “He’s down! We won!”

Naruto whoops as he marches all over the body. "We did it! Go team!"

“We didn’t need help, Sensei,” Sasuke grouses from where he’s now scratching an intricate design in the guy’s ankle with a claw.

“Maa, duly noted,” Kakashi says, amused.

----

Jirōchō watches as the baby foxes trill and shriek over the body of the mercenary, while the grey one looks on like a proud parent.
Well, that’s *one* way to take care of this problem for Tsunade.

"You creepy foxes are alright." says Jirōchō. He then hears a horrid scream from above him, and the sound of another human body—Socha the loan shark—thumping down the stairs. The angry fox saunters back in a minute later, pleased for once. The look on its face is ghastly.

Jirōchō smiles tightly. "Please leave my house."

----

They track down Tsunade again in another bar. She’s slouching in her seat, miserable.

Naruto walks up to her, in hopes of figuring out what he did to upset her at Jirōchō’s house. Tsunade flinches as she sees him, but she doesn’t run away again.

“Oh,” Tsunade begins to cry as she picks up Naruto, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Nawaki." She sobs, holding him close, “I’m sorry I ran away. I’m sorry for everything. I—I should’ve never given you that necklace, or you might still be…” She trails off as she hiccups.

“Uhhh, I’m not Nawaki, but I bet whatever happened, he’s not that mad at you!” Naruto trills. They feel like the right words to say, even if she can’t understand him. They make Naruto feel warm.

“You... forgive me?” she asks, peering into Naruto’s eyes. After a moment, she beams through her tears, wondrous. “You forgive me. My brother forgives me,” she says again, holding Naruto up happily to the now-unnerved bartender.

She sits Naruto on her shoulder and pats his side, “You can sit right there.” She looks down at the other foxes. “Hey—the bells are from all of you right? And you all must’ve fucked up that loan shark real good—” she squints at Kurama, “—especially granny there.”

“WHAT DID SHE CALL ME,” Kurama barks, the shrill sound startling half the patrons.

“Exactly! Can always count on UZUSHIO!” She hollers just as loud in a toast and knocks back the glass. “Another!” She holds the glass out to the bartender with a grin.

The bartender takes it but makes no move to pour another drink. "Listen, lady, you're making a scene —"

“*You’re* making a scene!” she yells back, slurred.

"Seriously, you need to go; the big fox is scaring everyone—"

"Oh yeah? I was just *leaving*!" She grabs all of the foxes at once as they squeak in alarm. "And you!" she addresses everyone else in the bar, “Show—show some fucking respect to the DEAD!" She kicks open the door, knocking it halfway off its hinges, and staggers down the street.

“Uhhh, where are we going?” Naruto asks from where he’s perched on Tsunade’s shoulder.

"...Wherever she wants to take us. Not much else we can do now," Kakashi-sensei sighs.

"Now she's *crying* on *me*!" Kurama hisses, outraged.

"Do you think she'll be alright?" Sakura asks, worried. “Tsunade-sama seems really upset.”
"As long as she doesn't drop us," says Sasuke, terse, clinging to Tsunade's arm in a death grip.

----

"Shizuuuuune," Tsunade leans on the door and calls through it.

Shizune opens the door. "Ah, you’re finally back—" She takes one look at her face and the foxes in her arms and says, "...I'm not even going to ask."

Tsunade stumbles in past her.

"I'm good to go back to my room then?" Shizune turns back to see Tsunade dead-asleep on top of the bedding, clutching the foxes like stuffed animals.

She exits the room slowly. "...I'll take that as a yes."

----

Zabuza snorts awake from where he’s lying facedown in a large patch of moss. He looks up and—

Shit, it wasn’t a dream. He and Haku are still stuck on Uzushio.

He sits up and squints in the morning light. Haku, all bright eyed and bushy-tailed, is pulling open a mango with his fingers while sitting a short distance away on the beach. A lemur is dozing in his lap. He’s near the tidepool of flamingos, some of whom wander up the beach for Haku to pet them.

Zabuza watches a toucan carefully pull a large leaf, with fruit piled atop it, through the sand. It gently pokes Haku’s arm with its beak, cawing and pushing at his hand to take some of its bounty. Haku pats its beak in thanks and the toucan chatters in delight.

Haku turns his head and notices Zabuza is awake. All the animals turn to stare at him too. Haku’s smile dazzles in the backdrop of the glittering ocean waves, lit up by the morning sun. “Good morning, sir. Would you care for some breakfast?”

Zabuza lies back down and presses his face as hard as he can back into the moss, screaming into it. Maybe he’ll wake up for real this time.

----

He doesn’t. And the chakra impression is still here too.

“Good morning, Uzumaki-sama,” Haku tips his head in greeting. “Oh, thank you, you too.”

“Meh,” Zabuza says from his spot on the ground.

“Oh! Zabuza-sama, she’d like to tell us why we’re on Uzushio.”

He rolls over and sits up. “Perfect. No cryptic bullshit. Please,” he adds as the shrine flares in warning but before the chakra impression can shoot another rock at him. Zabuza knows how to be polite!

“The gods of Uzushio placed us here for a reason.”

Zabuza lays back down. He’ll risk the rock.
“She says what she’s telling us will help us get off the island as well.”

Zabuza sits back up. “...I’m listening.”

“She says we’re here because we’ve been given gifts from the gods and chosen to help in restoring the island, allowing access to and from it again. And also because we have actual flesh hands.”

Yeah, that’s not creepy phrasing at *all*. Wait, specifying flesh could only mean—

“What, she wants our blood? Our *skin*?" Oh no, no *fucking* way. He remembers what happened to Gato with that scroll; that asshole was lucky enough to just fall over dead. Plenty of horror stories on Kiri were variations on why you never ever ever tangle up your blood and guts with Uzu seals. Zabuza’s least favorites stories were the one about a careless Kiri nin whose entire arms got swapped with stubby kunai and another who turned half his internal organs to sand trying to turn back time. Eugh.

“Of course not, sir, she doesn’t need our *skin*,” Haku lightly chides.

That wasn’t a no on blood.

Haku then cocks his head and blinks a few times as he listens. “...Ah, excuse me. She says she doesn’t need our skin yet.”

Zabuza is so horrified he can’t even speak.

“Oh!” Haku suddenly smiles, with a relieved little laugh. “She’s kidding. She says that was just a little Uzu humor, sir.”

Zabuza stares ahead at nothing for a moment. He supposes he could count himself as lucky. Most Uzu jokes maimed people. “Ha ha,” he says flatly, “and what did she mean by gifts?”

“...She says she cannot explain it just yet.”

Of course. Of course she can’t. But Zabuza can guess. “Yeah, fucked up chakra is a *great* gift.”

Haku hums. “Whatever it is, sir, they’ll help us do what Uzumaki-sama cannot. She could only jump to the point of the entrance to where this seal is to aid the island, and she doesn’t have the ability to activate that particular one. It's up to us to do this.”

Zabuza is stuck on jumping. A chakra impression that could not only *activate*, but also *jump to different seals*. Everything about her is terrifying. But when he thinks about it, she hasn’t killed them, or seriously tried to hurt them. She gave Haku a fucking amazing curry recipe. And for whatever mysterious reasons, Haku really likes the Uzumaki, believes her. Zabuza can see that Haku believes this will work. And Zabuza... he trusts Haku.

“All right,” he says, resigned to this madness, “where’s this place we have to go to?”

Haku points. “It’s right over there, sir.”

A cavern entrance that Zabuza swears was *not there earlier* is standing open in the moss-covered rock face that sits a modest distance past the flamingos’ tide pool. Opening that entrance had to have made a racket, and Zabuza didn’t even wake up once in the middle of the night.

Zabuza and Haku peek in, not yet daring to enter. Zabuza notices etchings of designs in the ridges of the cavern opening. He notes little flying flamingos... and foxes. *Foxes.* The angry and vengeful
spirits of Uzushio threatened to come and curse weak Kiri children in the night and—

No. That is a fable. There are no spirits like that. He doesn’t believe in curses. He is a grown man, not a child silently afraid of foxes. He’s doing this to get off the island. He has to keep telling himself that.

“So there’s a seal in there? What are we supposed to do?” Zabuza does not want the answer to that.

Haku provides it anyway. “Ah. One of us is meant to activate it.”

Oh fuck, oh no. This is something out of Zabuza’s worst nightmares. How many cautionary allegories in Kiri began with poking at Uzu nonsense ill-advised?

But Haku believes the chakra impression. And Zabuza trusts Haku.

Haku catches the trepidation on his face. “Sir, I could go—”

“No,” Zabuza interrupts. “No, I’ll do it.” He’s still unsteady, off kilter, from Wave. Where in one flash to the next, Haku fell, so still, unmoving, as the rain fell down around them...

It keeps playing over and over again in his mind, freezing his insides with lingering terror. He’s afraid he actually will wake up back in Wave, and maybe Haku won’t. What if something happens and Haku gets hurt again? Zabuza wants to keep him safe, this time.

Zabuza gives the order. “I’ll go in, and you just watch and wait by the entrance.” Just in case the whole thing explodes and the cave collapses.

“You’re certain, sir?”

Zabuza quirks his lips into a grin. “Yeah, come on, it’ll be fine,” he says with false confidence.

Judging by the look in his eyes, Haku won’t even pretend to believe his bravado for a second, but Haku also knows Zabuza will hold firm on this.

“Good luck, sir,” Haku says. The lemur now on his shoulder waves to him. The flamingos gathering behind Haku to gawk all honk and twist their necks about, as if to cheer Zabuza on.

Zabuza just… turns around and walks in. “What is this place,” he mutters lowly to himself as he starts to walk down the incline, deeper into the cavern.

A place of renewal.

Zabuza barely manages to avoid startling, but a shiver runs from his feet all the way to the tips of his hair. A woman’s voice echoing—is that the chakra ghost? No. Impression. Chakra impression. He loiters a moment but hears nothing else but the pounding of his heart in his ears. Zabuza picks up the pace.

He walks until he finds a large flat stone dias with inset steps, presenting nothing but a small seal carved into the wall behind it. That must be it. He pricks one of his thumbs on his sharp teeth as he takes the stairs. He looks at the seal, like a little spiral sun, and reaches his hand out slowly towards it.

This has to be, without a doubt, the dumbest thing he’s ever done in his life.

Zabuza can’t help but hold his breath, his hand now mere millimeters from touching the seal. Whatever happens to him, he has to believe this seal will help, and that, if anything, at least Haku
will be okay. He hangs on to that belief as tight as he can, and like the idiot he is, presses his hand flush to the wall.

Immediately he feels the tug. The seal pulls and pulls and pulls at him from within, his chakra fluxing, spiraling, and impossibly rising to meet its call with indomitable ease.

As the seal pulls, warmth spreads throughout him, traveling up his fingers and down to his toes, running over his shoulders and swirling in his chest. Array after array of interconnected seals light up in a growing spiral, forming a dizzying kaleidoscope of reds, oranges, and yellows. He turns his head enough to watch as they race along the walls and ceiling, as they travel up and out through the rest of cavern.

Just as soon as it began, the tide recedes. Zabuza slowly exhales as it all stills, and he retracts his hand, flexing it a few times. His fingers tingle, but he’s… completely fine. It didn’t kill him or turn him inside out or anything. He feels kind of good, actually, like dozing in the aftermath of a relaxing hot bath.

He walks back, taking the time to peer at the new seals all along the cavern walls that weren’t there before, in wild shapes and designs he can’t even begin to understand.

He gets back to Haku safe and sound, and Haku looks starry-eyed. “That was… that was amazing, Zabuza-sama,” Haku breathes. “Everything on the island… lit up.” He fans out his fingers a little for emphasis. “It revealed all of the dormant seals on the island.”

Yes, it was very pretty. Great, whatever. They could find out how to leave now.

“Now Uzumaki-sama can freely travel the island to help us with the others!”

What. “Others?”

“She says that was just the first one. There’s four more seals we need to help with, sir.”

Zabuza eyes the moss on the ground. Maybe he should try screaming into it again.

----

Tsunade wakes up that afternoon and groans, "Why the fuck are there foxes on me." She lifts the little orange one off her face and plops it on the pillow next to her.

She rubs at her forehead with a grumble and heals her hangover from being drunk for two days straight. Shizune will probably yell at her for it, but whatever, Tsunade needs to figure this fox shit out.

The biggest orange one is now pacing the floor, snapping its teeth at nothing. The grey and black one lazily eyes it for a moment, and then the cheeky little shit gives Tsunade a look as if to say, Oh, so nice of you to finally join us. The black one looks unimpressed with everything. The pink one is pawing at Tsunade, sincerely concerned.

They’re weird. It doesn't help that they all have an eerie aura about them. But a bit of her memory of the past day is coming back. She thinks about her grandmother’s stories of bells and spirits and she wonders.

"...Uzushio foxes?" shes asks aloud. Are they? Did they finally come to visit her? Shit, she might really be in a bad way if this many Uzushio foxes think they have to stop by and check in. "I dunno
why you're here, but I guess I can't exactly tell you to get out." She'll let them stick around for as long as it takes.

If they do, she should probably give them names.

She looks at the little orange one now jumping around the bed. Loud, bombastic, playful. He reminds her so much of Nawaki it should hurt, but really, she feels… lighter. Grief ebbing out with the tide.

She points one by one at the little foxes. "Pinky, Inky, Loud-Nawaki, hmm," she tilts her head at the adult foxes. "Grey-boy kind of reminds me of Sakumo, but way sassier." The fox flicks his ear sharply but otherwise doesn't react.

"And the big one reminds me..." she squints at it, "of grandma Mito."

Tsunade watches the largest fox shriek angrily and knock over a side table, breaking one of the legs. It grabs a pillow and shakes it in its mouth, feathers going everywhere.

She says, impassive, "There goes the deposit." She's out of money anyway. Tsunade turns to the other four. "Alright," she claps her hands together, "you guys ever skip out on a bill before?"

There’s a knock on the door. “Tsunade-sama, are you finally up?"

"Shizune! We're going out the window!"

"Again?" Shizune asks as she enters with Tonton in tow. The big fox is still off in its own little world of minor destruction, but the other four all swivel their heads to stare down the pig.

"Hey, hey!" Tsunade snaps her fingers, "No eating the pig!" Shit, this might be a problem. But her command does the trick well enough. They all look away, pretending like they didn't just plan her pet's death. Pinky actually looks chagrined.

Loud-Nawaki gets back on her shoulder as she scoops the biggest foxes each under one arm. Angry-Mito is snapping and snarling, ineffectual in Tsunade's expert hold. She's held down worse patients with less leverage. Sassy-Sakumo looks completely unimpressed with his fox companion. He turns his head up to Tsunade with a flat expression that says, Are you seeing the shit I have to put up with?

Shizune slides the window open and picks up Pinky and Inky, not even questioning the presence of foxes. Tsunade adores that about her.

“Alright, hang on, we gotta book it fast outta town!” Tsunade says with a grin as she leaps into the alley below.

----

Ino wants to skip down the path leading them down south through Konoha, towards Tea Country. Asuma-sensei finally is taking her team on a C-rank! A mission outside of Konoha!

She can’t believe Billboard-Brow already beat her to this, rubbing it in Ino’s face on the way out to Konoha’s gate. But maybe Ino’s team will finish their mission first, and she can rub that in her face. Or... maybe Ino will see Sasuke out here on the way, too, and she can impress him with her mission prowess.
Ino maybe skips once or twice.

It doesn’t even matter that their mission is totally boring. The courier mission is for a Konoha baker who’s got a special shipment for a teahouse and is overly paranoid about his cakes or whatever getting stolen. Even worse, he’s one of those people who thinks that too many items in one storage scroll impacts quality. She wants to roll her eyes. *Civilians.*

“You *could* help carry something,” Shikamaru grouses as he hoists his backpack higher on his back.

“No can do. I’m supervising you!” That’s what he *gets* for not pulling his full weight to get this mission in the first place.

“I believe that’s *my* job,” Asuma-sensei points out, ambling along behind them.

Shikamaru doesn’t quite give up. “Help Chouji at least.”

“Um, that would be nice,” Chouji says. He’s carrying the vast majority of the scrolls, his backpack totally overstuffed. He’s carrying an overstuffed messenger bag as well, full of potato chips.

“Oh, fine,” she sighs. She plucks out a single scroll sticking out from Chouji’s bag. “There!” she says, sunny. “You’re welcome, Chouji!”

Shikamaru gives her a seriously judgmental look. Rude.

She tries for innocent. “What? I’m helping!”

“So troublesome,” he mutters with a groan.

“Come on. Take this seriously,” Asuma-sensei says, tone light as he chastises them. But he also shifts the cigarette in his mouth, and his head tilts the barest southeast, in the direction of Wave.

Ino isn’t an expert at tells, but she’s paid a lot of attention to her team. Asuma-sensei… something might be bothering him. She and Shikamaru share a look; he’s come to the same conclusion just as fast. Chouji quiets as well, immediately catching on to their change in mood.

The wind picks up Ino’s hair, blowing it towards Wave in rivulets. It makes her shiver. She wonders where Team Seven could be.

C-ranks tend to be like test runs of real missions, for genin. Ino knows how they work, at least in Konoha. While the missions take genin outside the safety of Konoha’s walls, they’re not very high risk; they’re day trips or overnights, and easily completed by any jounin instructor if they need to step in. Anything more strenuous for a genin team would call for an organized training trip instead.

Billboard-Br—Sakura… she’s been gone for well over a week now. No C-rank should take *that* long, right?

They cross over a stream, and Ino spares a glance along its banks. Near the shore grows flowers. Red spider lilies. For the first time on their mission, Ino is worried.

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Somewhere in the northern half of Tea Country, a young man sits in a private booth in the back of a tea house, enjoying a bit of luxury in a place that doesn’t recognize him. Sometimes, in the quiet places, he likes to pretend he belongs, like he could blend in. He fiddles absently with his pipe, considering where he’d like to wander next. It doesn’t exactly matter, as long as he isn’t bothered by
anyone.

He sips his tea.

He’s often restless, he knows, but it’s a different sort of restless that’s plagued him recently. Not the urge to move. More like… somewhere to settle, no matter how impossible that is.

But in this very moment, he knows this restlessness isn’t all him. He shifts in his seat, then closes his eyes, dipping his head to the side, listening.

“...What is it, Saiken?”

Chapter End Notes

Next time: meeting new friends and old, and a whole lot of running.
Tsunade skids to a halt along the fork of a dirt path overlooking the eastern seas. She snaps her head around looking for any angry innkeepers or loan sharks that somehow followed them out this far. She doesn’t sense anything, and only hears the chirrup of early summer cicadas and the low growl of Angry-Mito under her arm.

Phew. Looks like they’re in the clear.

Then Angry-Mito writhes in her grip with renewed agitation. He snaps at her foot as she finally drops him down to the ground.

“Geez!” She jumps back and damn near kicks the fox off the cliffside out of reflex. “What’s your problem?”

He barks at her, fur bristled. He’s angry, but she catches the undercurrent of unease in the fox’s demeanor. Oh. Tsunade would freak out too if someone snagged her with little warning and ran for it.

“All right, all right,” she says as she puts down Sassy-Sakumo and Loud-Nawaki and holds up her hands in placation. “I get it, I’m sorry. I won’t pick you up again.”

Angry-Mito stops mid-snarl, and looks at her in bewildered disbelief, like Tsunade is acting crazy.

Sassy-Sakumo shakes out his fur, not even bothering to react to his larger companion’s antics, and lazily lopes after Loud-Nawaki, who’s running over to Shizune.

Shizune crouches to let loose her armful of baby foxes to their cohort. She straightens and turns to Tsunade, “Where to now?”

Hmm. Where should they go? Tsunade figures going to River Country might be a nice change of pace. There’s some raucous outposts by the border if things haven’t changed in the last few years. Then again, it’s been long enough that she could get away with going to Tanzaku Quarters again. Whether or not she wanted to stick around in Fire Country was another story.

Tsunade tips her head to the left path. “Let’s go west for now.” They’ll wander up the west coast of the peninsula and enter Fire Country that way.

But the foxes don’t follow, and yip at her when she and Shizune start walking down the inland path.

“What?” Tsunade asks as she turns back around, trying to figure out what’s wrong now. “This way?” She points up the east coastal path that will take them up closer to Wave. “Why?”

Angry-Mito barks again. Angrily.

"I can't understand ‘fox,’ you know," Tsunade barks back, irritated.

So the foxes attempt charades. It goes badly.

Pinky and Inky are watching Loud-Nawaki spin in place, trying to describe whatever-the-hell, when Sassy-Sakumo finally sighs and wanders over to a tree. He picks up a fallen branch and saunters back. He paws away some leaf litter and starts to draw in the dirt of the path.
Tsunade and Shizune tilt their heads at the awkward, but semi-legible characters that start to slowly form. "Go to... Uzushio? Ohhhh."

Tsunade stares at the message for another moment, but the words suddenly register and she yelps, "What?! There is no way I’m going there."

Angry-Mito opens his snarling mouth again but Tsunade cuts him off. "Hey, don't look at me like that," she snaps at him. “I don't know enough fuuinjutsu to get in! I've seen the security there and who knows what’s been activated since—since it was attacked.”

It was grandma Mito that knew the way, who knew the safe paths, the few times Tsunade went along with her grandma’s pilgrimages as a child. Grandma always said that anyone was welcome if their heart was in Uzushio. It’s just that… Tsunade isn’t sure she counts anymore. She had turned her back on her prior life, her own history, for years now. She isn’t going to risk it with her heart as broken as it is.

Tsunade continues, “That place is riddled with defense seals that would vaporize me if I looked at them wrong.” The she winces, thinking of her empty wallet. “And I don’t exactly have the money to get across the ocean.” Not to mention knowing anyone crazy enough to travel near the island.

But wait, she’s talking to Uzushio foxes. They want her to go there for a reason, and she’ll be damned if she willfully ignores a request from them. If anything, they’d have the power to help her along, right?

She cups her chin and asks, "...Unless you all can get me there?"

The foxes freeze, and all look at each other. They start gekkering at once in some sort of argument. Loud-Nawaki seems to be insisting on something, with Pinky and Inky backing him up with admirable sass, but Angry-Mito chitters back with serious attitude. Boy, if a fox could sound sarcastic, Tsunade would bet it’s like that.

Oh, the fox conference is over. Sassy-Sakumo turns to face Tsunade, and sheepishly shakes his head no. Fucking wonderful, she got the amateur foxes.

She sighs, "Well, shit, we might be out of luck." It figures for her.

Pinky’s ears droop, and her eyes turn huge and sad. Loud-Nawaki squeaks in alarm and pokes at her with his nose, trying to comfort her. Even the stoic Inky is beginning to look upset, and Loud-Nawaki is looking back and forth at them, at a pitying loss. Tsunade has to turn away; it’s too distressing.

Unfortunately, she looks right at Shizune, whose watering doe eyes match those of the baby foxes. “There’s nothing we can do, Tsunade-sama?” Shizune pleads, already irreversibly invested in helping the cute foxes find their way home.

Fuck. Tsunade’s already lost this battle. They’re getting to that island one way or another. “Alright, fine. I don’t know how, but we’ll do it.” She turns to the foxes. “We’ll think of some way to get to Uzushio, okay?”

The baby foxes start to perk up at that, thank the gods.

...In fact, they perk up a little too quickly, preening at their success. Gods-damnit, she just got fucking played.

Before she can shout at them, Shizune pipes up, “Oh! For fuuinjutsu help, we could ask—"
Tsunade cuts her off, "We’ll leave him as a last resort." She grimaces. Who knows where that pervert is, anyway. “Let’s just figure out how to get there first. I guess if we can find a ship…?”

Tsunade is lost in thought for a few moments as they begin to walk up the coastal path. All her plans suck. This is going to suck.

"Tsunade-sama?” Shizune asks, hitching Tonton up higher in her arms. “What do the foxes have to do with Uzushio?"

Tsunade glances over to her with a start. "I never told you? Huh, I guess I wouldn't have." It’s another painful thing she’s avoided until now.

What exactly happened last night? What do these foxes really want from her? She furrows her brow, trying to pull all her grandma’s stories from her memory. She keeps getting stuck on one—

“Tsunade-sama?”

Shit, she took too long thinking. “These,” Tsunade waves her hands out to their new four-legged companions, stalling, “are Uzushio foxes. They have to do with… everything.”

Shizune’s lips purse. “Why do I get the feeling you’re stalling for time?”

Tsunade groans, “Okay, I am, but give me a break, Shizune, I haven’t exactly thought about this stuff since I was sixteen!” Ever since Nawaki— “I’ve never even met a fox before, but they always show up for a reason.”

“A reason?”

"Like if you’re in trouble. Uzu people have all these traditions and stories about foxes. Oh, I know!” Tsunade snaps her fingers. "There's one story that always stuck with me," she begins, "of a girl who lost her mother off the northern shores of the island."

“This was before the central village, when there were few Uzu people on the island yet. The girl and her mother had gone to collect fish from net traps in anticipation of a summer storm. They split up to cover more ground as they pulled up the many nets.

“The girl ran along the beach to check her family’s nets, but came across a fox trying to sneak out a fish from the catch. However, it was clumsy and not very good at navigating the nets. The ringing bells in the girl’s hair alerted the fox to her presence, and it tried to appear innocent despite being caught red handed. The girl scolded it lightly, hoping to shoo it away, saying her mother would not appreciate her fish stolen by a fox.

“...But the fox’s impression was so bad that it just made the girl laugh. ‘It’s clear you’ve never even met my mother!’

“I’ve met you!” the fox said in a perfect imitation of the girl, ‘...So what if I was you in disguise?’

“The girl only laughed harder, causing the bells in her hair to chime. The fox’s excuse was so funny and it looked so pathetic that she opened up the net and threw the grateful fox a fish anyway. The fox ran off and she got back to work.

“Unfortunately, the winds picked up much more quickly than the girl anticipated, and the rain came pouring in. Due to the location of the island, Uzu storms are particularly unforgiving and
unpredictable. The girl barely managed to find shelter to wait it out and to find her mother.

“What the girl did not know was that her mother was not so lucky and did not survive the storm, being swept out to sea and overcome by the maelstrom. But the girl searched. She called and called for her. She tried until her voice was gone. And there was no answer, as her mother’s spirit was too lost to the gods of the storm and sea.

“But what did hear her,” Tsunade leaned in, “was the fox.”

“The fox heard her efforts and decided to help her as she had helped it. ‘I can run faster, see farther, and cry louder than you can. I’ll find your mother.’ The fox also asked for a bell from the girl’s hair and used its chime to mimic the sound of the girl as it leapt along the churning waves. Somehow it rang above the howling winds, just as loud as the fox’s cry.

“The mother’s spirit heard the call, and recognized the bells as the ones she weaved in her daughter's hair; her spirit was so overcome with the need to see her daughter, to make sure that she was safe, that she found the strength to follow the fox back to the island. The girl, though grieved by her mother’s death, was happy that she could say her goodbyes, and that her mother’s spirit could find peace.”

“The fox kept the bells, and could be heard ringing with each step as it ran through the island and along the seas. So it is said that since then, foxes could call forth departed spirits for those in distress or to help say farewell.”

Shizune hugs Tonton close. "Oh, that poor girl. At least they got to see each other again…” She trails off, and then asks, glancing at their new companions, “So the foxes... became guides for spirits?"

"In that story, yeah,” Tsunade crosses her arms and hums to herself as she tries to remember, "but it’s more than that. They actually have a lot of roles. They help guide the living as well when they've lost their way, or to direct them on a better path. Some of the stories have foxes tricking certain people too, to teach them a lesson." She smiles wryly, "Though it's like an Uzumaki lesson. The story with the snakes is something else."

She laughs a little to herself; she only remembers that one because it was Orochimaru's favorite story, the weirdo.

----

Sakura turns away from listening in on Tsunade-sama’s conversation, mulling the story over. Does that make them all spirit guides? Is that what Naruto had done for Tsunade-sama? She had kept saying the name Nawaki. Maybe that was someone’s spirit.

She turns her head to ask Naruto, but is alarmed to find that he’s loudly sniffing, his eyes wobbling with tears.

Sensei notices too. “Maa, Naruto?” he asks, a bit bewildered.

Naruto buries his face in Sensei’s side. "That was so sad!” he wails, muffled. “But the girl got to see her mom again too, Sensei!"

“Ah, yes she did,” Sensei commiserates, awkwardly shuffling along as he tolerates Naruto leaning his entire body weight into Sensei’s side.

Right, Naruto mentioned meeting his parents, one of whom was the Yondaime. She shakes her head
at how crazy yesterday was that she nearly forgot.

She does have a question for Kurama too, now that he isn’t in such a nasty mood. "Um... are you a spirit guide?" She doesn’t think that’s likely, but it can't hurt to ask.

"No!" Kurama barks, immediately offended, "I have nothing to do with that!"

“You’re a fox,” Sasuke points out, blunt.

"I am not just a fox. I am the Kyuubi no Kitsune, brat. I am powerful beyond mortal imagination and much more amazing. I have no need to deal with spirits and so-called gods."

He says he has no connection, but Sakura... really doesn't buy it. He's been nothing but cagey about the other foxes—and there’s obviously a history there—along with whatever spirit thing Naruto did yesterday to Tsunade-sama. Plus Kurama was no help during the pacing tantrum he threw for most of the morning. There's more to the story but she doesn't think it's wise to press.

She tries her luck with another question. "How are we going to find more Uzumaki?" Tsunade-sama doesn't exactly stand out in Sakura's senses as an Uzumaki descendant, and that worries her.

Kurama's ears flick. "Didn't you listen to the story the sad drunk just told us? You use bells. It’s a sense. That’s what the drunk heard and it’s what Uzushio foxes use for call and response."

"But..." Sakura hesitates, “I haven't heard or sensed anything?” Was she supposed to this whole time? Is something wrong with her? Is she going to be of no help to find them?

Before Sakura can spiral into a pit of self-doubt, Naruto shouts, "Me neither!"

"Not since... the storm," Sasuke adds.

"Hmm, so we need to learn how to reliably trigger this sense,” Kakashi muses.

They all look at Kurama, expectant.

But Kurama doesn’t answer, his expression suspiciously blank.

"...You have no idea how, do you." Sensei states rather than asks.

"What the hell! And I bet you haven't heard anything either!" Naruto accuses.

"Fine, I haven't!" Kurama spits. “And I shouldn't! I don't deal with this Uzu shit! You three just had to call those gods, didn’t you? The bullshit they think they're pulling tying up my power with their power... I'm not rolling over and accepting that like a good little fox!"

"Gods we called?" Naruto yells back. “That's what that old fox guy said, but we didn't even ask for this, you know!"

"Oh, really? You didn’t ask for any help at all?” Kurama presses.

“Well, I thought it, but that doesn’t count!” Naruto’s ears fold back, “...Right?"

Sakura looks away. "...I just prayed for someone to help us. All of us."

Sasuke’s whiskers twitch, and he doesn't deny it, either.

"Of course not. You're stupid children who don't know what you played with—"
"Arguing about this again won't change what happened," Sensei idly cuts in. "We need to move forward. Any suggestions, Kurama?" he asks.

Kurama blinks, surprised, but quickly shifts his expression back to irritated. "Hmpf. With more people, meaning more power, we should be able to work faster."

“So we really do need to find more Uzumaki first,” Sakura confirms.

“But how are we supposed to find more of my family? Sensei, even you said you don’t know where any are!” Naruto cries.

“Maa, well—”

“Then we find people who would be willing to migrate to Uzushio,” Sasuke cuts in. “That fox said anyone who calls it home counts.”

Naruto perks up. “Oh yeah! We could find a bunch of people then.”

Sensei tips his head. “You’re right that we could, Sasuke, but that’s if we can convince anyone. We’ll keep it in mind, but it might not be an effective route, considering our circumstances.” He swishes his tail in emphasis.

Sakura looks between Sensei and Kurama. “Then, um, what’s our plan for now?”

"Since the island is likely locked down and the gods are sitting on their asses after handing out my chakra like party favors," Kurama throws an ugly sneer eastward, "we check everyone with red hair and find some sorry excuse for seal master."

This sounds like... an unrealistic plan.

"Auugh, we're gonna be foxes for forever!" Naruto moans as he flops over into the grass, startling Sakura. What the hell; he's supposed to be the optimist here!

Sasuke goes to stand over him, eyes narrowed. “Are you already giving up, idiot?”

"And what happened to all your confidence from yesterday?” Sakura tries to rally, now more uncertain than ever, “We—we can do this, can’t we?”

"Yeah, sure, but when can I have ramen again?!” Naruto wails.

What.

Sasuke stares. “...That’s what you’re worried about?” he asks, incredulous.

Naruto rolls around pitifully. “How can I eat it as a fox?” He waves his little paws in the air. “I can’t even hold chopsticks!”

It’s decided. Sakura is going to punch Naruto the second she has hands again.

"It’s still better than being human,” Kurama adds unhelpfully.

She’s going to punch Kurama too.

"Oi, foxies! Loud-Nawaki? You alright?” Tsunade calls back, where she’s stopped a good distance ahead of them on the path. “We’re burning daylight!”
Sasuke pounces at Naruto. “Get up, dumbass.”

“Make me, asshole!” But he jumps up anyway, bats at Sasuke, and they chase each other up the path towards Shizune.

Sakura watches them go. She starts to walk after them and sighs, trying not to cry again in frustration at their situation. At everything.

Sensei trots up alongside her. "We haven’t lost yet, Sakura,” he murmurs. “We do have Tsunade on our side now, and she knows of a good seal master who could help if we really need it. It's a setback but it isn't hopeless. Okay?"

"Okay," Sakura sniffs once but nods, just a little more determined. It's nice to hear Sensei's reassurance.

Tsunade-sama glances at Sakura and covers her eyes with one hand with a groan. "Jeez, don't bring out the cow eyes again, Pinky.” She pulls her hand down and winks. “We'll get you home in no time.” She turns back around and scans out ahead as they crest a hill. She smirks, “And I have an idea for our first stop.”

----

Tsunade leads them along the coastal path with renewed purpose. The path takes them slightly inland, as the sea air gives way to rolling fields. They travel past rows of tea plants, overlooked by the distant mountains, as they enter the south side of the bustling agricultural village of Matcha.

“Allright, foxies,” Tsunade declares as she stretches and cracks her fingers out in front of her, “I got a good feeling about this; we’re gonna try for a lot of money the old fashioned way.”

Shizune tries to interrupt, “Tsunade-sama, no—”

“Yes! Let’s find us a gambling den!” Tsunade crows as she marches away on her self-appointed mission.

Shizune sighs, world-weary, and crouches down next to Kurama. She holds a hand up to the side of her mouth to whisper conspiratorially to him. “I don’t know if you know this, Mr. Fox, but her luck is not the greatest. Please try to help her,” Shizune grimaces, “or at least stop her if needed.”

And that’s absolutely going to be needed.

----

Utakata hasn’t moved an inch from his seat, clutching his pipe tight in his hand and letting his tea go ice cold. He’s caught between incredulity and fascination. What Saiken is telling him is outrageous. As it turns out, his brother—a free tailed beast—is coming this way. And, somehow, he’s supposedly the key to finding Utakata a safe place, a home.

He can’t be serious.

...Oh. Saïken insists he is serious.

Utakata shakes his head, as if the words the slug is telling him will align and start to make any more sense. He has so many questions. How on earth can a tailed beast walk into a village without being noticed, let alone fit into a tea house?
Then Saiken suddenly and fully retreats, and for once, Utakata’s mind is completely silent. It’s…
terrible to have it so quiet. It’s strange to admit, but he’s gotten so used to Saiken’s chatter. The slug
has become something of a constant companion, a creature who—admittedly—buoys Utakata’s
spirits throughout the endless lonely days of his life on the run.

Before the silence can break him, he hears Saiken’s merry voice again in his mind, and he can’t help
but relax, secretly relieved. He wonders what the slug was up to. Saiken doesn’t answer that, but
he’s changing their status quo again, pressing forward. He’s requesting control once they meet his
brother. Just to talk.

Utakata hesitates. While he’s comfortable working with Saiken, he’s never given up conscious
control before. Saiken could easily run rampant and do anything he wanted.

But... Saiken isn’t like that. He’s not some mindless, evil thing. And as Utakata’s discovered over the
years, Saiken’s nothing if not sincere.

And Utakata is tired. Any chance for a place to call home is a temptation he can no longer resist.

“Okay,” he says out loud, to himself and to Saiken. “Okay.”

He takes a deep breath, and peeks out of the curtain.

----

Asuma flicks the ash from his cigarette as his genin team crest the northern outskirts of Matcha.

As irrational and irresponsible as it is, he itches to run off to Wave, to barge in and investigate. He
only has pieces of a picture, but he trusts his instincts. He knows something isn’t right.

Asuma had caught the end of his dad’s conversation with Danzo, and then the hesitation in his dad’s
voice before he dismissed Asuma. It’s rolling through Asuma’s mind, over and over.

Something has gone awry with Konoha’s jinchuuriki, and by extension, Team Seven. And that
means something went wrong with Kakashi. He may be a prickly shit, but the guy knows how to
survive. His penchant for tardiness aside, he’d never let his team take this long on a C-rank of all
things.

Oh, Asuma caught whatever worried hint his dad was trying to project at their meeting, not that it
explains anything. Unfortunately, the esteemed Hokage’s favorite pastime is to be as obtuse as
possible. Asuma doesn’t get it. It would save him so much grief if his dad could lay it out straight for
once.

The whole situation makes for a sick, oily feeling in his gut. It doesn’t help that all his
contemporaries this year for the rookie genin teams are new to this, new to taking on the the
responsibility of children who have never been in a real battle, or seen the true horrors of war and
conflict.

He shies away from the hypothetical of Kurenai and her team going missing too, and he brings
himself out of his ruminating. He needs to focus on this mission, on his team.

Ino is subdued. Shikamaru is pretending he’s not watching Asuma closely; Chouji is following
Shikamaru’s lead, though a little less subtle. Asuma curses in his head; either these kids are already
way too attuned to his moods or he’s getting seriously sloppy.

He’ll distract them with their mission specs. He pulls the cigarette out of his mouth and says,
“Alright, you all remember where we need to go?”

“Yep!” Ino brightens with a fake smile, “It’s the Oolong Tea House on the west side of Matcha.”

“And all we do is deliver the storage scrolls, right?” Chouji adds, a little uncertain.

Shikamaru nods. “We’re supposed to pass them off to the owner of the tea house.” He slouches, and mutters, “And then we’re hopefully done.”

Asuma brings the cigarette back to his mouth. He hopes so too.

---

Tsunade zeroes in on a place called the Oolong Tea House. Either she's been here before, or she possesses the uncanny ability to sniff out an underground gambling den like an expert ninken. After observing her for the past 24 hours, Kakashi wouldn’t put it past her.

Shizune appears fully resigned to this adventure, but she straightens up and goes, giving a stern stare-down to anyone who so much as looks askance at the parade of animals behind her.

She’s a good ally, Kakashi thinks.

Shizune jogs ahead to follow Tsunade through the back door into the gambling den, but Kurama stops in his tracks. He looks sharply to his left, his tail going stock still. “Shit.”

Kakashi tenses, which causes all the kids to tense, alert and wary. What now?

Kurama notices their staring. “What?”

“What’s wrong?” Sakura whispers, worried.

“Nothing. Nothing’s wrong. Shut up,” he snaps, clearly lying. “Let’s just go and watch the alcoholic lose even more of her money—”

“Excuse me,” a young man in a loose robe speaks up as he steps carefully out from a private booth, looking over each of the foxes in growing confusion. “May I... speak to Saiken’s brother?”

Kurama curses again.

---

Ino rolls the the scroll back and forth in her hands.

She’s being ridiculous, right? Those spider lilies are just freaking her out because she's already feeling a little off kilter from Sensei’s mood.

She'll just focus on their mission. They're almost done.

They walk down the bustling market street where Oolong Tea House stands on the corner. It’s one of those trendy places that has a looser café feel to it, rather than a stuffy ceremony. Ino's surprised there's one like it in a place as small as Matcha, but she supposes it is Tea Country. A lot of the newest foodie trends crop up here first.

“Welcome to Oolong Tea House,” A robe-clad hostess smoothly intones when they enter. She glides right past them with a tea tray in hand. "I'll be right with you folks."
"Actually—" Sensei tries to interrupt but the hostess wanders off to a table to set down the tray and chat up another round of customers.

Shikamaru sighs. "Troublesome." Ino can't help but agree; she just wants this mission over with. Then she can go back to Konoha and Billboard Brow will be back and it'll assuage Ino’s silly lily fear that her rival might be dea—

Ino catches a flash of pink out the corner of her eye and her heart seizes for split-second.

But it's not Sakura.

"Hey," Ino whispers to Shikamaru and Chouji, "did you see that?"

She gestures to the far side of the tea house, where there’s booths with privacy curtains. It’s a man in a loose fitting robe that should look ridiculous on anyone, but Ino thinks he makes it work. What really grabs her attention, however, is that the man is surrounded by a very… colorful assortment of foxes. Huh. Are they summons? They really don’t seem like it, but she wrinkles her nose; the big orange one is certainly ugly enough to be a weird summons.

As if it heard her thoughts, the big one whips its head around and bares its huge teeth in an appalling grin. She and her teammates quickly tear their eyes away, inadvertently looking at each other.

Ino can't help but let a giggle escape at her teammates’ unnerved faces. She covers her mouth with her hand. "That thing was scary, wasn’t it!" she breathes, her heart still beating slightly too fast.

Shikamaru’s shoulders drop with a snort, and Chouji’s shocked expression slowly morphs into a helpless grin, his cheeks dimpling. “Yeah, it was pretty creepy!”

"And what are you all laughing about?" Sensei turns back to ask, a blessed thread of genuine amusement in his voice.

“Oh, nothing," she lies, smiling.

---

Kakashi wants to bang his head against a wall. Of all the C-rank missions available, of course Asuma had to choose one that sent his genin team here. And then, because Kakashi’s life is never easy, Kurama had to go and make it a hundred times worse.

"You really had to do that?" Kakashi asks as they follow the jinchuuriki for Kurama’s brother. He knew the rumors that one of Mist’s jinchuuriki was a missing nin; how interesting of him to be lurking around in northern Tea Country of all places.

Kurama trots into the booth, and wobbles his head with a self-satisfied grin. "I’m intimidating those brats into leaving us alone. You’re welcome."

Intimidating? It might intimidate those genin for a minute. He tries not to sigh audibly. “Or they’ll just get more curious.”

Kurama just squints at him, like he can’t comprehend such a possibility.

If Kakashi had hands, he’d put his head in them. “The less they notice us, the better.”

Kakashi never thought he’d be in a position to explain to the Kyuubi the first lesson in stealth, but he never predicted he’d die and come back to life as a fox, either. What an oversight on his part.
Kurama starts to scowl again as the jinchuuriki gestures to the cushions. “Make yourselves comfortable,” he says. The man’s keeping himself composed, but it’s clear he’s just as caught off guard by this development as they are. “And, well,” he begins, “I’ll… let Saiken take over from here.”

The man sits down and shuts his eyes. His head tips down, like a string was cut. After a beat, he perks up and his eyes open again, his expression much more open and upbeat than before. He bobs his head and greets, “Kurama! Long time no see! And you brought friends!”

Kurama sighs, “…Saiken.”

“Well look at you!” Saiken gushes, resting a hand on his host’s cheek. “Back to your own body!” He looks Kurama over again and exclaims, “Oh! But one tail… you match Shukaku!”

Kurama instantly bristles, and that single tail whips around, puffed up. “You dare compare me to that weak little shit?”

“Haha, sorry, sorry!” he waves a hand and backtracks with a laugh, “I didn’t mean it like that! It’s just been so long since we’ve talked face-to-face like this.” He glances over and stage whispers to Team Seven, “For two thousand years now.”

“Woah, what, that long?” Naruto blurts out.

“You didn’t talk to your brother at all?” Sakura asks, shocked. Sasuke gives Kurama a very judgmental look.

Kurama ignores them. “Just get to the point, Saiken.”

“You’re up to something,” Saiken sing songs, “and I want in on it.”

“No, absolutely not,” Kurama snaps back.

Saiken carries on as if he didn’t hear that, “Oh, I think I can guess what it is~! Uzushio, right? The foxes make it so obvious.”

“Stay out of it,” he hisses.

“But it’ll be fun,” Saiken whines a little, “and Utakata,” he taps at his host’s chest, “is nice for a human. He’ll definitely agree to help you. And we can bring in everyone!” He counts off on fingers, “Matatabi and Kokuo and Chomei and—”

Kurama snarls, ears flat to his skull. “You’re going to tell them? Saiken, don’t you dare—”

“Ah, going to? No.”

“Good, and you better keep it that way—”

“Because I already told them to come!” he warbles happily.

Kurama screeches in inarticulate rage.

“It’ll be like a family reunion!” Saiken continues on over the noise, but then he deflates a little. “Not that I could get all of our siblings to respond.”

“How tragic,” Kurama bites out through gritted teeth.
Kakashi’s eyes widen. Kurama’s siblings—

That means more jinchuuriki may decide to up and leave their respective villages. Ethics aside, jinchuuriki are positioned as linchpins for maintaining truces and power balance between the major countries. Kakashi thinks about hypothetical destabilization of alliances, treaties overturned and even the possibility of a world war—

This is not going to end well.

----

“Thanks for waiting,” the hostess chirps as she finally comes back. “Four, then? And where would you folks like to sit?”

"We actually have a delivery," says Sensei.

She tilts her head and looks them over, spotting their hitai-ate. "Oh! Oh, do you kids have a mission here? Isn't that fun! I'll go get my manager." She wanders off again before anyone can say anything.

Ino can't help but groan in tandem with Shikamaru. More waiting!

She looks around and tries to spy on that fox guy again. She strains her eyes and catches a glimpse through a sliver of the curtain. She frowns. That's weird; his mannerisms have changed from earlier. He seems more... bubbly, and delighted to be talking to the foxes.

But then the woman who must be the manager walks up to them, ruining Ino’s fun. "Welcome to Oolong Tea House. You have a mission here?"

"We have a cake delivery!" Ino declares.

"Cakes? I didn't hear about cakes," the manager says with a frown. She squints at them, suspicious, but then shrugs a shoulder. "The owner probably forgot to tell me about it, but let me go ask and make sure."

She beckons them to follow her. She saunters to a door at the very back of the hall of private booths and cracks it the barest amount open. She hollers into it, "Hey, Takusu, did we order cakes from Konoha?"

She steps back as the owner comes barrelling out of the back hall, smacking his shoulder hard in the door frame on the way. He slams the door shut behind him before Ino can get a good look at whatever’s back there.

"You startled me, Yanomi!" He wipes his sweating hands down on his apron, wincing from his likely bruised shoulder.

"Cakes? Of course, of course, uh, Maple Bakery, yes? And you, uh, have every storage scroll?"

Sensei raises an eyebrow. "We have every scroll that was present for delivery," he chides lightly. Ino would snort if they weren't in front of the client. Like they'd be so inept as to forget one.

"I, uh, just don't want to get cheated, you see!" he stutters. He looks totally nervous. Civilians can get that way, but is he that scared of shinobi? The other employees aren’t so skittish.

She catches Shikamaru’s eye, careful to keep her face neutral. Something is weird here, but Sensei
seems to be pretending nothing’s the matter. Maybe he’s waiting for them to figure it out on their own.

Whatever; she and her team could take a sweaty tea house owner in a fight, easy.

----

As Saiken and Kurama continue their back and forth, Kakashi surfaces from his catastrophizing to see the kids edging slowly towards the curtain, trying to peek out of it.

“Maa, what do you three think you’re doing?” he asks.

They freeze. Mostly. Sasuke keeps going, bless his recalcitrant little heart. Kakashi darts forward to block his path.

“Well?” he asks them again as Sasuke glares at him.

“Nothing!” Naruto lies.

Sakura doesn’t. “We thought we saw something, sensei.”

Kakashi hopes that something isn’t—

Shit, Asuma’s team is right outside.

Naruto gasps. “Hey, that’s Chouji and Shikamaru!”

Sakura’s tail whips around. “And Ino-pig!”

“And you’re all staying in here.” Kakashi’s more worried about the young Yamanaka than anything. Her clan’s techniques could immediately out them.

“Low profile, yeah, yeah.” Naruto tilts his head to peer through a gap in the curtain. “Haha, their mission looks so boring. Ours was way more cool!”

‘Cool’ is not the word Kakashi would use.

----

Asuma is tempted to facepalm. Or maybe strangle this idiot.

Nobody gives this much of a shit about cakes.

Either the actual goods are more valuable or volatile than disclosed to avoid a higher insurance fee and a higher mission base price, or this asshole had the gall to make his team, his students, the proxies for a smuggling operation.

And who the fuck vetted this mission? Asuma is going to give someone in Administration absolute hell for this.

He keeps all his thoughts of punching Takusu out of his expression and instead quirks his lips in a lazy smile. “We have one or two bits of paperwork we have to do before we wrap up here,” Asuma lies, stalling.

Takusu pauses. “Paperwork? I, uh, never had to do paperwork,” he argues.
So the guy’s a repeat offender. Good to know. Asuma scratches his cheek and shrugs a shoulder. “New protocol, sorry. It’s a real pain.”

Whatever is in these scrolls, Asuma is not handing them over.

----

Saiken nods at Kurama. “So it’s settled; Utakata will go with you.”

“No—”

Saiken interrupts, “Okay, great, bye!”

After a moment, the jinchuuriki—Utakata—blinks out of a daze.

He takes one look at Kurama’s angry face and says, “The discussion went well, I take it.”

Kurama sneers. “Yes, thank you so much for conspiring with Saiken on this farce.”

Utakata blinks at him. “...I can’t understand what you’re saying.”

All of a sudden he tenses and shoots out of his seat. They all still; even Kurama looks wary. Utakata waves at them to stay quiet and tilts his head like he’s listening for something.

His eyes widen. “...We all need to leave now,” he whispers, urgent.

They sneak out the booth, Utakata obscuring their exit with a ruffle of the curtain, while the shop owner is arguing with an unyielding Asuma.

They’re barely down the hall when they can sense the air displacement of a shunshin. Masked shinobi appear behind Asuma’s team, about to strike.

“Ino!” Sakura screams, horrified.
Ino jolts at the shrill cry that cuts through her, that threatens to shake her out of her skin.

_Sakura?_

She looks back—

—Just in time to twist to the side, barely dodging the blow that smashes through the support beam of a private booth.

Her eyes snap forward and she slides around, snatching a kunai out of her leg pack, her hands a fine tremor. She can’t stop to think how that would’ve been her head if she were a moment slower. She doesn’t register the customers beginning to scream. Her attention is solely on her attacker, the masked shinobi, with Mist symbols painted on their porcelain face.

...Mist nin? Why are they here? And why are they trying to _kill_ her?

She dives to block another blow as Asuma shoots forward to counterattack. Chouji ducks to his right as the curved blade from another hunter snags his backpack, slicing it open, spilling the scrolls everywhere along the floor. Shikamaru pulls him away from another strike, and they scramble to brace for another attack.

But these Mist nin ignore him in favor of—the storage scrolls! Ino holds her scroll to her chest, wary, as the grip on her kunai tightens. She brings it up to block as the hunter-nin goes after her again, bringing his ragged sword straight down at her.

---

Asuma pulls Ino flush to him with one hand as he whips a trench knife up to block the sword. The awkward angle and rough blow staggers them back as the metal of his trench knife screams against the blade, jostling the scroll out of Ino’s hands. He watches the hunter-nin’s head twitch as he follows the rolling scroll.

Hunter-nin from Kiri? No. hunter-nin don’t act or operate like this. These nin are brazen, out in the open, their movements too rough.

Asuma grips his trench knife around his fist with a grim smile. These are _fakes_, hiding their identity behind a fearful image. But they must be equal parts bold and stupid to take on a disguise like this and remotely expect it to work.
Asuma presses forward as he lets Ino snake behind him, pushing the sword back to the false hunter’s chest. Takusu is pounding on the back door, screaming in a panic, while Yanomi is flush to the wall, terrified. Asuma moves to lunge again when another false hunter snags Takusu’s collar and shoves him and the manager to the side as he slaps a tag on the door hinge. Asuma aborts his forward strike, nearly gutting Yanomi.

The exploding tag hisses wildly and everyone ducks as it erupts, taking out the door and chunks of the surrounding frame, blowing splinters and smoke over them. A false-hunter swipes the storage scroll in the distraction, snapping open the seal, and he takes off through the back door with his accomplices, dragging Takusu behind them.

“Shit—” Asuma leaps to his feet and races after them. They fly through the back room—a gambling den, he registers—and the patrons start to back up out of their chairs. Asuma’s target upends a poker table as he passes, tossing aside the now-empty storage scroll. Asuma hears an angry shout, a pig squeal, and cups and bottles shatter to the floor.

“You *assholes, I’ll—*

The voice drowns out as all the players erupt in an uproar around them, pulling out weapons and joining in the brawl, fighting anyone and anything.

Amidst the chaos, Asuma twists around in time to see another false-hunter slap down a second exploding tag, this time on a mid-floor support beam. Asuma can see his students’ eyes widen and he shouts to them over the din, jerking his head towards the outer door. They scramble as the tag explodes. The beam bows, the ceiling creaks, and Asuma rushes through the exit as the entire structure starts to come crashing down.

Asuma covers his face with his arms as the blowup of dust and rubble whites out the side alley, obscuring the retreating backs of the false-hunters. He hears another crash, and instead of chasing, Asuma looks back instead, heart in his throat. His students could be—

He sees Chouji wheezing, Ino’s incensed scowl, and Shikamaru groaning irritably. They’re covered in dust and coughing, but his team are all well and whole behind him.

He turns back and swears fiercely; the false-hunters are gone from the alley. Split up, likely. He tries to cast out for chakra but it’s all muddled, whether from frazzled nerves or the cacophony around them. He never was much for longer range detection.

Ino whips her head from the left to the right with a sneer. “Ughh, those jerks! They split up!” she cries, her more innate sensing confirming Asuma’s assumption.

“We have to get whatever they stole, back, right?” Chouji asks, nervous, but beginning to steel himself again.

The glimpse Asuma had caught of the scroll prickled, buzzed instinctual fear down his limbs. It’s ornate and old. Very few scrolls that look like that are good news, and Asuma would bet his hitai-ate it’s for summoning. But whatever that scroll houses, letting it fall into any enemy hands is not an option.

“We can split up,” says Shikamaru, and dammit. Asuma knows that’s the strategic option, but he’s already had one heart attack today from his genin nearly dying.

He nods anyway and takes off to the left. He doesn’t notice the tag-alongs behind him.
Utakata runs out the front of the teahouse, his senses and Saiken on alert. He’s putting himself out in the open, he knows, but he has the power to risk it. He doesn’t want to injure any civilians in the crowd of the teahouse if he can help it.

He hears the dull boom of an explosion from behind him, and renewed screaming. Too late for that, perhaps.

What a mess this is. As if those ambushers inside were hunter-nin. Obvious fakes using a costume to hide their identities. Missing-nin or bandits, maybe, likely angling for some kind of reward out of one of those scrolls.

But they aren’t his problem, he thinks, as his senses prickle again.

The real hunter-nin are.

Unfortunately for them, Utakata has played this game for years now. As civilians are gawking or running from the now-collapsing building, he walks to the middle of the street, lifting his pipe to his mouth, his chakra rising. They’re several years too late to truly catch him by surprise.

But in the moment the hunter-nin descend, shrouded in mist, two of the false hunters barrel out of the side alley, smoke trailing at their heels.

“Fuck, that was close,” says one of them, hitching a scroll up under his arm as he looks up towards the road. “Come on, let’s get outta—”

They all pause, and the hunter-nin twitch their heads the slightest to stare at them.

“Uh oh,” says the other fake.

----

Ino and her teammates take off in the opposite direction of their sensei. They don’t have his power and speed, but they can work together and potentially prevent those Mist nin, or whoever they are, from escaping.

They peek out of the alley, and Ino is surprised to see the foxy robed man out in the middle of the street. And seriously, how many of these Mist guys are after this scroll, anyway?

But the foxy robed man doesn’t spare a glance for them as he blows on his pipe, bubbles billowing out from it, chasing after the masked nin closest to him.

But nevermind that; there’s the jerk with the scroll, and he’s going to get a taste of Ino-Shika-Cho.

The one with the scroll freezes mid-step next to his partner. His head is twitching, trying to turn it. “What the f—”

Shikamaru smirks from where he’s standing in the shade of the building, his shadow holding the masked nin firmly in place.

“Don’t just stand there, get them!” the frozen one barks to his companion.

His partner turns to move… and yanks the scroll out of his hands.

“What are you doing?!” the frozen one shrieks.

His partner grins and tsks, “Taking back something that doesn’t belong to you~”
The partner—Ino—hollers as she tosses the scroll, “Chouji, catch!

Chouji, holding Ino’s body in a one handed grip, reaches up to grab the scroll, but jerks his hand back when an ugly oversized fox leaps up to snatch it out of the air.

“AHHH!” the nin all scream together, Ino clutching at her host’s head. That ugly fox has their scroll! The one thing they can’t lose!

She hastily cancels the transfer and leaps out of Chouji’s arms, chasing after the fox with a shout.

But then her team and the fox run straight into the middle of the foxy robed man’s fight, right as he releases a torrent of bubbles to counteract the haze of the mist.

Her senses are immediately strained, trying to keep heads and tails of where she is and her teammates nearby. They take a step forward and—

“Do not interfere,” masked nin intones as he sweeps scary close near them before disappearing again as bubbles descend and—pfft, yeah right. Like an intimidating voice will work on them.

Then Ino hears an angry yowl and the sound of the scroll rolling off somewhere, but she can’t get her bearings with all the bubbles everywhere. She sees the fox rush past her legs after one of the masked men, snapping its jaws viciously and attempting to bite him to death.

The bubbles thin out, following the the robed man and his attackers as they move further down the road.

Now’s her chance to look. Ino’s alternating scanning the ground and watching out for any encroaching masked nin, checking around by the now-abandoned produce stalls. Scroll, scroll, *where is that scroll?*

Shoot, did one of the masked nin pick it up again? It’s possible. They’ll have to take their best guess to nab it back. So warning or not, they sneak down the road and back into the fray.

Shikamaru catches another masked nin and something is immediately wrong when Shikamaru’s fingers start shaking. This one is *dangerous*, and is much harder to hold off against.

“Oh, a little help?” he asks, voice already strained.

“Right!” Ino and Chouji get ready to attempt a transfer, but a whip of water streaks at them. Shikamaru’s concentration breaks, releasing his shadow’s hold. They all duck behind a fruit stand to avoid the whip crack as the more terrifying masked nin round on them.

“You were warned not to interfere—”

But that’s all he gets out when a cabbage stall slams full force into him.

The masked nin leap away as another stall flies into the street, bursting apart and sending eggplants all over the road.

Ino looks for the source, and an imposing woman with a pink fox on her shoulder steps out to the center of the road, her face set in an irritated smirk.

“You,” she bellows, as she cracks her knuckles, “you all wrecked my *winning* hand, you know?”

----
Kakashi wants to sigh. First a tailed-beast reunion, then Asuma and his genin, and now more botched missions and explosions; can’t the universe give it a rest for half a day?

A wish like that would take luck, however, and Kakashi clearly has none of that.

Since they’re caught up in the mayhem again, Kakashi might as well do what he can to help Asuma out while keeping his more eager students from rushing in and killing themselves.

And to start, they need a better vantage point. He looks about and—ah, that’ll do. “Up here, Naruto, Sasuke!”

They skitter up the metal awning, where a carpenter has hastily vacated their construction project. From here he can observe the fight from all angles. His whiskers twitch, and he sees another encroaching nin, concealing himself. Asuma, distracted enough as he is, is being ambushed. But how to warn him…?

Kakashi glances over at the lumber and rebar sitting precariously on the edge of the awning. Ah. It would be a shame if anyone accidentally tipped it over.

---

Asuma stalks forward and he slashes his trench knife up, catching the lip of the mask and chipping it as the nin pulls back. He gets armor on the next shot, and puts more power into it as he backs the nin into a corner in the alley.

He lands a direct blow under the chin, and cracks the man’s mask in half on the upswing. It drops off the face of the collapsing false hunter, revealing a scratched out hitai-ate from Suna. Missing-nin then, and not much of one if he’s resorting to exploding tags and weapons. He knows to watch out for wind, now—

A cutting wind passes overhead, slicing into the wall opposite him; it’s another missing-nin, and now Asuma’s the one cornered in this dead end. He’s now stuck avoiding rapid fire cutting jutsu in an enclosed space. He brings his fists up after dodging again. He’ll have to risk pressing his attacker into a forced melee—

—but watches as a load of lumber and rebar instead crashes down on the missing-nin’s head.

Asuma follows the trajectory up, and blinks. There’s a grey fox peeking out from the awning above, with two little foxes peering out after it.

“Uh, thanks, but I had him,” he calls out.

The grey one just tilts its head at him, and Asuma gets the distinct feeling he’s being judged.

It then nods towards the exit of the alley as if to say, Go on, then.

Asuma snorts to himself as he goes. Weird thing.

He sprints out, looping around to the main road, and it’s a disaster. Everything’s hazy, vegetables and wood fragments litter the ground, bubbles are floating everywhere, and... is that Senju Tsunade?

He never expected to ever see her again, but he can’t worry about her right now.

He cuts in front of Shikamaru to block the attack, and he can tell with every strike that this fake’s demeanor is composed and so much more frightening.
Then Asuma sees the loosely robed man fighting with a bubble jutsu against Mist techniques and oh fuck these are actual hunter-nin his students picked a fight with.

And great, now the bubbles are coming this way. He’s so done with this.

Asuma shouts back at his students, “You three get out of here!”

“We can help, Sensei!” Ino cries. But the bubbles multiply around them, pushing the kids back, merging into a barrier, and blocking them off from the fight.

Asuma brings up his fists, alarmed and alert. He’s not sure where that loose-robed man went, or that hunter-nin, his senses muted by the haze. He sees Tsunade barreling ahead, pushing the fight farther down the road as she lifts a cart clear over her head.

He hears a warning shout, and before he can turn, pain explodes in the back of his head as his vision goes black.

----

Tsunade throws another apple cart.

These assholes. She was going to buy a boat with that money!

And was that Hiruzen’s kid back there? Ugh. She doesn’t remember him as a tattler when she babysat him, so maybe Sensei won’t hear about this.

...Who is she kidding? She’d have better luck hitting another jackpot.

The cart edge catches one of the nin in the arm. He tears off his sleeve where he’s cut open and—

Blood.

Tsunade lurches, and can’t quite avoid the incoming blow that sends her backwards into the outer wall. It’s a weak hit; her head barely cracks the boards, but she’s starting to breathe a bit too fast, her vision a bit too dark. The sight of red—too much red on Dan—is pulling her down and down.

----

Sakura nearly topples off of Tsunade-sama’s shoulder, gripping the sleeve with her claws as they sway. But she falls of right as Tsunade is thrown backwards.

Sakura looks up, horrified, as Tsunade-sama staggers away from the wall. Sakura doesn’t know what happened; she seems ill, about to drop.

All Sakura knows she has to help; she has to do something.

----

It hurts—Dan, she can’t—

Tsunade forces her hearing to focus; she latches onto a fox cry as a beacon through the haze. Pinky is standing in front of her now, defensive and bristling.

One of the bastards laughs, “The fuck is this pink thing trying to do?” as he steps up to kick Pinky aside.
“Touch this fox,” Tsunade spits as she staggers forward, trying to keep her vision from greying out, “and you’re getting turned inside out.”

The bleeding missing-nin laughs at that.

But Pinky shrieks furiously at them this time, her little face a snarl. Through the sound, Tsunade hears a distant chime. She wonders if she hit her head too hard against that wall. But Tsunade braces herself up anyway, glaring at these laughing assholes, wanting nothing more than for them to feel the same, to reflect the worst sort of pain on them, and—

She watches the nearest hunter-nin crumple to the ground, his legs falling out from under him. For a moment, she thinks he’s dropped dead, but then his body heaves into pitiful moans and broken sobs.

“Oh god,” the hunter-nin gasps out as he’s digging his fingers painfully into the dirt, “mom, I’m so sorry…”

The other two stare, bewildered. “What…?”

“What’s wrong with him?” asks one of the missing-nin.

The other hunter-nin assess Pinky, and one completely breaks composure, jumping back. “Oh, fuck me, that’s an Uzushio fox!”

“A what?” another missing-nin asks.

“Those things trick you with visions,” the hunter's starting to sweat, “and they steal your soul!”

Pinky shrieks again. The hunter-nin and missing-nin scream.

But it’s not just the fox, she thinks.

Tsunade, so lightheaded but no longer caring in the slightest, takes an unsteady step towards them as she begins to laugh, the bells clamoring around them.

----

Utakata curses this entire situation as he chases off the hunter that attacked that Konoha nin. At least he blocked off those children in time.

All these people are throwing themselves like idiots into his problems, risking their lives. He should just leave, not drag anyone down into this and hurt them like he always does and always will. Always like the jinchuuriki he is.

But Saiken is warbling in the back of his head, insisting there’s a place for him, pressing on his chance of home and—

Utakata inhales sharply and turns around. He loops back to face his attackers, but the first hunter he comes upon is frozen, stock still and hands twitching.

The man rips off his mask, tears in his eyes. “Little brother, I didn’t mean to…”

What? But man’s not looking at Utakata, he’s looking through him, and Utakata watches him stagger away, talking to nobody Utakata can see. What on earth…?

The sound of laughter cuts through his thoughts, and he looks back in time to watch the blonde woman roundhouse kick a fake hunter-nin through a wall.
Oh. Well.

---

Asuma’s senses come awake to barking, and his ears are ringing from the lucky blow. Oh, it’s the grey fox again, urging him to get up.

He gets to his feet. His hearing isn’t quite back to catch whatever the other nin are screaming about, but he shakes his head once and tightens his fingers into a fist as he rushes forward. He has an ample opening to take one flailing bastard out, punching him clean in the temple as Tsunade pummels the other in the gut.

Asuma smirks down at his fox audience. “How’s that?”

The grey one glances away and stares at the spot where Asuma blacked out, and then back to him. It blinks once, slow and unimpressed, before it lopes over to Tsunade, the little black and orange ones on his heels.

...Asuma just got wordlessly dressed down by a fox. He can’t believe this shit.

He hears a series of bubbles popping; and his students are racing over to his side.

“Sensei!”

"I'm alright," he says as he shakes out his head again. One last nuisance, he thinks, eyeing the last fake standing, and then he’ll find that teahouse owner and gut him.

---

Tsunade will probably collapse if she lets herself, so she won’t.

She sees Shizune emerging from the half-collapsed teahouse, and hopes the casualties aren’t too bad. Besides, she’s raring to get the hell out of here; she’s got bells calling.

She steps forward; now to deal with this last asshole.

“Hey! No coming closer!” the one remaining missing-nin hollers, a battered yet intricate scroll in his hands.

“That’s—” She and Asuma stop at the same time. Her stomach drops. That scroll is—how on earth does he have that?

“Yeah, yeah! You better stop,” says the still-standing idiot, brandishing the scroll, lisping from his swollen lip. “I’ll just use the big weapon that’s sealed in this thing!” He shakes it with emphasis.

Too much emphasis, when he loses his grip and it drops, the abused spiral seal on it snapping as it unfurls on the ground.

Asuma drops the concussed hunter-nin from his hands and takes a giant step back, pushing his students behind him. Tsunade and the foxes are already running, Shizune not far behind her, scrambling for higher ground.

“What the hell?” the missing-nin calls out, dripping blood all over the iconic spiraling matrices. “It’s just some stupid paper—”

Water explodes out of the scroll face, engulfing the nin in its wake as the torrent snakes along the
road, sending sprays of foam and gouging out deep rivulets in the ground with its power. Civilians scramble indoors to avoid being taken by the current.

Tsunade braces Pinky by one hand and follows the other foxes as she climbs the wall of an inn to its overhanging wood balcony, with Shizune and the brats from Konoha not far behind her. She looks back and sees the robed weirdo warily maneuvering Angry Mito up the balcony while the fox snaps at his fingers. Tsunade hefts the large kid up just as the as the water passes right under his feet, and she kicks a passing missing-nin in the head for good measure.

They watch, amazed, as the main thoroughfare transforms into a writhing river, stretching across the entire village and beyond. The water is unrelenting, cutting deeper and deeper through the ground, until it finally settles into a steady flow, its mirror surface reflecting the late afternoon sun.

---

“What the fuck,” Kurama seethes. “Is someone giving out these fucking scrolls like candy?”

Team Seven all nod in agreement as they stare at the torrent; it sure seems that way.

Sakura looks up from the river that was once a road and asks, “Aren’t Uzu scrolls rare?”

“With Uzushio destroyed, incredibly,” Kakashi answers. “If someone is distributing them like this, the biggest question is why.”

“Because they’re stupid!” Naruto says confidently. “All they’re doing is making a mess!”

“It’s not stupid, idiot, if they intend to cause that damage,” Sasuke cuts in.

“That’s so dumb! And who’re you calling an idiot, asshole?”

And they’re off squabbling again.

“As for who,” Kurama says lowly with a glare, ears flat to his skull, “you know where they must be coming from.”

Of course Kakashi knows where. There’s only one logical answer: Konoha. It’s all the more reason to avoid the place as they currently are.

Kakashi then watches Kurama turn his glare to Asuma. Ah.

“I’m not about to reveal us,” he reminds Kurama.

“You better not,” he turns back and sneers, but his ears lift back up. In relief, Kakashi suspects.

Naruto breaks the moment to interrupt, bless him. “Oh yeah, Sakura, that thing you did was so cool!”

“Maa, it was a very effective technique,” Kakashi adds.

“Oh thank you,” Sakura can't seem to help but preen, a little flustered, "But... I don't really know what happened? I just shouted at them."

Naruto snickers. "Yeah, but you scared the pants off of them! I bet you could freak out a room full of missing-nin, you know!"

But now Sasuke has a look in his eyes like he absolutely wants to be the first one to terrorize a room full of of missing-nin. “Then we need to determine how it was done.”
That’s a healthier goal, Kakashi supposes.

Kurama is now snickering as he listens to the kids start to argue about how it works and who can pull it off first. “Genjutsu? Really?” he says to himself.

“How? Care to share?” Kakashi asks.

Kurama gives him the side-eye. “Why should I when you’ve already figured it out?”

Kakashi shrugs. “Maa, just bits and pieces.”

Really, his best guess is they’re spiritual conductors, with Uzumaki as emotional conduits. The technical hows of it are currently escaping him, but he’ll puzzle it out.

Kurama snorts. “I’m sure you’re really struggling, you smartass. As if it’s so hard to solve; let them figure it out.”

“You’re passing up an opportunity to boast about fox power?”

Kurama looks like he’s seriously considering it. Then he grins as he watches Naruto and Sasuke break out into a scuffle while Sakura is yelling at them both. “But it’s funnier _not_ to tell them how.”

Oh, Kakashi can attest to that. And isn’t it novel to relate so well to a demon fox?

----

“Well,” says the loose-robed man, eyeing the river that used to be a road. “That was odd.”

Odd is an _understatement_, Asuma thinks, and what the hell kind of guy is this, anyway, to have so many hunter-nin after him?

He opens his mouth to say so, when Tsunade cuts in, “Oh hey, everything alright, Shizune?”

Shizune smiles. “Yes. I’m fine, and the people at the teahouse are too. Most injuries were fight-related. You punched the ceiling in time.”

Tsunade nods, mostly to herself. “Good.” After a moment, she asks, “...You think they’ll make us pay for it?”

Shizune purses her lips. “Hm. Seems like it’s time for us to go. Again.”

Tsunade nods again, and hauls herself to her feet. She squints at Asuma. “In that case,” she points a woozy but threatening finger towards him. “I... was _never_ here, kid.”

The foxes circle around as Shizune and the man in the loose robe as they all coax Tsunade away. The large fox sneers at Asuma and his team as it stomps off.

Asuma raises his eyebrows and watches the parade leave across the rooftops. This is going to be hell to explain in his mission report.

As his team makes their way back down the building, Asuma sees Takusu attempting to skulk away down the alley behind them. Asuma jumps down, pivots on his heel, and twists Takusu’s arm as he hauls the bedraggled teahouse owner up. Takusu flails, but Asuma slams him into a wall, pressing his forearm hard into his neck.

Asuma smiles thinly. “We should talk.”
“I don’t know what you—”

Asuma presses harder. “Do not bullshit me. What did you really order?”

“Okay, okay!” Takusu wheezes. “I shouldn’t have denied that the cakes had gold leaf!”

Asuma must have not heard that right.

Takusu continues, “I—I had a broker help me arrange it with the bakery. The order was already so expensive; it would’ve bumped me up to a higher insurance bracket if I declared it!”

“A broker?” That wasn’t mentioned anywhere in the briefing.

Takusu swallows and nods. “Well, indirectly. He approached me a couple weeks ago with the idea and had me sign all the paperwork.”

Asuma loosens his grip. “And you don’t think that’s the least bit suspicious?”

Takusu wrings his hands. “You don’t know how hard it is for a teahouse to stay popular here! It would be a great promotional item! Maybe as a nice comp for our high rollers! And I swear, I didn’t know there’d be anything else!”

“You risked this for a gambling hall—”

“Of course I risked it! I am an entrepreneur, thank you!”

“What you are is a damn proxy for smuggling!” Asuma barks. “You think Konoha won’t be interested in investigating?”

“Okay okay, wait, please; I didn’t know what they were after; I was just told to sign papers and to make the payment for the order and things would be taken care of in Konoha!”

It’s clear Takusu was taken for an easy pawn. Someone in Konoha had to have had a hand in this. But to involve something on the level of an Uzu scroll…

Asuma needs a cigarette or six, but he stares Takusu down. “You’re going to tell me everything about your meeting with this broker.”
Asuma’s team takes a break in a copse of trees in an orchard a good few kilometers outside Matcha. His students all look rattled, but it could have been *so much worse.*

An *Uzu scroll*—Asuma feels sick. He knows them by the stories he shouldn’t have eavesdropped on when he was a little kid. His team had that *thing* in their possession the whole time. An unpredictable weapon those missing-nin would have taken to do gods-knows-what.

He had interrogated Takusu a while longer, but the description of the broker was a non-starter; plain face, brown hair, brown eyes, nothing distinct. He could’ve used a henge, possibly, but there’s no way a civilian would be able to detect the difference.

C-Ranks aren’t supposed to be like this. Things can go wrong, but *this wrong*? Without any vetting? Precautions? It makes his stomach sink more, thinking of the absent Team Seven, of his suspicions. What if genin teams are being targeted?

In any case, someone in Konoha’s administration may be compromised, and he doesn’t know who yet, or how far up it goes. As much as Konoha nin like to project belief in each other and their village, betrayal is not inconceivable; the forbidden scroll debacle with that academy instructor is still fresh in his memory.

“Sensei, um,” Chouji’s fingers are twitching; he looks like he wishes he had a bag of chips in his hands. “What exactly was that scroll?”

Ino peers at Asuma as well. “And who was that woman? She knew you.”

Shikamaru doesn’t look away from the sky from where he’s lying in the grass, but his brow furrows. “How this troublesome mission even happened in the first place is the real question.”

Shit.

“Alright, listen up.” Asuma puts out his cigarette. “I’ll answer what I can, but then I’m going to teach you all an important lesson: how to keep your story straight.”

----

“And who the hell are you, anyway?” the blonde woman growls. The other woman—Shizune—is looking warily at him, and even the pig is staring him down.

Utakata’s not quite sure what he’s gotten himself into. He keeps his face blank as he walks with them. They’re along the newfound river that was once the road, putting the remains of Matcha behind them, the farm fields giving way again to wild prairie. He’d rather run in the other direction at this point, and Saiken is much too pleased for any of this.

“Utakata,” he finally says. He doesn’t want to give away his jinchuuriki status if he can help it, so he
simply adds, “I’m with that one,” as he points to Saiken’s brother.

She squints at him. “Angry-Mito?”

Utakata gets the feeling that is not the right name when the fox hisses and Saiken outright guffaws. He decides it’s wisest to not comment.

She then asks the fox, rudely pointing at Utakata, “This guy’s really with you?”

The big fox huffs and puffs, but eventually nods.

“Fine,” she says, crossing her arms, tipping her head to the foxes. “But you so much as look at any of them funny and I drop kick you through a mountain.”

Right then it hits him as he places her face, her strength, and the seal on her forehead to a half remembered Kiri warning. As little as he ascribes to the fame and infamy of most nin—a jinchuuriki has little to fear—this is Senju Tsunade. She is an undeniable legend, a force to be reckoned with, and a third of the once-whispered nightmare of the Sannin.

But then she looks him over in appraisal and says, “So. Since you’re here, you got any money? A couple hundred thousand, preferably.”

What.

She huffs at his stunned silence. “Typical. Then are you any good at gambling?”

Oh, she actually wants an answer. “...Er, not really—”

She groans with feeling. “I’m surrounded by amateurs, Shizune!”

Her companion pats her arm. “There there, Tsunade-sama.”

Utakata doesn’t quite know what to say to that, so he peers at the foxes next. He knows “Angry-Mito” is a free tailed beast, somehow, but that still doesn’t explain the other four.

“Are... they your summons?” he asks. Utakata’s fairly certain she’s called the Slug Princess, not the Fox Princess, but he can admit to being wrong.

Tsunade snorts and waves out her hand. “Of course not. Just listen to them.”

Listen to them? Utakata just gives her a puzzled look.

She blinks and looks at the foxes and then back to him. “What, you can’t hear it?”

“...Hear what?” Shizune asks.

Tsunade groans. “Oh come on, Shizune, seriously? No one else hears the bells?”

Bells? Bells? Utakata suddenly wants to take a step back. Or maybe several. The claim of bells could only mean—

“Those are Uzushio foxes?” Utakata can’t help but let his voice go a bit breathless at the end of his question. He thought they were just made up or a myth. For all the notoriety of Uzushio, of the untold horrors they could summon to earth in battle, spirits simply walking among them is unheard of, never really believed. They’re supposed to be stories to scare children. They aren’t supposed to be real.
And that’s where Saiken wants to go? *Uzushio*?

Yet... Saiken is promising him sanctuary. A home. It’s something he hasn’t had in years, something he never thought he *could* have. The thought is tempting in the most agonizing way.

Utakata wants so badly, and Saiken *knows* it.

...But he looks at Angry-Mito, still hissing, and all the eerie foxes, and wonders yet again if a smarter man would’ve run to the other side of the continent by now.

----

On an island in the middle of the ocean, next to their makeshift moss beds, Haku folds over the palm leaves wrapping the provisions he’s gathered.

That is, provisions that even more animals have gathered for him. It’s a spectacle of birds: pelicans with fish in their beaks, parrots dropping mangos from high branches, and a goofy-looking thing —”A shoebill, Zabuza-sama,”—had rolled in an entire watermelon. Zabuza isn’t sure he wants to know where it managed to find that.

And great, more toucans are here. One of them pecks at Zabuza’s hand when he tries to take a berry from another small pile it dragged in on a palm leaf. “Ow, fuck! You little sh—”

“Now don’t be like that,” Haku waves a finger at the bird, lightly chiding, “it’s okay for Zabuza-sama to have some of this food, too.” He picks up a couple berries and sets them in Zabuza’s palm. “See?”

The toucan bows its head, as if chastened by the rebuke. But the moment Haku turns away, it turns its beak and narrows its eyes suspiciously at Zabuza.

Haku sets the palm leaf packages into his coat, folding it all into a makeshift bag. Zabuza had tried to offer to carry something but Haku just gave him and his sword a look and politely laughed it off. Zabuza doesn’t force the issue. These birds might try to kill Zabuza if he took all that food of off Haku, anyway.

Haku loops the newfound bag around his shoulder and tugs at it, ensuring it’s secure. “I think that’s everything. Are you ready, sir?”

Zabuza is ready to try his raft plan again. Or just swimming for it, but Haku would be upset if Zabuza drowned in a whirlpool like an idiot.

Four more seals. Four. More.

“Yeah,” he says instead, as he hefts Kubikiribōchō up and straps it to his back, a comfortable weight. He needs all the comfort he can get, willingly walking into Uzu wilds.

They make their way along the beach, Haku bobbing his head politely along to whatever the Uzumaki is saying. He turns to address Zabuza. “Uzumaki-sama says this is a good point of entry.”

Zabuza just nods, because what the hell else is he going to do?

Haku turns around and waves goodbye to the flock of flamingos loitering near them, and the flamingos honk and flap their wings. Zabuza waves goodbye to any hope of getting off this island quickly.
They start along the path into the trees, into the rainforest that brackets the sand bar. The Uzumaki is making the path for them; seals seem to be hidden all over the damn place on here—rocks, trees, more of those shrines—and they light up wherever the ghost maneuvers to one. He can’t quite get over how effortless she makes it seem, and he still can’t even see her.

As relaxed as he still feels in the aftermath of activating that seal in the cave, that shit still creeps him out.

More and more animals are peering out of the brush and trees: red pandas, lemurs, iguanas, all brazen in their curiosity. That’s fine. Whatever. As long as it isn’t a fox.

Not that he’s scared of a stupid animal.

They carefully cross over a shaded river—Zabuza curses their current lack of chakra control—at the point where a felled fig tree bridges the two sides. Zabuza looks along the river’s length, seemingly endless. It must span the entire island. Its shoreline has all sorts of weird plants around it, too; red flowers, especially. He was never great at botany, but Haku might know them.

“Spider lilies; very pretty, sir,” is all Haku says to it.

They continue on. Despite the warm breeze, he can’t help but shiver. Since they crossed over the river, it feels like something’s been watching them, and he doesn’t mean the creepy ghost.

Just then, Zabuza spots something out of the corner of his eye and he turns sharply. Was that—

He looks around, but nothing’s there to be seen. He shivers again and presses onward, fingers twitching the slightest for Kubikiribōchō should he need it.

He doesn’t spot the curious eyes peering at them from the underbrush.

----

They reach the southern interior of the island. The fig and rubber trees begin to thin out, giving way to dogwoods and oaks. Fewer and fewer chattering birds fly overhead, following their path for only a few minutes before veering off again. Before long, they come to a solid wall of trees, close together, and through the impassable vines snaked around them, Haku can barely make out an open meadow. The place feels still, devoid of sound.

Haku looks up. Hundreds of bells are tied by a rainbow of strings to the branches. They dance in the gentle wind, but none of them chime. In turn, hundreds of lunar moths rest along the tree branches, silently shifting their wings closed and open, catching the glances of late day sun in their span. A few tip off the branches to alight down to Haku. He tips up his palm and lets one land on his hand.

“Seriously?” he hears Zabuza-sama mutter next to him. Haku hides a smile when he sees one land in Zabuza-sama’s hair without him noticing.

But, he wonders, where is the seal they need to activate?

Haku blinks and Uzumaki-sama is standing in front of him again. He watches as her fingers glance a small seal hidden in the knot of a tree trunk. The vines unfurl, gnarled roots twist and open, the gap between two trees grows wide enough to slip through.

"You're sure you want to do this?" Zabuza-sama asks, gruff but hushed in the resuming silence.

"I want to help, Zabuza-sama, and it would not do to make you do all of this alone." Haku murmurs
Zabuza-sama nods, though stiff and tense. His eyes are wary and alert as Haku walks forward, leaving Zabuza-sama at the treeline.

Uzumaki-sama whispers to him as he passes between the opening of two trees:

_A place of recall._

The moths takes off again towards the plinth in the center of the meadow, surrounded by an impressive spiral of set mossy stones half buried in the grass. Haku looks close as he passes the outer tendril, and can see flowing seal etchings in patches between the moss growth on the stones. They’re beautiful designs, though he has no chance of reading them. Perhaps he could ask Uzumaki-sama about them.

He steps to the plinth. He feels the barest wisps of wind waft from it. He examines the central seal, made of several tight spirals. This must be it.

He pulls a senbon from his hair and pricks at the veins in his palm, watching the blood begin to bead.

Blood. Haku thinks about his mother, the moments few and far between with just the two of them. How the worst of the world could fall away when she held his hand, kissed his cheek, whispered a song.

Haku thinks about the family he's made in Zabuza-sama. It's like he said to that Uzumaki boy: family can become bigger, or change in time. _It's what you make it_, and Haku wants to make it that they stay a family for a while longer.

He smiles, fond, and turns his hand over and sets it into the seal.

It pulls at him; the breeze picks up and tassels his hair about. He hears the whooshing exhale of the wind as it casts out farther, faster. The seal takes and takes, but he’s got more than enough to give. Then, it shifts, inhales, and Haku is the center of a whirlwind. He breathes with it, buoyant, lighter, like his very being is rising with the moths now dancing up around him.

The bells chime all around. He looks back at the other moths scattering from their resting places in the trees, fanning out and above the meadow, joining their brethren as the bells sway in time.

Haku can almost imagine his mother’s voice singing in the wind.

He walks back to the treeline, where Zabuza-sama steps out to greet him and can’t quite hide the worry from his eyes. "You're alright, Haku?"

"Perfectly fine, sir. I feel better than before, in fact."


Haku smiles. “Probably not, sir.”

- 

Uzumaki-sama closes her eyes for a moment, taking in the sound. She smiles, opens her eyes and turns her face to the west, as if watching the wind carry the symphony away.
Far west of Tea Country, a bell rings.

He takes a sharp, pained breath. He thinks of his parents, for the first time in many years.

But they fall away again, and he thinks of his friend, his partner, who he cannot go a single moment without aching, hurting for. His mouth tightens at the still-open wound.

His friend began this dream.

He will see to it that he finishes it.

---

Back east in Konoha, in his miniscule kitchen, he flinches. Thoughts of his grandfather and of stories of secrets come unbidden. Things he was warned by his family to bury deep away, keep safe, though he never quite managed. Minato—

He hears a tap on the glass. Fuck. A crisis of self couldn’t come at a worse time.

He opens his window to a messenger hawk. He’s being summoned for an audience with the Hokage.

He takes a deep breath through his nose, schools his expression, and pretends nothing is different as he jumps off the balcony.

---

In a neighboring country, in a fortified compound, he nearly snaps his pen in half.

...Well, isn’t this something.

He taps his pen on his desk, thinking, considering, combing through the memories bubbling up to the surface. The stories he’s heard. Maybe... maybe he doesn’t have to give up on his original dream after all.

But as curious as he is to follow now, as tempted as he’s ever been to drop everything and run, he’s on a deadline. He has arrangements in Sand to make.

---

Surrounded by the desert dunes, it’s just the two of them in their team training today, as it is most days, to their relief.

They each play off the sudden wince as intentional. Though they are genin, they are their father’s children. There are expectations of no mistakes.
But when their mentor dismisses them, and when no one else is listening in the dusty evening haze, a sister whispers to her shaken brother, “...You heard that too?”

---

In the underbelly of Tanzaku Quarters, his breath nearly hitches. A chill runs up his body, but he is not cold. He does not understand. It is an old memory, his brother. He should not think of—Focus. He is his mission. He does not feel. He is no one.

But the memories keep coming and the feeling won’t stop.

---

In the chasm of his private world, the silence breaks.

It’s muted, muffled, but there… the sound that carried with it a team who came together. Meant to be with each other.

Torn apart.

The sound ceases as soon as it begins, and he can’t be sure he ever heard it at all.

---

In a prairie in north-west Tea Country, Kakashi can’t help but stop in his tracks.

The sounds of the bells echo through him, and sets his nerves electric. It’s nothing short of invigorating, his senses expanding, spreading out in a wave across the continent. There, warm swirls of life and light. It’s few, and distant, difficult to really pinpoint, but they’re there.

Uzu people. Uzumaki. Naruto’s family, Kushina’s family. They’re out there and alive.

“Oh,” he says, and he thinks words can’t really convey how he feels right now.

“Woah, what is that?” Naruto asks next to him, looking around wildly. Sakura is wide eyed, peering out intently.

“It’s people,” Sasuke says, a little awed.

“People?” Naruto squints hard, sticking his tongue out, then gasps. “Oh, wow!” He dances around. “So those those swirly things are people? Cool!”

“It appears so,” Kakashi says. “Somewhere to the west.”

“And that’s my family, right?” Naruto asks, vibrating in excitement.

“Oh now we all sense them?” Kurama asks, derisive. “Then—” He freezes, then sneers. “...Oh I’m going to kill Suzu.”

Kurama doesn’t elaborate, and Kakashi’s brow raises. Doesn’t that sound intriguing. Considering how cagey Kurama is about anything, Kakashi supposes he’ll have to bide his time on it.

Of course, Naruto immediately asks, “Kill the old fox guy? Why’s that?”

“None of your business, brat.” Kurama automatically rebukes, turning farther west and walking
“Then don’t say your business out loud, shitty fox!” Naruto hollers after him.

Kurama ignores him in favor of Tsunade. “Hey, you drunk has-been! This way!” he yells.

“Don’t talk about Tsunade-sama like that!” Sakura snaps at him, and, well, that’s new. Kakashi silently approves.

Kurama snorts. “I’ll talk about anyone I damn well—”

“Oh,” Tsunade turns back to assess them, “you all have something figured out?” She grins. “You’re our guides, then. Lead the way!”

Naruto whoops and scampers ahead, his teammates not far behind him. Kurama grumbles but picks up the pace. They run north-west, the wind behind them, and for once in his life, Kakashi feels light on his feet, his faith in Kushina to see this through.

---

She’s hiding in the supply closet. Just a few minutes. Just to take a break. She can say she’s checking inventory if anyone catches her. She’s mindlessly rearranging a row of bandages when she nearly pulls down the shelf from its hinges in a full-body jerk. Her knees wobble, and she carefully lowers herself to the floor.

The most astonishing feeling just crossed her senses. Loud, bright, vibrant. The feeling warms her through, like swirls in the sun.

Like her mother was.

Karin swallows hard.

She focuses. It’s still there. It’s far, too. All the way across Fire Country and out to sea. It’s far, but so, so bright.

She could… she wants to...

Karin shakes her head. What is she thinking? She’s needed here, to help people, to heal them. There was noise of her trying for the chuunin exams in a few months, too. She’d become a missing-nin? For a feeling? Throw it all away?

(Like they threw away her mother?)

She takes a deep breath and stands. She better return to her shift before anyone notices how long she’s been gone. But the feeling swirls and rings in the back of her mind and she wonders.

By the end of the night, her arm sore from bite marks and fingers stiff, she…

She can’t take it anymore.

She’s going to find the feeling or she’s going to die trying.
She sneaks back into the supply closet and steals as many things as she can, things that are usable or tradeable, as much as she can hide. She goes home and shakes out a backpack, stuffing her spoils into the pockets. In the remaining space she’ll put clothes, and food. She hides all the money she had tucked in her bed roll in various spots on her person.

She pauses to grab a small photo of her and her mother that’s tacked to the wall. She stares at it for a long moment, then carefully tucks it into a hidden pocket of her shirt, sitting it above her heart.

She turns off all the lights and unlatches the window. Her skills in chakra suppression will really come in handy now.

She makes it a few kilometers out of the village when she pulls off her hitai-ate. She looks to her left at the sound of flowing water. It’s impulsive, and probably stupid, but she takes great pleasure in dropping it in the river. All the while, she has a kunai under her sleeve, gripping it tight in a thrum of terrified certainty. If she dies trying, she’s going to go down swinging.

She arrives to the mawing darkness of the tallgrass field stretching before her, lit only by the stars, pointing the way East.

The bells in her mind ring loud and clear as she steps into the grass.
The fox parade marches on towards the sinking sun, into rolling savannah that brackets the southern border of Fire Country. The little foxes had been running after each other, Inky and Loud-Nawaki each trying to stay ahead of the other, Pinky at their heels, and Sassy-Sakumo behind them at a comfortable distance. As the evening closes in, they’ve slowed a bit now to walking, their shorter legs not quite suited to long treks.

Tsunade yawns into her hand, kicking up a couple oak leaves on the grass pathway with her sandal; her first “Uzushio Fund” plan was a total bust—not that it was her fault for once—and they somehow managed to pick up a weird hitchhiker, too. Speaking of:

“Do you know where we’re going?” Utakata asks, walking a touch ahead, politely in Tsunade’s line of sight.

“ Nope!” Tsunade responds, and that’s a bit of a lie. She has an idea, an inkling—

But she wants to see what Utakata knows.

Tsunade doesn’t know Utakata’s backstory, and she probably doesn’t want to, but he’s likely led just as sorry a life as she has the past few years. He’s an unknown, and definitely on the run for some reason, but if the foxes gave him the O.K., she’s not going to press hard. Well, press too hard.

“So, how do you know Angry-Mito?” she asks, crossing her arms as she tips her head to look at him.

Utakata glances back at her, then looks ahead again. “...I know his brother,” he offers.

Tsunade’s eyebrows raise. “Oh?”

But he doesn’t elaborate. “This is the first time we’ve met,” he says instead, gesturing to Angry-Mito in front of him. Angry-Mito rolls his head back and sneers. The rest of the foxes are all blatantly eavesdropping at this point, slowing down to hear this conversation.

“I can tell,” Tsunade smirks, “you seemed surprised to see them.” And the fact that he didn’t recognize them at first.

“ Well, I didn’t realize there were that many,” Utakata responds, composed as ever, but a bit paler as Loud-Nawaki runs around his feet.

Yeah, Tsunade’s ping him for a Kiri kid, if she had to guess. It raises her hackles; they’re half of who wiped out her grandmother’s home, her people, her history, and she won’t ever forget it. But it says a lot that he’s here, and not running back to Kiri. They don’t like to let their people leave the village and live to tell about it. Something must have happened there to make him find Uzushio more appealing than his homeland, possibly something to do with Angry-Mito’s brother. She never thought any Uzu fox would become friendly nowadays with someone from Kiri, but what does she know? It’s hard to guess the motives of spirits. The foxes never visited her before until now either.
Before she can ask another question, Tsunade yawns again. She’d usually be drinking at this time of day, but her routines are out the window for the foreseeable future.

Then the baby foxes yawn with her, starting to list to the side as they walk, tails drooping.

“Tired, huh?” She asks. She crouches down, scooping up all the baby foxes into one arm as they grumble-squeak.

The older foxes are looking equally tired. Maybe they can get in another hour of travel and find a village if she carries them too. But as if reading her thoughts, Sassy-Sakumo side steps her, moving nimbly out of arm’s reach.

She huffs and turns to Angry-Mito. "You want me to carry you?"

Angry-Mito hisses.

“It’s not *that* bad,” Tsunade argues, but Angry-Mito bares his teeth at that.

Well, she *asked* this time. Tsunade rolls her eyes and jabs a thumb over to her left. “Then your new pal can carry you—”

Utakata shakes his head ‘no’ very quickly.

“We’re getting nowhere fast at this rate,” Tsunade complains.

“It *has* been a hectic day,” Shizune hedges.

Tsunade can take a hint. She doesn’t have to like it though. “Ugh. We’re gonna have to rough it, aren’t we.”

“Afraid so.”

“Fine.” Tsunade sets the foxes back down and looks around for a tree to settle under. “We’ll set up camp.”

She supposes she’s slept in worse places.

----

It’s dark on the island, now. The light of the stars is barely peeking through the growing density of the rainforest canopy. They’re under the impressive silhouette of a fig tree, where a stone shrine is bracketing the trunk, tilting sideways.

It’s creepier here, Zabuza thinks, than it was at the shoreline. At least he could pretend he had an escape route there, as much as the water mocked him. Haku also keeps looking like he’s trying not to laugh at Zabuza; Zabuza would ask what that’s all about, but he privately likes seeing Haku in such a good mood.

They could continue on, and Zabuza would actually prefer it, but then Haku stops in front of him and frowns.

“Oh,” Haku says, his brow furrowing slightly, as much as Zabuza can see it in the darkness. After a beat, Haku adds, “Uzumaki-sama wants us to stay and camp here for the night.”

“Here? Why?”
He bites his lip. “She can only say she will be back as soon as she can.”

More questions unanswered. Zabuza bares his teeth under the wappings and addresses the empty air, “What, so we’re just supposed to sit here twiddling our thumbs all night while you wander off?”

He catches a flare of light from the corner of his eye. He turns, only to get pelted in the arm with a pebble. It doesn’t even hurt, but—really? He knows she can fucking talk to him!

He wants to find these seals, unfuck this island, and leave. They can’t do that if they’re wasting time. Despite what most people would believe, he still has a shambles of a life to get back to. He still likes to pretend he has plans.

“C’mon, Haku.” He steps forward to continue on, but freezes, as an overwhelming wave of chakra rises, spinning out of the seal of the shrine.

*Do not go alone,* whispers her disembodied voice as the invisible power flows around and through him, causing all his hair to stand on end. The moment it’s there it’s gone again, seals behind him lighting up in warm firelight, one after another, until the path disappears into the thick of the rainforest.

...Alright, point made. In fact, he might prefer the rocks.

The darkness encroaches on them once more as they settle against the trunk of the tree. He sighs and his stupid hair flutters again. Stupid Uzushio.

----

First order of business.

She steps from seal to seal, tree to shrine to stone to tree, edging closer to the center of the island. She should—she needs to see, to soothe what’s gnawed at the back of her mind for the last thirty years captive at that shoreline.

She wraps around the final seal and leaps. Her feet touch down at the edge of the once-gleaming pebbles, where the very center cradles the once-bombastic gem that had thrummed with life and so much more.

She exhales, tension bleeding out of her.

The gods may not be here, but this—this is still here, and for now that is enough.

And now to the second order of business.

Something has been circling around them—her, Haku, and the other one—calling to the shrines ever since the first seal was activated. As much as it pained her to ignore the call, it was vital to activate the second seal quickly. Now they have a bit of time. She can search, and seek out who it is.

She arrives to where she last heard a call, peering around the dark forest. Hopefully, whoever it is hasn’t wandered too far.

She senses a rustle of leaves from the side and she slinks back into one of the still-intact shrines to observe the curious new visitor to the island. Her eyes widen, the barest smile playing at her lips.

*Ah ha,* she says to herself, *so this is what the gods are up to?*

She follows along with the little interloper from shrine to shrine, her smile widening at these
newfound implications. She’ll have to introduce herself.

Of course it had to be those particular gods, as well. She laughs to herself this time. I am in so much trouble, aren’t I?

----

They are in so much trouble, aren’t they?

It’s night, quiet with the low brush of lazy wind against the grass. His kids are (supposedly) settled, all is well for the moment, but Kakashi can’t turn off his brain. Tailed beasts and their jinchuuriki may be on the move, someone is throwing Uzu scrolls across the nation, and they need to find the last remaining Uzumaki before it all really goes to hell—

His ear flicks at a the sound of movement yet again behind him. "Maa, you're supposed to be sleeping, Naruto," he murmurs.

"I am sleeping!" Naruto says nonsensically. But a couple minutes pass, and Kakashi hears shifting again.

"Hey, um, Sensei," Naruto whispers as he wriggles over to where Kakashi is sitting. "Can you tell me another story about my mom and dad?"

The request twinges, but Kakashi can't help but acquiesce. "I'll tell you one for now. Let's see..."

He can tell Sakura and Sasuke are listening in now too, still pretending to be asleep. He needs to teach them how to better fake their breathing tempo.

But for now, he thinks back, and decides to tell the story that he wanted to share back in Wave. "I was five, a new genin, about two weeks into training with Minato-sensei."

"You graduated at five?!" Naruto interrupts.

"Isn't that the youngest age ever?" Sakura asks, scooting closer over while dropping any pretense of sleep.

"One of the youngest," Kakashi hedges, watching Sasuke stiffen slightly out of the corner of his eye. "In any case, Naruto, your dad had agreed to take me on as a student, sans a team. This was his first time teaching, and I was an outlier student. He wasn't quite sure what do with me at first, so we spent a lot of time in the library as he showed me his research."

"The library?" Naruto says, appalled. "Reading!?"

"I love the library," Sakura admits.

"Uhh, me too," Naruto quickly corrects.

"I was reading through advanced ninjutsu theory for the third straight day—" Kakashi pauses for effect, then adds, "—when the roof completely vanishes."

Naruto gapes at that. Sakura gasps a little. Sasuke's ears stick straight up.

"In the shock, this red haired woman drops down from nowhere, trips my sensei, screams, 'Demo
"My mom is so cool," Naruto whispers, open mouthed.

“We’re off running through the village. I couldn’t even begin to escape the hold she had me in, but Minato-sensei quickly catches up with her as we made it to a training field. So Kushina throws down etched kunai, tosses me behind a seal barrier with a wink, and says this would get me out of studying.

“It was the first time I’d ever seen such fuuinjutsu up close. We’d practiced tags at the Academy—” all three of his students made a bit of a face at that. Kakashi could relate; the fuuinjutsu curriculum is seriously lacking in Konoha. “And I heard your dad was skilled in it, but to see it incorporated into fighting the way they could… it appeared as if Kushina was creating new seals on the fly, pulling whirlwinds from hidden spaces, things I’ve never seen before and never the same way twice.

“Minato-sensei was no slouch either. Did you know his nickname was the Yellow Flash? At his peak he could fly across villages in a snap. What he lacked against Kushina in spontaneity and power he made up for in speed and precision. I’ve never seen two people work so well in tandem.” Kakashi pauses, then adds, “I don’t think I’ve seen a training field destroyed so quickly, either.”

“So who won, Sensei?” Naruto asks excitedly.

“Maa, who do you think won?”

“My mom?” Naruto guesses.

“Um, Naruto’s mom,” Sakura decides.

“Kushina,” Sasuke says without hesitation.

Poor Minato-sensei. “It was…” Kakashi says dramatically, “a tie.”

“What!” Naruto shouts.

“They got yelled at to stop before they damaged the surrounding fields too. And then later they were both yelled at by the librarians and banned for a month, but I finally got to do some training and missions, so I was happy.”

“But who would win?” asks Sasuke.

Kakashi shrugs. “Who knows? They balanced each other in fighting and in life. It was an interesting early lesson as a genin, though it took me a while to recognize it. Kushina believed in living, learning, purely by experience. Minato wanted to know the whys of everything. Kushina always thought, ‘why not?’”

"Pfft, don't look so deep,” Kurama suddenly interrupts, “she just got back from a long mission and didn’t even know you were there when she sealed the roof away. She was just flirting with him hard, and changed her plans when she spotted you."

Kakashi thinks about it. Kurama... is probably right about that. How much did he really witness? He tamps down on how unnerving that is, and instead teases, "Maa, do you want to take over storytelling then?"

His students look at Kurama expectantly, and he recoils.
"Wha—NO!" Kurama shouts, flustered. "Forget I said anything! GO AWAY. I'M LEAVING." He stomps away again to the edge of their camp.

----

Even if it wasn’t her turn on watch, there’s no way Ino could sleep.

They’re taking a rest break for a few hours in a forest in south Fire Country, before they make a push for the final stretch at dawn. Everything Asuma-sensei had said is running through her mind, over and over and over.

Their sensei is finally asleep himself, up half the night on watch planning and writing out what he called his “show” mission report. Ino really is learning so much about subterfuge, in retrospect.

Beyond that, it’s bothering her. This mission. Team Seven’s mission. Nothing’s sitting right, and she can’t stop wondering—worrying—about Sakura. Ino realizes it could have been worse for Team Seven. They might not have had someone like Senju Tsunade to help them, or that guy with the bubbles. Considering how her team’s mission could have otherwise played out—

Red flashes through Ino’s mind.

But Ino isn’t one to sit on her hands. She needs to—no, she’s going to do something.

“Psst, Chouji!” Ino hisses. “You asleep?”

“Um, not with you talking in my ear,” he mumbles.

She graciously ignores that. “Then poke Shika awake!” she insists quietly.

Chouji reluctantly does. Shikamaru bats weakly at his hand, but he does show more signs of life.

“Hmngh, what?” he grumbles, grouchy, not bothering to get up.

“It’s bothering you, isn’t,” Ino says without preamble.

“It wasn’t when I was sleeping,” Shikamaru stresses, finally rolling over to face her, “but yes.”

“Me too. But what should we do?” Chouji asks, worrying the hem of his shirt.

“As troublesome as it is,” Shikamaru’s eyes flick to their sleeping sensei, and back to them, “we’re not letting this go.”

“Well, duh,” Ino says. “So here’s the plan…”

----

It’s not quite dawn.

Zabuza doesn’t feel that staticy prickle of the Uzumaki’s presence, or see any lit up seals around them. The ghost still isn’t back.

He looks to his left where Haku is sleeping, his back to a large snarl of roots, a lemur resting in his curled arms.

A lemur?
Zabuza blinks, looks up, and sees the reflective eyes of more lemurs staring at him.

Right. Warning from the ghost or not, he has to take a leak, and he is not doing that where every damn animal can stare at him.

Besides, it’s not like he’s wandering off far.

---

Shit, he might be lost.

Zabuza either got turned around at some point, or this island can rearrange itself at will. He’s choosing to believe he’s just stupid, because the alternative is terrifying.

He passes by an unrecognizable low stone wall inset with another shrine, trying to keep an eye out for any hazards, when something tips off his head, and he sees fluttering green in front of his face. “Wha—”

It’s a lunar moth from before, from that wind seal. How… how long has it been in his hair?

“Fuck off,” he says, more mildly than usual, shooing it a bit. But the moth doesn’t get the message, bouncing happily onto his hand and fluttering in front of him again.

The moth flies around him, flying off for a few meters out from the wall and then back to him. It’s annoying.

“Cut that out, I’m trying to figure out where I am,” Zabuza argues, and then realizes he’s talking to a moth. This island might be getting to him.

The moth responds by… flying and landing on the shrine. Huh.

He waits for a moment but it doesn’t move from its spot. Zabuza walks further past the wall into a grove and realizes immediately he’s made a mistake when he hears a snap. He must have triggered something, and he tries to take a step back.

Red hair flashes in front of him, and before he can even process what’s happening, the shrine light shoots impossibly fast around him, along several once-invisible seals along the base of the trees. The ground all around him gives way, exposed tree roots pulling Zabuza hard down into… another goddamn pitfall. He’s making a mental note to destroy every single shrine on this hellscape of an island when he registers a rush of whistling air above him, and an almighty series of crashes.

He hears Haku’s voice, distant. “Zabuza-sama!”

The roots loosen and recede. He lifts himself slowly out of the hole, peering up at the cause of the noise.

Whatever it was, it was something with enough force and velocity to cleave several trees in a line. So fast that without the help of chakra he wouldn’t have even hoped to dodge it. Worse, the line of the cuts sit right at Zabuza’s chest.

Fuck.

The moth settles back into his hair again.

“…Thanks,” he says, and he’s not sure if he’s talking to the moth, or what.
You’re welcome.

Zabuza nearly startles at the ghost’s voice. He looks about, eyes wide, ears open, but he still can’t hear or see her any more than he did before. Figures.

He’s glad she saved his life, but she’s still creepy.

---

"Hey, what the fuck is this place, anyway?" Zabuza asks in the middle of Haku scolding him.

Haku pauses a moment, listening to thin air, then answers, "A genin exam course."

Zabuza squints at Haku, then at the mangled carnage of trees, and back.

...He really should be more surprised.

The moth flutters in his hair.

---

Taking on a genin team is so much harder than Kurenai ever expected.

It’s early, about an hour past dawn, as Kurenai makes her way to the front entrance of the Administration building to meet her students.

“Good—good morning, Sensei!”

Hinata arrives first. Hinata always arrives first.

Kurenai remembers when Hinata’s father practically thrust the poor girl into her hands after she made genin. It rankles, to think her student still lives in that compound when her family barely acknowledges her. It can’t be good for her. Kurenai remembers some of the worse-off clan kids in the Academy, and beyond, and how much that affected them.

She’s technically Hinata’s guardian now as well, and that complicates matters. She’s been thinking about it, and the space she can make in her apartment. She wants to offer—but big clan politics are so touchy in a way she doesn’t really understand; Kurenai’s not sure if she’d be overstepping as an instructor, and she’s not going to simply ask around for advice. Asuma might know what to do, or maybe Kakashi as well.

Or, maybe not. It would be an understatement to say they both don’t like talking about their clans; it’s become a sore spot for Asuma since he returned to Konoha, and Kakashi practically pretends his doesn’t even exist.

...Dammit.

She resolves to try and ask Asuma anyway the next time she sees him; she might have better luck there.

Shino arrives exactly ten minutes early, as he always does. He nods politely, but briefly, to Kurenai. She likes all her students, but she can count on him as the most even-keeled of her team. He’s not one for conversation though, and Kurenai isn’t going to bring up her current worries with Hinata, so they all wait in amiable silence for their last wayward member.

Then Kiba comes sleepily—and noisily—shuffling in, Akamaru snoozing away in his coat front,
barely on time.

Good, they’re all here. Well, they’re physically here at least.

“Alright,” Kurenai claps her hands to get their attention, walking with them into the building, “as you can guess, today we’re starting with a mission.”

“Aw, more D-ranks?” Kiba whines, Akamaru whining along with him.

“And what’s wrong with D-Ranks?” Kurenai asks.

“They’re boring! And the other teams get to do C-Ranks!” Kiba complains. “Why can’t we? Back me up, Shino.”


“You three really think you’re ready for a C-Rank?” she stares at them, stern, outside the mission room.

“Hell yeah we are!” Kiba says. Shino nods once, and they both look at Hinata until she reluctantly nods as well.

Kurenai’s not sure if they’re ready, but as the other genin teams advance, she worries she might be holding hers back.

She takes the binder the mission desk clerk hands to her. “Well, let me take a look at the list.” What could it hurt to check? There has to be something.

Kurenai begins to flip through the C-Ranks. And keeps flipping through them in growing despair. Absolutely not on courier and escort missions. She worries about distance and the added risk of protection against bandits or missing-nin on the way. You never know—those sorts of things could happen. Plus, imagining her students coming together as an actual team to fight...

Oof.

She’s starting to get to the end. What would be the ideal mission to help them—

Oh! A simple recon mission, due to start immediately; it’s an investigation of minor thefts in a village southwest of Konoha. It’s a quick enough day trip, no expectations of serious fighting, and it will play to all of their strengths in tracking and observation. Kurenai wants to sigh in relief; this should be no sweat for all of them, especially a Hyuuga. Maybe it’ll help boost the poor girl’s confidence, too.

Kurenai looks up at her students, a mix of eagerness and trepidation, and says, “We’ll petition the Hokage, then.”

Good thing they got here so early. They might be able to meet with the Hokage and leave in good time.

-----

It’s morning in the savannah. Birds chirrup and insects hum as Kakashi steps gingerly out of the pile of children that have crowded him in the night.

Tsunade is snoring away on the ground, her robe rolled up as a makeshift pillow, with Shizune next
to her. Kurama is inexplicably curled up right between their heads, wheezing angrily in his sleep. Utakata too is asleep a bit off to the side, his little bubbles dotting along their campsite perimeter in lieu of a watch.

Since no one else is awake, Kakashi stretches his legs forward and yawns freely, blinking his eyes open. Both eyes; he can’t quite forget that his Sharingan isn’t working right now. It makes him uneasy, that Obito’s gift is just out of reach.

He instead focuses, and feels the warmth, the swirling beacon in the back of his mind. If they can find another Uzumaki, they may finally be able to attempt the island.

More minutes pass, but soon the little fox pile starts to stir, his students yawning awake, and the rest of their party coming back to life.

The bubbles all pop as Utakata opens his eyes. Shizune rubs at her face tiredly.

“It’s too fucking early,” Tsunade grumbles, facedown. Kurama grumbles an agreement in turn, but then seems to realize who he’s talking to and slinks away, pretending he wasn’t sleeping near her.

His cute students seem full of energy this morning, though. How nice for them. And they’re whispering to each other about something; he pretends not to notice as they break away and look up at him.

“Sensei,” Sakura starts, “we were wondering if we could do some training?”

Training? That’s fair. No need to neglect that just because they’re foxes.

“Yes!” Naruto adds, trotting up next to Kakashi and grinning, “like with reflexes or something!” Sasuke nods with him.

Kakashi hums, a bit suspicious. “I suppose we could do that.”

"Really? Then… you're itsensei!!" Naruto hollers as he jumps away and all three of them scramble away.

Kurama snorts. "Some reflexes you have."

"You'd think so," Kakashi muses. He then taps Kurama's side, "But you're it," and darts into the grass after his students without looking back. He hears Kurama squawk in outrage and laughs silently to himself as he ducks and hides low to the dirt amongst the bluestem, ready to watch this play out.

It'll be fun to see if his cute students realize what happened.

"Ssh, Sensei's right there!" he hears Sakura whisper.

Then he hears Naruto yip once, then shout, “No, guys, Kurama’s it! Hahaha!” and it becomes a cacophony of shouting and rustling in the grass, Kakashi following along to watch.

“C’mon! Are you slow?” Naruto taunts, and Kakashi hears Kurama growl.

Kakashi follows them out as Naruto and Sakura squeal; even Sasuke looks startled as they rush to
the side, Kurama chasing after them. They break out into the opening, but Kurama is faster than them. He bowls them all over in a tackle, but not enough to hurt them.

“Ha, you’re all it!” Kurama crows, as he rolls with a twist back to his feet.

“What? We can’t all be it!” Naruto argues.

“That’s not how it works!” Sakura adds.

“Fine,” Sasuke says, surprising his teammates.

“Huh?” Naruto asks.

“Then we can all can chase him,” Sasuke replies, pointed.

The kids look at each other once, and then sprint off into the tall grass in three different directions.

“Maa, you’d better run,” Kakashi says, amused, to Kurama, who just snorts.

“Ohh, we could get Sensei too!” Naruto whisper-shouts from somewhere in the grass.

“Shh!” Sakura and Sasuke hiss in tandem.

“Ah…” Kakashi says mildly, “we’ll both run.”

----

Utakata watches, a bit bemused, as the foxes chase each other back and forth into the savannah.

Saiken blurbles, delighted. Utakata has to agree, it’s pretty cute.

Then the little orange fox races over to Utakata. He taps at his foot with a pleased yip and barrels off again.

"Looks like you're it, kid," says Tsunade.

"I'm it?" Utakata glances at the swaying grass where the fox kit had dashed through.

“You never play tag? Just touch someone else and they’re it.”

“Oh.” He tips up his hand and touches Shizune’s arm. “You’re it?”

Shizune smiles, but immediately responds by tapping Tsunade, “Then you’re it. Run, Utakata!”

Utakata, alarmed, rushes off, and turns back to see Tsunade grin. “Guess who’s it now!” she hollers.

The little foxes all shriek, Saiken’s brother hissing madly, crowding behind Utakata as she stalks forward.

“Run, please,” he says to the foxes as he darts ahead, the little foxes all following him. Is this supposed to be fun?

But he sees Shizune laughing alongside him, and sees the foxes running underfoot, and he supposes it might be a little fun.

----
Asuma doesn’t let his shoulders slump as his team crosses Konoha’s gates, but it’s a near thing. What a shitshow of a mission, and today might only get worse.

He turns his head, realizing his students are still following him.

“What now, Sensei?” Ino asks.

“Take the day off, and remember what I said,” he says as he gives a pointed look to all three of them. He’s going to pretend they’ll heed his words as he makes his way to the Administration Building. He has a report to drop off.

Danzō is in Hiruzen’s office again.

Hiruzen is largely tuning him out. It’s again about jinchuuriki and security and Hiruzen has a headache. It’s too early for this. Surely he has meetings scheduled for right now. Maybe his assistant will take pity on him and find one.

Hiruzen finally waves a hand to cut him off. “I have it handled, Danzō,” is all he says to it. He already sent out a shinobi to perform an initial investigation into Wave. He hopes for the best, but he has potential plans and cover stories ready to be set into motion if worst comes to worst.

He prays that will not be the case, but as he’s discovered in life, prayers don’t mean anything.

Danzō, of course, cannot leave it at that. “Have it ‘handled’? Just like you handled—”

“Sir,” his assistant interrupts, “a reminder you have a meeting with Sarutobi Asuma.”

“Of course, let him in.” There was no such meeting scheduled, but Hiruzen could kiss his assistant for providing the distraction.

“Ah, Asuma.” He latches on to his appearance like a lifeline. “You’re right on time. Have a good day, Danzō,” Hiruzen says in clear dismissal.

Danzō snorts derisively but leaves, staring at Asuma, no doubt building up scathing remarks of nepotism for their next one-on-one. Hiruzen wants to roll his eyes.

Hiruzen also wants to breathe the biggest sigh of relief. His son has returned no worse for wear, it seems. “I see you’ve returned from Tea Country,” he observes.

“Yes, sir. Mission complete.” Asuma nonchalantly drops a report on his desk and pulls out a new cigarette.

Hiruzen considers this. Direct delivery of a mission report to his desk is unusual, but Asuma was delayed. It’s also his first C-Rank as a jounin instructor. But perhaps something happened on the mission that Asuma believes needs Hiruzen’s attention, and that’s never a good thing.

“And I take it your team is well?” Hiruzen asks instead, fishing for insight.

“Hale, hearty, and whole,” Asuma says, cribbing an Akimichi phrase. “A bit of a misunderstanding with the delivery, but hey, we all lived.”

That piques Hiruzen’s interest, but he’ll read the report. “This is good progress, I’d say, for all our genin teams to make it to C-Ranks so quickly. It could make for an interesting Chuunin Exam this year, should they qualify.”
“All of them, huh.” The cigarette rolls in Asuma’s mouth, and he scratches his beard. “Yeah, could be. Is that all, sir?”

“That’s all,” he says looking back down at his desk, but it the words feel like a mistake the moment they leave his mouth. He looks up from the report cover. “Asuma—”

But Asuma is already gone, leaving Hiruzen alone in his office. He gets the feeling he’s missed something.

But it’s a good time as any to read the report, he supposes, and opens it. He has to immediately school his expression, because what Asuma has handed him… is the most outrageous mission report he’s read in years. A river? What on earth?

He reads down the summary of damages. And keeps reading, for pages and pages. She isn’t named, but Asuma is descriptive enough. that particular flavor of collateral damage can only mean Tsunade. Hiruzen barely resists the urge to bang his head against his desk. He will never escape his student’s proclivity for destruction.

On the other hand, he’s surprised she fought at all. Perhaps… perhaps she’s finally healing.

Perhaps he finally has a successor.

He puts that out of his mind for now and refocuses on the report. For the thousands of mission reports Hiruzen has read over the years, he knows better than anyone how to spot discrepancies. Something about this doesn’t add up. Something is wrong.

Asuma wanted to send him a message, but Hiruzen is missing a part of the puzzle. This calls for additional investigation. He wishes he had this information yesterday before he sent out Shiranui, but it can’t be helped.

He’ll call Tenzō—Cat—for this one.

---

Asuma walks into the streets of Konoha with purposeful calm he absolutely does not feel.

This is bad. Asuma lost his nerve a bit, with Danzō’s stare, and it’s just as well; at this point, he can’t trust his dad’s office isn’t being spied on by someone like Danzō. Because what if it is? What if?

And Kurenai—

Kurenai is not here. She’s gone, on a C-Rank of all things, the one linking thread of these suspicious events. What if she—

Asuma wants to scream, but he won’t publicly panic, as much as he wants to. It would do him no good in the long run, and he can’t draw that kind of attention to himself right now. But what can he do?

Gods, this is risky, but if he can get away with sending her a message with no one noticing, he’s going to try. He tucks around a corner and bites his thumb. His badger summons, Saka, trots out of the plume of smoke.

“What,” she says more than asks.

“I need you to get a message to Kurenai outside the village.”
“What, a love letter?” She flexes her claws, pulling up a tuft of grass. “I’m not a mailbird.”

He knows. And he knows she’s not a ninken. He’d ask Kakashi instead, but of fucking course, Kakashi going missing is the big problem in the first place.

“I don’t have a lot of options,” Asuma stresses. He also ignores that love letter barb; he and Kurenai are not dating, thank you.

“Then you owe me BBQ,” Saka hits back.

“Yes, fine,” he agrees, distracted. Saka can eat twice her bodyweight in grilled meat, but Asuma is too frantic to care at this point.

She pauses at his easy concession, peers at him, but doesn’t say any more about that.

“Tell her to be careful, that there’s something strange going on with the C-Rank missions. And if—” Asuma pauses. He thinks of who else he can trust, and who his dad trusts. “If you catch wind of Jiraiya, let me know?”

She just nods once and goes, burrowing down into the dirt and disappearing.

----

The rainforest warms to a damp heat, growing wetter with every passing kilometer, and it’s making Zabuza feel slow and languid. Maybe part of that is the adrenaline crash from another near-death experience.

They’re walking to the third seal, Zabuza figures. The moth-that-won’t-leave is still settled in Zabuza’s hair, its wings wide open, soaking up the sun it can catch.

Haku blinks, and turns back to address Zabuza. “Uzumaki-sama just left.”

Zabuza raises his brows. “Again? Why?”

Haku shakes his head slightly. “She didn’t say; she just left in a hurry. Towards the east, it seems.”

“Huh.” That’s odd, for her. “Let’s follow her,” Zabuza suggests.

“Sir?”

“She didn’t say to stay this time, did she?” He’s also not going to lose his only guide out of this damn place.

Haku frowns. It’s small, but it’s there, and very disapproving. Considering what happened earlier this morning, Zabuza probably deserves that. But he knows Haku is curious too.

“We’ll even follow the moth,” Zabuza offers.

“Only if we follow the moth,” Haku reluctantly agrees.

The moth flaps its wings, delighted.

----

Gato can’t believe this. What was that seller smoking? The stupid scroll had—had teleported him or something! If he ever gets his hands on that lying asshole—
He trips over another root.

He woke up on this godforsaken island days ago. He got lost in the muggy tropical forest for hours the first day, so turned around he ended up back where he started on the beach. He was nearly eaten alive by bugs and a lemur threw a mango at him! Then it stole the mango back when Gato tried to eat it! He had even tried swimming out to sea (it couldn't be that hard to avoid those whirlpools), but those damn pink birds kept pecking at him when he took even one step into the water.

"What is with this place!" he hollers as he kicks at a tree, swearing when he only succeeds in hurting his foot.

Just then, a fluffy grey fox pokes its head around the tree and peers at him curiously. Gato stiffens, and braces himself for the beast to lunge at him or something. But it just keeps looking at him, cocking its head in idle curiosity.

“What?” he asks, wary.

It doesn’t respond, it just looks at him. Dumb animal.

But... it's not coming after him. It’s the only living thing that hasn't immediately attacked him so far. Gato can't help it; he starts to vent to it.

He vents for a while.

"All I want to do is be a businessman, is that such a crime?” he complains, thirty minutes later. The fox is still there, sitting by him like it’s listening, so Gato keeps going.

"I can’t trust anyone to do anything right! My hired help up and quits in the middle of the bridge job and then the Uzu scroll I was promised would summon a lightning god to kill those dumb Konoha shinobi instead throws me on this damn rock!” He turns to the fox. “Isn’t that ridiculous?”

The fox stares at Gato one more time, severe, then barks at the shrine. The shrine flares, and the last thing Gato remembers is a rock hurtling towards his face.

---

Something jabs Gato in the side and he wakes with a groan, rolling on the ground. He squints open his eyes, and stares up into the face of the man he prayed to never see again.

“Gato,” Zabuza says, genial, as he hoists his sword to rest on his shoulder, "so funny meeting you here." He pulls the bandages down his face, and smiles wide with all his sharp, sharp teeth.
Zabuza has no idea how Gato got here, but he doesn’t care right now. He steps forward, swinging Kubikiribōchō down to pin Gato where he’s lying on the forest floor, stopping short of piercing flesh. Haku is watching, quiet, at Zabuza’s shoulder.

Gato squeaks, terrified. Good. He should be.


That twinges, just a bit; Zabuza’s not stopped to think about his goal, the reason he worked with Gato in the first place, but that’s on hold while he’s stuck on this island. But now Gato’s stuck here, too, and Zabuza has finally found a way to cheer himself up.

“There is nothing you can possibly offer me,” Zabuza grins, resting the blade against Gato’s sorry neck, “other than your life. I think I’m going to enjoy separating your head from your shoulders.”

You will do no such thing.

What.

“What,” Zabuza grits out, too incensed to be startled by that damned voice. He whips his head around to shout in the general direction of the ghost, but his words die on his lips.

A woman stands before him, proud, her hair as red as freshly spilt blood. He has no idea who the fuck she is, though he feels like he should. It’s only that the very sight of her—Uzumaki red—sets off every ingrained warning alarm in him.

He holds his breath, and doesn’t let that terror show. “Why not?” he manages instead, not moving Kubikiribōchō away from Gato’s neck.

Her eyebrows lift as her eyes flick to Gato, her lips twitching up into a smile. It’s horrifying. You will see.

“What? Who—who are you talking to?” Gato has the audacity to demand, his voice pitched high.

“Shut up,” Zabuza says absently, still staring at the Uzumaki, the gears whirring in his head. He’ll see, huh?

After a long moment, he tips his sword to the side, letting the point of its blade rest against the ground. “You owe me for this,” he growls, pointing an accusing finger at the ghost. “Me and Haku,” he adds, since Haku, of anyone, deserves as much. Haku places a hand on Zabuza’s arm.

I can accept that, the ghost concedes, still smiling. Zabuza wishes she would stop that.

He glances over to where Gato is attempting to crawl away. Zabuza snatches him by the collar, hoisting him to his feet. “You caught the interest of the Uzumaki. Lucky you.”

“Uzumaki? What does that mean? Aren’t they all gone?”

Zabuza laughs lowly as he drags Gato through the trees. “Don’t you know? You’re on Uzushio
now. You’re going to wish you stayed dead.”

---

That went well, all things considered.

Sakumo ducks further back into the underbrush and watches the spectacle move back deeper into the forest. As much as he’d like to tear apart this Gato character strip by strip for daring to harm his son, he ought to remember to be a little cautious, and heed the island. He’s dealing with too many unknown entities now, still-unfamiliar territory, and more than a lack of offensive options. Twenty years dead is no excuse to be careless, and he needs to stay alive now. He desperately wants to know if Kakashi’s okay, and that means surviving for a while longer.

Care to talk now, in a manner of speaking?

Sakumo jolts, hearing that voice again. He peeks out from behind the bushes to peer at the ghost, the incredible chakra impression, that he’s felt shifting from place to place in the forest, keeping a passive eye on him. Sakumo doesn’t know much about chakra impressions or how they work, but he doesn’t think they’re supposed to work like this. But if anything, an Uzumaki could make it happen. And of all the Uzumaki who could make it happen, it was her. Her, a reassuring voice he could hardly believe was real, that offered him help when he needed it, as long as he played by her rules.

And with Gato, he definitely needs to play by her rules.

_Hatake Sakumo_, the ghost says, warm, as she sizes him up in the morning light, _the gods were quite lucky to get you, weren’t they?_

He cocks his head, quizzical. Gods? _Uzumaki_ gods? Is that what had happened? Off hand stories from Tsunade, long ago, were one thing, but _this_...

_Oh yes, one of our kin finally made the call, and to have this in answer… it is quite interesting._

As much as he respects her, Sakumo can’t help but give her a flat stare. _Interesting_ isn’t the first word he’d use for coming back to life with four legs and a tail.

_Oh, should I stop being so cryptic?_ she asks. _It was necessary at first with those two boys, but perhaps I’m going too far._

He nods. He’d like some answers, if possible.

She sighs to herself. _Here I am, indulging in such childish whims._ Then her lips turn up, _Though it is so amusing after nearly thirty years with no one to talk to, and eighty years with nothing much to do._

_His eyes widen at the number, tilting his head. She’s been here that long? How?_

_Oh yes, she says with an impish grin, that’s what I get for adding and adding and adding to the consciousness of my chakra impression across a lifetime of return visits. It’s just as well. I do appreciate my husband indulging me my trips, as I’m now the only Uzumaki, in any form, left on the island._

_The destruction of Uzushio took away more than my people, my homeland, my culture. It brought about an intentional, malicious, imbalance of spirit and will in the world. So here I have waited, waited for the chance to restore it, to set it right. But when the remaining impressions began to dissipate so quickly, and none of my people returned, I believed it nearly too late, and that I would merely wait in silence on the shore until I finally faded to nothing, along with the spirits. She shuts_
her eyes with grief, head slightly bowed. Perhaps such an ending was my penance for leaving my people; it would be what I deserved for failing them so completely.

Sakumo can commiserate, considering his own still-fresh memories of his time in the in-between. Still, as much as he himself deserved it, it’s not a fate he would wish on anyone else.

But with you, those two young men, and what I suspect the winds will bring this way, perhaps there is hope after all. To bring the island back to life… to return the Gem of the Eddy to its full glory... we may be able to avert total disaster.

Sakumo shivers; this is something bigger than him, bigger than he can put into words. He barks to get her attention, and she looks up, breaking out of her mourning.

You will help? She asks, eyes hopeful.

Sakumo nods. He owes his newfound life to the Uzumaki, to the island itself, and how could he not help her?

Her shoulders drop with a sigh. Thank you. This means more to me than you know. She looks over her shoulder, her brows raised. I suppose we should keep an eye on those boys, to make sure they all make it to the next seal in one piece?

Sure, Sakumo can do that. He could follow them. And maybe take a small bite out of Gato, or scare him. That won’t kill him.

- 

She watches Sakumo go, creeping silent through the brush towards the rainforest after her guests. Ah, foxes.

Of course it had to be that gift, which only means one thing, she mutters to herself with a wry snort. I’m certainly in deep trouble, she says, and then laughs again to herself. But if you ever asked poor Tobirama, Uzumaki Mito causes nothing but trouble!

----

Team Eight travels along the well worn path along west Fire Country, weaving through the trees of the forest. Hinata tries to still her fidgeting fingers; despite her nerves, she can admit it’s exciting to finally go on a mission beyond the walls of her village. The weight of her hitai-ate is starting to feel more real, that they’re trusted enough to go on a C-Rank mission.

(And maybe now—maybe now Hinata can finally begin to prove to her father that she’s worthy as a kunoichi.)

The small village of Kaede comes around the bend of the tree-lined dirt path, breaking open into tilled land. It’s a modest farming community in the dip of a valley, so small in comparison to Konoha. But it seems bustling today from overtop the path, with civilian commotion towards the center of town. Hinata wonders what it is. A festival?

“We’re nearly there,” Kurenai-sensei says from where she’s walking behind them. “Are you all ready?”

“Yeah!” Kiba hollers. Hinata winces a little at his volume. Still, his enthusiasm is infectious. Hinata likes that about him.
“Um, yes, Sensei,” Hinata confirms after Kiba, trying to mirror his confidence. She’s not sure she quite managed it.

Hinata looks to Shino next, but he shakes his head minutely. He then sticks a hand in his pocket and pulls out a pair of sunglasses. To Hinata’s surprise, they’re rather cute, with a lavender tint to their lenses than his usual black.

He hands them to her. “Wear these,” he says. “Why? To further conceal your eyes.”

“Thank you, Shino,” Hinata says, taking the glasses and sliding them on, adjusting to the new hue. It’s a good idea, actually; she tends to forget her eyes would make her stand out even more outside of Konoha.

“I would have suggested a henge, but very thoughtful, Shino,” Kurenai-sensei says, with an approving smile.

“Looking good, Hinata!” Kiba calls out with a thumbs up. “I should wear some too!” He makes grabby hands at Shino until Shino gives in and hands Kiba a pair of brown sunglasses.

Kurenai-sensei side-eyes Kiba’s antics, but instead says, “Alright then, if that’s everything, let’s get started.” Her gaze sweeps across the three of them. “This is an investigation on a limited schedule,” she frowns down at the village, “and in a crowded space. There are a few potential ways to approach this. What would you do?”

“We could totally split up,” Kiba suggests. “Why?” he adds, adjusting his glasses, imitating Shino’s voice, “because… uhhh, it’s a good idea, right?” He looks to his teammates to back him up.

“We could cover more ground quickly,” Shino covers for him. “My kikaichū can also travel undetected in this search.”

Kurenai-sensei nods. “Reasonable options for the search itself. Suggestions, Hinata?”

Hinata resists the urge to bite her lip. “Um, we can check places that were targeted for clues first.”

Kurenai-sensei smiles. “Excellent answer. Instead of beginning with a wild search, we can first narrow down possible suspects and locations. But what should we do before that?”

“Uhhh,” says Kiba. Hinata is drawing a blank, too.

Kurenai-sensei waits a beat, and then puts them out of their misery. “Talk to the client,” she stresses, but not unkindly.

“Ohhh,” says Kiba, adjusting his sunglasses again. “I knew that.”

----

Itachi reads over the letter in his hands again and again. It’s already burned into his memory, but he keeps thinking he’ll read the words differently.

It’s a coded message from Konoha, from the Hokage, that he received a day ago. Only a reckless fool would keep a letter like this for so long in the Akatsuki, as a spy, but Itachi has the benefit of near-solitude, and Kisame would never go through Itachi’s things.

And maybe Itachi’s starting to feel a little reckless, himself.

He’s left the clean-up to Kisame, this time, and Kisame won’t be due back for another several
minutes to their meeting point. Itachi reads the letter again. One of his few requests is that he receive updates about Sasuke amidst the intel, even just to confirm he’s still alive and whole. Sarutobi occasionally takes pity on him with scraps of detail.

Last time, Sasuke was about to embark on his first C Rank mission, accompanying a bridge builder. Itachi knows the only possible location to fit the parameters would be Wave. So perhaps Itachi suggested he and Kisame take the job to track down useful informants in South Fire Country. He’s not entirely sure why he offered; it’s too soon to see Sasuke. Was it the desire to be close to his little brother anyway, when he doesn’t deserve it in the least? Guilt? Masochism?

Itachi didn’t make it to Wave yet, anyway, as their informant search erupted into curtailing spies instead. Ironic, that.

But that was last week. This time, the letter holds nothing. Nothing at all about Sasuke.


Something isn’t right.

Itachi burns the letter, and watches the trail of ash swirl away in the wind. His breath catches on the next inhale, breaking. He coughs, ragged and slow. He tries to ignore how it’s getting worse, how he’s on borrowed time, less than most shinobi. However little he has left to borrow, he has to hope it’ll be enough.

His breath evens out again as Kisame returns to their meeting point outside the village.

“That one went quicker than I thought,” his partner chuckles, patting Samehada’s side. “Looks like we have a bit of free time, but we probably shouldn’t spend it here.”

It’s the perfect opening. “I have... another lead,” Itachi lies.

Kisame rolls his shoulders, and Itachi catches him eying the specks of blood still dotting Itachi’s fingers. He’ll let Kisame come to his own conclusions. “Ah. Your side project. Where to now?”

Itachi can taste the ash in his mouth, swirling with the blood. “Wave.”

----

The mayor’s assistant welcomes Team Eight into the main office of Kaede, which is more of a lean-to built aside a house than a standalone building.

“Wellcome to Kaede!” says the assistant. “Our mayor has been expecting you.”

The mayor takes that moment to come bustling out of the office. “Oh thank goodness you’re here, and couldn’t you have filled this mission faster? We’re almost out of time!”

“Out of time?” Kurenai asks, frowning at the woman’s attitude and the time limit.

The mayor tips her head towards the front window, as if it were obvious. “For Kaede’s Annual Maple Festival! There’s been more thefts since, and the items stolen are of critical importance!”

“Critical?” Kurenai repeats. “We would have appreciated that information updated in the mission request.” It could change mission grading criteria and priority.

The mayor sniffs. “There wasn’t time, and I don’t expect you big village folk to understand how important Kaede’s Annual Maple Festival is.”
“We call it Maple Fest for short,” the assistant helpfully chimes in.

Kurenai keeps her eye from twitching, if only because she is a professional. “And the missing items?” she asks as the assistant pulls out a list.

A frying pan. A candy mold. A banner. It goes on. This mission is more of a joke than Kurenai thought. It’s a bit of a relief, though that thought makes her feel guilty. That said, none of her kids look particularly impressed, either, though Hinata appears more politely confused if anything. Kurenai appreciates that in comparison to Kiba’s baffled scowl.

The mayor steeps her fingers against her lips. “We’re worried about a scroll, as well.”

“A scroll?” Kurenai asks. That’s more intriguing. And potentially more dangerous.

“A decorative scroll, that’s displayed in the festival shrine. The hinge is rusted, so nobody can open it. But it’s supposedly got the great Shodaime’s autograph in it!” the mayor gushes.

“Such a man of good arboreal taste,” the assistant sighs.

“...Right,” says Kurenai. She’s not going to get much more out of these two at this rate.

Kurenai holds back a sigh, and ushers her befuddled students out the door. “We’re on it. Please leave this mission it to us.”

“Good luck!” the assistant calls out at the door shuts behind them.

Kurenai lets out a silent sigh, and turns to her students. “So, the key places are the display hall, the festival shrine, and the central market.” She feels less trepidation for her students going off by themselves, at least. Kurenai idly wonders if there’s a tea room she can wait in. “Do you feel like you three can handle this?”

Hinata wrings her hands, and Shino slips his hands into his pockets. Kiba wrinkles his nose. “Yeah, but it seems kind of lame, huh?”

“Well, any sort of theft is a problem, right?” Kurenai hedges. “And it could escalate over time, so it’s better to stop it now.”

“Ohhh, ok. That makes sense. We got it, Sensei!” Kiba nods, with Akamaru barking in affirmation. Shino and Hinata nod along with him. It looks a bit ridiculous with her team all decked out in sunglasses.

“I’ll leave you three to it,” Kurenai says to her students, trying not to feel like a nervous parent. “I recommend sticking together to start out with for this one. Meet me back here in an hour to regroup.”

----

Kiba swings his arms in front of him, marching down the road with his team. Awesome! They’re starting their mission! It’s kind of dumb, but Kiba supposes that their sensei is right: searching for this stuff is important. Any thief is bad news.

Kiba looks down at his partner. “Got anything, Akamaru?”

Akamaru wuffles from his jacket, sniffing the air, but only sneezes; the maple stuff everywhere is pretty overpowering.

Kiba looks back at his team next. “Should we go see that scroll thing?”
“More items were taken from the marketplace,” Shino points out.

“And there, um, might be more clues there?” Hinata adds.

“Oh! Yeah! Let’s try that market,” Kiba decides. His friends are so smart. That scroll still sounds kind of cool though, but they’ll get to it eventually.

The crowd grows bigger as they reach the village center. It’s starting to get tough to move forward faster. They could be all shinobi sneaky, but it’s probably smarter to just blend in, civilian style. Otherwise these sunglasses would be pointless!

The stalls are selling a bunch of cool stuff, though. Maple candy, clothes with maple leaf designs, maple jewelry. Maybe they can look around more after the mission. Maybe there’s a maple chew toy for Akama—

Just then, Kiba spots a big man, wading through the people. He towers over everyone, like a tree. A big, armor-covered tree. And, yeah, that is totally suspicious. Who even wears stuff like that? Even though it is super cool.

Shino’s eyebrow twitches. Whoops, Kiba said that out loud. He shuts his mouth, but makes a toothy grin. They found a lead already!

This mission is going to be easy.

----

*You have a little dog and bug following you*, Kokuō says, voice billowing up from the back of Han’s mind.

“I am aware,” Han responds under his breath, more amused than anything by the two children playing at shinobi. He could stand to humor them—what could they do to a jinchuuriki?

Han was only in this village because Kokuō asked. It’s the first time Kokuō’s ever requested a visit to a *sibling*, and Han can admit to giving in to the curiosity of meeting another fellow container. He’s only known one other jinchuuriki from his former country, his long-buried former life, but he’s lost contact in the last several months. Han can only guess where Rōshi is these days.

Kaede is a convenient meeting point, at least, with the unexpected benefit of a festival. Han glances down at a stall promoting maple candies, and idly picks up a bag; it might be a nice introductory gift when meeting a fellow jinchuuriki. He doesn’t miss beat of hesitation in the seller at the sight of Han, but the seller smiles as Han drops a few coins into his hands. People tend to overlook eccentricities when one has money.

Han knows that he’ll always stand out. He’s stood out for forty years, and he’ll likely stand out for another forty.

He’s brought out of his musings when the woman in the stand next over gasps, looking frantically under boxes.

“Hey! My candy bags are all gone!” she cries.

“Ugh, you got hit by the thief, too?” groans the seller in front of Han, as he hands over a few spare bags. “I’ve had to hand-mold all my candies this week, and it’s just the worst.”

“It’s totally sabotage,” the woman seethes. “Someone has it out for us.”
Han really should stay out of it, but: “A thief?” he can’t help but ask.

---

Karin hikes her bag up higher on her shoulder, wandering into the village from the sloping field. Her feet should ache from walking all night, but she hardly feels it, a lilt in her step from the steady chime.

Her map says this is Kaede. It’s got a crowd to get lost in, anyway, to blend in, and Karin appreciates that. She keeps her eyes open, wary of any potential shinobi, anyone who might recognize her and try to drag her back to her own, no, former village. They have to know she’s missing by now. If she wanted to, she could sense the hospital director’s agitated spike of chakra, the village’s panic. But they don’t deserve any consideration.

She touches the picture in her shirt pocket. They don’t deserve any more of her time, of her gifts.

Karin can’t help but absorb the excitement of the people carrying around sweet foods, wearing yukata and clothes with maple leaves all over it. A maple festival, huh. Karin had never heard of such a thing before, but that’s not so surprising. She hasn’t heard of a lot of things. She thinks about maybe trying some maple syrup. Or even some candy! Who’s going to stop her?

But a bright spot is nagging at her. A sense, something that is familiar, a piece of home, blinking like a low beacon in this village. She knows this isn’t her final destination, but she doesn’t think she can leave without taking a look first.

She wanders towards the stage at the center of the market street. She looks around, making sure no one is paying attention, and downplays her chakra presence for added effort. She cracks open the door of the hall at the back of the stage, and slips in. The signal is stronger now, singing. The hall is more of a shrine, an empty space, that seems only halfway set-up for a festival in full swing.

The feeling calls to her. She creeps towards a central display, as it grows louder, and she unlatches the door. An old, metal rusted scroll sits hidden in the center, with whirling spirals of designs, red in color.

She stares at it, transfixed. This must be it, but she needs to touch it, take it, to make sure.

She’s already a fugitive, since she’s abandoned her village. What’s another crime? It’s for a good cause, anyway.

Karin picks up the scroll, holding it carefully in her hands. It feels like the swirls in her head, the feeling stretching eastward, but even warmer, an untamable thrum under her hands. It doesn’t belong here. It would be happier with her, where she’s going. The whirlpools—

She jolts as she hears the door open. She snatches the scroll before she has any more time to think, and suppresses every drop of chakra that she has. She’s not getting caught so soon. She’s not going back now. She’ll die first.

---

“Let’s follow that guy!” Kiba announces, and runs off into the crowd, Shino one step after him.

Hinata takes a step and is accidentally knocked forward by a passing civilian, her sunglasses nearly flying off her face. She hastily grabs them and slides them back on. As she looks up, she realizes she’s facing the market stage, and spots a girl glancing around, before sneaking onto the platform.
She has the reddest hair Hinata’s ever seen.

But that’s right, the scroll is up there, too. That could be suspicious.

“Um, guys—” Hinata starts, turning back to her team, but Shino and Kiba are already long gone, tracking after that tall man.

She makes to run forward after them, but a large group of civilians passes in front of her, blocking her path. The crowd’s gotten denser. It might take too long to go after them. She looks back again. She doesn’t see the girl anymore, but the path to the stage, and to the shrine hall, is a bit more clear.

She can be brave. She can go take a quick look, to see what that girl was up to.

Hinata sneaks around the pop-up stalls, dodging civilians, inching towards the festival stage. It all appears normal still. The girl might even be gone already, but Hinata might as well investigate it; this is one of the potential targets of theft, with the display scroll.

She steps onto the corner of the stage, cracks open the door, and slides in. The hall is oddly empty, and doesn’t seem to be open yet. She shouldn’t get in trouble for looking, right? It’s for a mission.

Hinata is about to take another step forward when she hesitates. Something is off. It feels like someone might be here. She then hears a slight creak in the wood and tenses. Someone might really be here. She activates the Byakugan behind her glasses, straining for any signs of chakra, anything out of place. But instead she senses nothing. Even the smallest animals have slivers of visible chakra, and the lack of it sets Hinata on edge. Someone who can conceal themselves so completely might be dangerous.

She holds her hands up, defensive, as she inches around to the back of the shrine.

Another creak, and she runs forward, cutting off the escape of the red haired girl. The red haired girl holding a scroll in her hands—the display scroll!

“What are you—” Hinata begins, but the the girl interrupts, immediately on the defensive.

“Who are you, huh? Are you a shinobi?” she accuses, taking a step back.

Hinata tries not to show surprise at being already caught out. She casts about for an excuse, “No, I’m not a—”

“Liar!” the girl hisses, with a certainty that startles Hinata into activating her Byakugan again.

The girl doesn’t have a hitai-ate, but Hinata can now see she has a lot of chakra. An alarming amount, in fact; she’s only seen one other at genin age—_Naruto_—with comparable amounts.

This girl could be dangerous, but. But she just looks scared, terrified of Hinata, and Hinata doesn’t know what to do with that.

“What are you doing?” Hinata tries again, covering up her hesitation. “You shouldn’t be in here.”

“You can’t make me go back!” the girl yells, not answering the question.

Hinata falters at that. “Go back?” she asks, unsure what that means.

“I won’t go back there! They killed my mom!” the girl snarls, startling Hinata.

That sounds… that sounds terrible. Hinata can’t imagine such a place. So she pauses, and slowly
holds up her hands. “I’m—I’m not here to make you go anywhere like that.”

The girl stares at her, tilting her head a fraction. “You’re telling the truth,” she says after a beat.

Hinata nods slowly. She has to ask, though, eying the scroll in the girl’s hands. “But… are you the
thief? Stealing everything?”

“What? No!” the girl denies, scandalized. Then her eyes dart to the scroll in her hands, and her face
colors, perfectly matching her hair. “Uh, well, I’m taking this,” she admits. “But it’s not supposed to
be here anyway. I think.”

Hinata feels like she’s missing something. “...It’s not?”

The girl nods. “I can feel it, uh, sense it. It doesn’t want to be here. It belongs somewhere else.”

“Where is that?” Hinata asks, letting her eyes finally deactivate.

“I don’t know,” the girl says. “But I can feel it, hear where it is, and I’m going there too.”

This is all so confusing, but Hinata might as well press. “Hear it?”

She smiles a little to herself, cradling the scroll. “The bells. They remind me of my mom.”

Despite her confusion, Hinata smiles too. Even without the Byakugan she can tell this girl is genuine.
“That’s wonderful, um. What’s your name?” Hinata tries, gentle, if awkward.

“Ka—Wait. What’s yours first?” the girl demands.

“Hinata.” It seems pointless to lie to her.

“Hinata,” the girl tries out the name, and nods to herself. “Well, that’s true. I’m Karin, and your
chakra is really cute,” she blurts out, face going all red again.

Hinata blinks a few times, and decides to take that as a compliment. “Thank you. No one’s, um, told
me that before.”

Karin starts to smile through her blush, when her eyes suddenly widen, and then narrow.
“Someone’s coming? No, a lot of people. Come on!” she hisses, pulling Hinata along with her,
ducking behind the display.

A rumbling comes from the front stage, and the hall door slams open. A plume of smoke erupts on
the stage in front of the shrine display, laughter emanating from it. “Ha ha!!”

Karin and Hinata curl in against each other. Hinata pulls up her hood and holds her breath, trying not
to cough. The smoke clears, and she sees a group of colorful masked men appear posed on the stage.
They move forward one-by-one, and Hinata can hear the people outside clapping, oohing and
ahhing at the flips and jumps.

“We!” Red cartwheels.

“Are!” Yellow flexes.

“The!” Blue spins in place.

“Evil!” Green high kicks.
“Acer-rangers!” Silver punches the air.

“Wait, did the green guy say ‘Evil?’” someone calls out.

“And we…” they bring their hands together in spirit fingers, “are here to destroy Maple Fest!”

Chapter End Notes

everything is totally fine
Ten minutes earlier, Kiba and Shino race through the crowd after their own target. Kiba weaves between the tourists. “This way, this way,” he says, as Shino deftly follows on his heels.

They watch the towering man linger for a few moments at each merchant stall as he peers over the goods. They’re close to the guy now, within spitting distance, but Shino grabs onto Kiba’s hood, holding back.

Kiba turns back to his teammate, quizzical. “What?”

“Allow me,” Shino says, quiet but sure, letting one of his bugs crawl out from under his sunglasses. Kiba watches the bug flick open its wings and hop into the air. He squints as it flits off into the crowd, but quickly loses track of it. He opts to pretend to browse the stalls, all the while keeping one eye on their target.

Kiba and Shino slowly sidle on through, doing their best to blend in. The sunglasses were such a good move, Kiba thinks, pushing them up with the palm of his hand. Maybe Shino will let Kiba keep this pair for future missions.

A gaggle of ladies block Kiba’s sightline as they coo over a stand of festival mascot dolls, so he peeks over Shino’s shoulder, the sunglasses on his face sloping down his nose again. The man’s stopped to buy... huh, some candies, of all things.

After a couple minutes, Shino lifts up his hand. The bug flies back from out of nowhere, flitting onto Shino’s finger in little agitated jumps.

Kiba leans his head farther over, and whispers to his teammate, “That was quick. What did the little guy get?”

Shino’s brow furrows. “He couldn’t get close. That man is too warm for my insects,” he explains with a slight frown, bringing the bug up to his collar to rest. “Why? Unsure. A kekkei genkai?” he suggests.

“Dammit,” Kiba groans, plopping his chin onto Shino’s shoulder in despair. Ugh, a shinobi with a tricky kekkei genkai would be one of the more shitty scenarios to deal with. Maybe Hinata could—

Wait a minute.

“Uhhh, where did Hinata go?” Kiba asks, lifting his head up and looking around wildly into the crowd.

Shino glances about behind them, and after a few moments shakes his head. “We lost her. Why? Because we got too caught up in following the armored man,” he says, a grimace peeking out from under his collar. Akamaru whines in agreement.
Kiba blanches. “Oh crap!” he hisses. “Sensei is gonna be so mad!” Losing track of Hinata on their first ever C-Rank is not Teamwork Material. “What are we gonna do?”

Their panic is interrupted when the lady behind the stall next to them shouts, “Hey! My candy bags are all gone!”

“Ugh, you got hit by the thief, too?” the seller in front of the tall man adds. “I’ve had to hand-mold all my candies this week, and it’s just the worst.”

The lady spits, her expression venomous, “It’s totally sabotage; someone has it out for us.”

Kiba and Shino glance at each other, the wheels turning in their heads.

Kiba’s eyes light up. “This is it!” he hisses, grinning. Shino nods. They’ll just have to find Hinata later—they’re on the right track to hunting down this thief and acing this mission!

But then they hear boisterous laughter, booming from the stage behind them, and everyone in the market turns to follow the noise.

“—And we’re here to destroy Maple Fest!”

Gasps and confused murmurs ripple out through the crowd. “What? Destroy Maple Fest?” people call out, as if they didn’t quite hear the masked men right. “Who would want to do that?”

“Our goals are none of your concern! And our plan is working! Anyone missing these?” The masked men mock in tandem, holding up the stolen items in their hands, one by one.

“Hey! Those are my candy molds!” the seller behind the tall man shouts, outraged.

“And those are my pans!” says another woman.

“Somebody stop them!” someone cries out.

“So those are the thieves,” the armored man says, his deep voice carrying over the crowd, making Kiba jolt.

“What—what the hell?!” Kiba hollers, pointing up at the man. “So it’s not you stealing stuff?”

The man glances over at them, bemused. “Me? A thief?” He eyes Kiba with a casual downward tilt of his head. “Is that what you thought?” he asks, his voice laced with amusement.

“You’re suspicious looking,” Kiba says confidently, ignoring how Shino pinches the bridge of his nose with a small sigh. And suspicious feeling; it’s warm enough outside in the midday sun, but standing next to this guy is like standing in a freaking sauna. It must be hard on the kikaichu, considering how Shino shifts uncomfortably in the humid heat.

“I do stand out,” the man concedes, “but one could say the same about you two.”

Kiba bristles. “What’s that supposed to mean?!”

The man taps at the side of his face. “Sunglasses don’t cover up those clan cheek markings, little shinobi. Besides, I only arrived in this town an hour ago. I’m no more the thief than you are.”

“Oh, uh, well—” Okay, the guy might have a point or three, but, “—Anyway, how do we stop those masked guys from all the way back here?”
“Good question.”

Back on the stage, the masked men all raise their hands in tandem. “Get ready! For our! Arboreal anarchy!” They pose together in a line, their arms creating a flower shape. “And for our finale, we’re here to take… the sacred scroll!”

“Hey, why is it sacred?” a little boy in front of Kiba asks his friend.

“It’s old? Oh! And my mom says she heard it has Senju Hashirama’s signature in it!” his friend explains, eager.

“Ooh,” the boy replies, appreciably awed. A few eavesdroppers around them even clap their hands together in excitement, forgetting the threat in front of them.

Kiba tsk and crosses his arms. “Man, why is that so important?” he complains. “The first Hokage is cool and all, but his signature on a dusty roll of paper won’t do anything.”

Shino shrugs a shoulder, also at a loss.

But the armored man stills, cocking his head to the side as if listening for something. After a moment, he speaks aloud. “That scroll is not what they believe it to be.”

Kiba looks up. “Oh, it does something cool?” he asks.

“Not from your perspective.” The man crouches down to the two boys. “If that scroll is opened here and now, with any trace of blood, it could devastate this town,” he murmurs, voice low and grave.

“What!” Kiba shouts; he covers his mouth when one of the civilians glances over at him. Akamaru whines, plaintive. “We have to get over there and steal it first!” he hisses.

“Wait,” the armored man says, stilling Kiba and Shino with a giant hand. “It seems it’s already in the right hands.”

—-

Hinata steadies her breath, doing her level best not to hyperventilate; she’s stuck without her teammates. Karin squeezes her arm to ground her, and to her surprise, it’s a comfort. Hinata focuses, and they listen as the silver-masked man saunters over to the shrine, lazily spinning his knife from hand to hand.

“And now for the main event!” he crows. He flips opens up the display case with a triumphant slam. The market goes silent as they all stare at the completely empty case.

“What—Hey! The scroll is gone!” Silver shouts, sticking his head straight into the open display and looking all around the inside. “Someone got here before us!”

“That’s not supposed to happen, right?” Blue asks, slowly lowering his own staff in confusion.

“Shhh, stay in character!” he hisses Red as he sharply elbows his blue companion in the ribs.

Hinata and Karin glance quizzically at each other. “What the hell is with these guys?” Karin mouths to Hinata, eyebrows raised.

Karin motions for Hinata to get up and follow her, and as they sneak around from the back of the display, Hinata wonders the same thing. Regardless, the masked men want that scroll, for who-
knows—what purpose. Maybe Karin was right to take it first, if it was going to be stolen by them.

“We have to find it! Tear this shrine apart if you have to!” Silver hollers to his companions.

“Now let’s get out of here while they’re distracted,” Karin whispers to Hinata. They sidle their way out the front entry, avoiding the notice of the masked men.

But they didn’t expect the crowd to respond. Someone gasps. “Look! That girl’s got the scroll!”

Karin and Hinata frantically try to shush them, Hinata shaking her head and Karin making a swiping cancelling motion across her neck, but it's too late. All five colorful villains turn around in unison.

“Um,” says Hinata.

“Hey! What are you brats doing? Give that back!” Silver commands, running forward out of the shrine with an outstretched hand.

“Go away, you weirdo!” Karin shrieks, clutching the scroll to her chest with one hand, twisting down and springing forward off her other hand to flip-kick Silver in the chin.

“Holy shit!” says Green, watching his leader skid across the stage as the crowd begins to cheer.

“Get going!” shouts Red, pushing Blue forward towards Hinata. “Our jobs are on the line here!”

“Eep!” Hinata’s Byakugan activates; she ducks under Blue’s swinging staff. As he turns to attack again, she lifts up her hand and taps him in the chest with an open palm strike. The hit connects, cutting off the chakra point, and the man goes down like a sack of rice. The crowd erupts in roars.

Hinata blinks as he unceremoniously tumbles off the side of the stage. “Oh,” she says. She didn’t expect that to work so well.

“Woah, nice one!” Karin calls out with an approving glance. She twists the scroll around under her arm. “Ok, come on!” she says, grabbing Hinata’s hand and they run together to the front of the stage.

“How do we get out of here?” Karin shouts over the noise as she looks about; they’re blocked on all sides by the raucous and cheering crowd.

“Hey kid, what do you think you’re doing?” Yellow growls lowly, advancing towards them, waving around an unsheathed tanto. “We’re trying to work here! Stop messing this up for us!” The other men pick themselves back up, raring for round two.

“We’re—“ Hinata starts, wavering. Karin takes a wary step back towards the edge of the stage, but her face set in defiance that could rival Naruto’s.

What would Naruto do?

Hinata steels herself. She steps to the side and in front of Karin, drawing herself up into a Gentle Fist stance. “I’m here to protect what’s precious,” she declares.

---

Kurenai taps her foot, impatient, on the patio floor. She thought an outdoor café might be a nice and peaceful place to wait for her students, but not even tea cakes can distract her from her ruminating.

She sips her awful floral tea, grimaces, and sets it back down. She could have gone with them, or
should have gone with them. But she folds her arms and leans back in her chair, trying to force herself to stay put. No, she doesn’t want to stifle their growth as shinobi, either.

She hears an uptick in screaming in the direction of the marketplace, and she’s up from her seat before she realizes it.

“What’s going on?” Kurenai asks another café patron hustling towards the noise, of all things, as she steps away from the rendezvous point into the street.

“It’s those thieves, I think!” the woman shouts back without stopping. “I gotta see this!”

“I don’t know why they’re stealing all that other stuff, when the old scroll was what they want,” says a nearby old man to his wife. “They’re having a heck of a time trying to wrestle it from that girl, though. What the heck are they feeding these kids these days?”

But Kurenai’s stopped listening to them, breaking out into a run towards the market. ---

“Hinata! That’s Hinata!” Kiba cries out, with Akamaru barking fruitlessly over the din of the crowd ahead. She and some red-headed girl protecting the Crazy Death Scroll are on their own with those masked freaks, with no idea what they’re carrying. He tries to push through the rows but it’s packed tight, and he’s too far back to try and leap over all these people. Shino’s holding back too, his bugs too agitated by the heat to control. Kiba growls to himself. If this tall man is right, and anybody so much as looks at that scroll wrong, the entire town will be in deep shit.

“Hey, big dude!” Kiba shouts up to said man, slamming a hand on his armoured leg. “Help us stop those guys!”

He glances down at Kiba. “You think I can help?” he asks, curious.

“You gotta have an idea, right? You’re still suspicious, but you actually seem really cool, and like, a powerful shinobi,” Kiba retorts, because there’s no way a guy like this is a civilian.

Shino pinches the bridge of his nose with a sigh again.

The man huffs once. “Hm. I’m ‘cool?’ Just the opposite. Stand back.” Kiba’s about to ask what the heck that means when the slats of his armor rise, as air—woah, no, steam starts to billow out from underneath.

---

Karin stares, awed, at Hinata standing before her. She’s unable to stop the blush rising in her cheeks. No one’s ever defended her before like this, let alone someone with no real reason to defend her.

But then Karin gasps as her senses go haywire. Someone is billowing out massive and boiling chakra behind them, on the other side of the crowd. The scary boiling chakra pitches higher, higher, and—

“Duck!” Karin screams over the shrill whine, pulling Hinata flush to the stage floor as the heady wave of chakra blasts above them.

The Acer-rangers fall down along with them, yelling and screaming as the intense heat curls the wood thatching on the edges of the shrine. The blast burns the surrounding lanterns, setting them aflame. The smoldering ash seeps down into the cracked floorboards.
Below her, Karin hears a cacophony of familiar hisses. They’re fuses, and the sound is coming from right under the stage.

---

A renewed commotion erupts in the square as Kurenai nears the crowd, and she has a sinking feeling her students are caught in the center of it. She makes it to the edge of the din, when a sudden blast of steam runs right over top the heads of the audience, vaporizing the hanging banners above them.

Kurenai whips her head around tracking the origin of the blast, and her heart leaps to her throat as a delayed wave of residual and caustic chakra crests over her. Even a genin could sense it; that’s the power of a jinchuuriki, and Kurenai needs to get her kids away from this town right now.

Kiba is the first to spot her and he waves, oblivious to what he’s standing next to. “Oh hey, Sensei —”

Kurenai grabs Kiba and Shino both by the collar, channeling chakra to her legs as she leaps to the closest roof.

“Did you see that thing he did with the steam, Sensei? That was awesome!” Kiba babbles, pointing back down to the ground as he shouts, his sunglasses askew on his face.

Awesome is not the word she’d use. “Where is Hinata?” Kurenai demands.

Kiba flinches and then chuckles nervously. “Uh, about that—” he starts, pointing towards the stage.

Kurenai drops her students in shock. Hinata is still down there. Hinata is in trouble. “Wait here and don’t move,” she commands them both, ready to leap back down.

Which is right when the entire stage explodes in a cacophony of color.

---

Karin drops the scroll, bear hugs Hinata with both arms and pinwheels, rolling them both near the stage’s edge just as an explosion of fireworks rocks the center of the floor. The sound is tremendous as wood slats crack open with the first blast, bursting upwards in a technicolour volcano. More and more mortars barrel into the sky with a shrill whistle, erupting above the market in a kaleidoscope of rainbow lights. The crowd erupts in turn, cheering at the newfound mayhem.

Karin cracks open one eye and spots the scroll rolling away with the vibrations, towards a blood-smeared crater in the stage. She pushes herself forward and snatches the scroll before it can roll through the blood. She shakes her head at the single desperate clang of bells that follows, and for a moment the scroll is almost burning to the touch.

Karin gets to her feet, offering Hinata a hand up. “You okay?” she asks.

“Yes, thanks to you,” Hinata smiles, a little shaken, but her chakra still bright.

Karin opens her mouth to surely embarrass herself, when out of the smoke a final bloodied ranger runs at them. Hinata turns, darts around Karin and slams the last delirious masked freak off the stage with a palm strike. The crowd cheers again from behind them, lifting up the battered Acer-rangers as the light from the fireworks continue to illuminate the market in flashbangs of color.

Karin grimaces the people shouting and clapping for them, on top of the immense caustic chakra still lingering somewhere in the market. “There’s no chance I’m getting out with my scroll by going the
front way,” Karin says, mostly to herself. She winces at the next whistling explosion, and curls her arms around the scroll for comfort.

“Let’s try the back,” Hinata suggests. They’re in luck; one of the fireworks has fully torn out the back of the shrine, opening up to a gap behind the stage. It’s a tight fit, but the two girls sidle through, popping out into an empty back road.

They don’t stop running until they hit the eastern edge of the town, where the short clover grass gives way to distant patches of flowing bluestem and orange prairie lilies.

“This is it,” Karin says, a bit reluctant.

“Will you be okay?” Hinata asks, worried.

“I’ll be fine from here,” Karin says, holding up the scroll. “And I’ll get this back to where it belongs, wherever that is.”

“I hope you find that place,” Hinata says, soft and sincere.

Karin’s eyes close to the seaside music in her mind, the scroll resting over the hidden picture on her heart. “It’s home,” she says, assured, as she opens her eyes to look at Hinata again. “I know I’ll find it.”

--

Hinata is struck by the certainty Karin’s voice, speaking of a place she’s never been. But she must know it in her heart.

“Thank you,” Karin next says to Hinata, smiling bright and wide and happy, for the first time.

“Thank you for helping me.”

It’s a beautiful smile, Hinata thinks, smiling back. “Oh, anyone would do the same,” she says.

“No, not anyone. Thank you, Hinata,” Karin says again, earnest.

“Oh,” Hinata says, blinking. But she doesn’t stop smiling. “Then you’re welcome. I wanted to help.”

Karin nods. “Your chakra… you really mean that,” Karin murmurs as her smile turns shy, color high in her cheeks. She takes a step backwards towards the lilies, hesitates, and then darts forward, planting a peck on Hinata’s cheek.

Oh, Hinata thinks, as another firework explodes high above them, lighting up the dim alley.

“Maybe I’ll see you again!” Karin says as she takes a few steps back into the grass. “No, definitely again!” She waves one more time and then turns, running towards the field and into the flowers.

Hinata stands there and watches Karin go until she’s swallowed up by the tall grass and speckled orange. She can’t stop touching her cheek. She hopes Karin finds what she’s looking for. And something about her is familiar. She reminds Hinata of someone. Someone as bright as sunshine, just like—

Hinata’s face turns tomato red. The kiss on her cheek burns, and she begins to stammer as her brain goes entirely offline.
“Hinata! Hinata, what happened? Speak to me!” Kiba shouts at his catatonic teammate, shaking her shoulders with gusto. Shino looks over Kiba’s shoulder in vague consternation.

“Hinata?” Kurenai-sensei asks, as she crouches down next to her unresponsive student. “I don’t sense genjutsu… are you hurt?”

Shino shakes his head in time to Kiba waving a hand in front of Hinata’s eyes. “I don’t think she is? She usually only gets like this around Naruto,” Kiba says to their sensei.

“True,” Kurenai-sensei sighs, knowingly, “but he isn’t here.”

Kiba shrugs his shoulders and lifts his hands up. “Then beats me!” Then his shoulders drop as he looks around the alley. “And hey, that red-headed girl isn’t here anymore.”

“Red-headed…?” Kurenai-sensei trails off, and stares off into space with the strangest expression on her face. Then she shakes her head the slightest with a scoff, and scoops up Hinata into her arms. “Right. Uzumaki or not, she’ll snap out of it eventually,” their sensei says. “We have something more vital to attend to.”

“What is it?” Shino asks.

Kurenai-sensei pivots on her heel and stalks towards the main road, turning her head back to address her students. “You two are going to watch me yell at the people responsible for this.”

“Woo hoo!” Kiba shouts, throwing his hands up above his head. Akamaru yips, delighted, and Shino pushes up his glasses.

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Kurenai kicks open the door to the town hall, a dazed Hinata still in her arms. The so-called Acer-rangers are lying in various states of pain, but all manage to flinch despite their wounds at the sight of her young charge. Kurenai smiles inwardly as she deposits Hinata into Kiba and Shino’s hold. She steps forward and rips the mask off the silver idiot, who immediately cowers in front of her.

“Who do you think you are?” she hisses.

“Please don’t hurt us, shinobi!” he cries, hiding behind the cold pack clutched to his chin. “It’s not our fault! We got paid to do the show!”

“I’m never taking a gig like this again,” moans the red one, pawing at his singed arms.

“Paid? By who?” Kurenai asks as if she doesn’t already know the answer, her hand curling into a fist. Forget genjutsu; she’ll pummel the incriminating evidence out of these fools if she has to.

The doors to the main office fly open, and the mayor bustles out, with her assistant in tow. “What on earth is all that noise?” she demands.

“It was the mayor!” the actors all wail, pointing to the woman in question.

The mayor blinks, uncomprehending. “What?” she asks, glancing back and forth.

“These fake thieves—what were you thinking? ” Kurenai demands.

“Well, I don’t see why you should complain,” the mayor sniffs, crossing her arms.

“You could have all gotten killed,” Kurenai stresses, the image of the towering armored jinchuuriki...
still burned in her mind.

“But no one died. It was great!” the mayor says, ignoring Kurenai’s murderous look.

“Why did you stage the thefts from earlier this week to create a mission?” Kurenai asks.

“We had to drum up interest and intrigue,” the assistant explains. “And it would look suspicious if
we didn’t make a show of investigating it.”

“And the scroll?” Kurenai hisses. “That was an act, too?”

“Yes!” The mayor claps her hands once together, pleased. “It was part of the plan! We were
supposed to use that seal scroll and set off a finale to go with the light show.”

“A light show,” Kurenai says, flat. “All this, for a light show.”

The mayor waves her hands. “We wanted to make Maple Fest an unforgettable experience. New!
Hip for the kids.”

“Think of the exposure!” the assistant says, starry-eyed, clutching the clipboard to his chest. “Our
tourist industry! We’ll be the talk of Fire Country!”

Kurenai resists the urge to genjutsu everyone in the room. “And where exactly did you get such an
idiotic idea?”

The mayor huffs, apparently offended by Kurenai’s lack of vision. “I hired a consultant. Or, well,
this one young man offered to be a consultant a couple weeks back. He threw in the seal scroll for
free as a sign of good will.” Then she harrumphs, hands on her hips. “It’s a shame some red-head
hooligan stole it.”

“For shame,” the assistant tsks, shaking his head.

The mayor claps her hands together again. “But it’s not much of a loss, considering the result! This’ll
be the talk of the town for weeks! And where did that man with the steam go? What a great trick!
We could hire him for the pyrotechnics next year,” she muses, gazing off into the middle distance
with renewed fervor.

“Next year,” Kurenai says, in disbelief. Clueless. These people are all clueless. “You’re thinking
about next year? You all do realize,” she enunciates slowly, casting her red glare across all of them,
“how much trouble you are in right now?”

“Er,” the mayor says, her hands freezing.

“Is it a lot?” asks the yellow actor, blinking his one unswollen eye.

“Oh,” Kurenai intones, drawing herself up to her full height, eyes blazing, “For knowingly falsifying
a shinobi mission and endangering my kids in the process, we are well beyond ‘a lot.’”

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They’re trailing down through the island towards the southern coast, to the third seal. The forest is
growing more muggy, a little more hazy. Here the ground is softer, wetter, and the grass taller. The
trees are turning to mangrove and hibiscus, threatening to drop them all into a feral swamp. It feels
like homeland, the marshlands of Mist, and nothing but, all at the same time. It settles and unsettles in
Zabuza’s skin that he can find familiarity in a place like this.
Home. He’s pushed it to the back of his mind these past few days, in his quest to escape, the very reason he’s in this mess to begin with. How can Zabuza inspire a revolution, a rescue of his country, if he can’t even rescue himself?

Something dull throbs in his head, but it’s not a headache. Zabuza could lose himself to his maudlin thoughts at this rate, but only if, by some horrible Uzu god, that Gato would stop his whining.

“Where are you taking me? What do you want? Money, ransom?? I refuse!”

In an ideal world, Zabuza would suggest Haku encase Gato in a block of ice and they just push him there, but the ghost might get irritated with them if that ends up as an encore of the shattering palm tree.

Said ghost looks back and narrows her eyes at him, like she knows exactly what he’s thinking, and yeah, he’ll keep that bright idea to himself. He keeps trying to not shiver at the sight of her; the baby Uzumaki in Wave was one thing, but her red hair is setting off all sorts of instinctive urges to run.

Speaking of the baby Uzumaki, what happened to those brats and Hatake, anyway? He can’t really remember what happened. Maybe they ended up here too. Or maybe they’re somewhere else entirely. He’s not going to entertain the possibility that they’re dead until he has to. It’s not like he cares if they’re alright; he just wants to fight that one-eyed scarecrow again.

Right.

The bushes stir from behind them. Zabuza glances back, but nothing’s there. The ever-present moth on his head takes the moment to coast down to the hilt of his sword, touching along his hand before setting on the blade.

Then something thuds right inside his ear, like a dull bang on brassy metal. He turns his head sharp to catch the source, but again, nothing.

“Now what the hell was that.” Zabuza mutters, even more exasperated, to the moth loitering on his sword. The moth bobs, and flutters its wings once. Zabuza would describe it almost as a shrug, but that’s stupid, because it’s a bug.

Now he’s talking to bugs, too. Great.

He tries to distract himself, and notices a rusted kunai sticking out of the dirt. It must be years old. Besides their resident ghost and the lingering seal traps, it’s one of the rare signs of any other former Uzu life.

Which, when Zabuza thinks about it, makes little sense. The entire island was massacred. Wiped out, half in part by the hands of his people. In all the area they’ve covered so far, he hasn’t seen any human remains. Zabuza’s fingers itch. How is that even possible?

“You know you’ll pay for this!” Gato shouts some more, panicked, and breaking Zabuza again out of his thoughts. “I have lawyers! I can sue!”

“It’ll be hard to talk to your imaginary ‘lawyers’ back in Wave when I cut out your tongue,” Zabuza bites back, a half-second away from knocking Gato over and dragging him by his hair to the next seal.

But before he can, the moth swoops down and flaps its wings, batting Gato’s face. It doesn’t look menacing in the least, but Gato screams anyway, swiping a frantic pinwheel of hands at the moth and missing completely. The moth flits about Gato a few more times in taunting spirals, before swooping
away in a graceful arc.

“Okay, I like you,” Zabuza says to the moth, as it wafts up to settle on his hair again. If he’s going to go crazy talking to Uzu bugs, he might as well embrace it. “And who’s scared of a moth, anyway?” he goads Gato.

“Ha, scared?” Gato shakily laughs, “I was just surprised!”

“You should be scared. Uzu moths are full of venom,” Zabuza lies. He hopes it’s a lie, anyway, but Gato’s silent terror is worth it.

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Gato is cowed for five blissful minutes when he starts shrieking again. “Oh god no, it’s back! Get away from me!” he screams, flailing into some brambles.

Zabuza opens his mouth, about to ask what the fuck is wrong now, when Haku says the most terrifying words possible:

“Oh, hello there, fox.”

Zabuza whips his head around and freezes. Haku is patting a large grey fox on the head. A fox. Haku is standing right next to an Uzu _demon_, petting it like it’s nothing. Yet the fox just sits there, staring its eerie eyes at Gato thrashing around, stuck in the bramble bush.

“Is he a friend of yours, Uzumaki-sama?” Haku asks the ghost, still scratching behind the foxe’s ears. The fox seems more bemused than anything by the gesture, and seems to be humoring Haku, but makes no move to leave.

The ghost smiles. _You may call me Mito, you know_, she says to Haku. _And he and I could be friends, if he would like to be._

The fox flicks its ears, and huffs after a moment, causing the ghost to smile wider.

“A pleasure to meet a friend of Uzu—I mean, Mito-sama,” Haku says, patting the fox’s head one more time in greeting. Zabuza really wishes Haku would stop doing that.

Then Zabuza rolls back the conversation in his head. “Mito,” Zabuza repeats. “Uzumaki Mito?”

This is it, this is the absolute worst possible scenario. They’re wandering in the woods with the Uzumaki to end all Uzumaki. No village has ever managed to kill her despite their best efforts; she died on her own terms. And apparently even _death_ was merely a suggestion, considering her immense chakra spirit standing before them here and now.

Mito angles to glance at Zabuza with a regal posture. _Correct. And garbage-faces will address me as Uzumaki-sama_, she adds, tilting up her chin.

“What’s your name?” Haku asks the fox.

“Let me guess,” Zabuza adds, sarcastic, “if you’re Uzumaki Mito, then that fox is the Uzukage?”

_Not quite_. Mito says, narrowing her eyes sharply at the lack of address. She then looks down at the fox with a questioning gaze. The fox nods, and she grins.

_You may have heard of him as The White Fang_, she begins. Her grin turns a touch wicked when she adds, _But he also goes by Hatake Sakumo._
It’s like the air is punched out of Zabuza’s lungs. The White Fang—Hatake…? No. No fucking way. Copycat’s father is an Uzu fox? That wasn’t in the fucking Bingo Book!

Even Haku’s eyes widen in shock. The fox perks up, glancing back and forth at Haku and Zabuza expectantly. Zabuza wants to claw his own face off.

“Who are you talking to!?” Gato shouts frantically. “You can’t scare me, you freaks! I’m warning you, I have powerful allies who will raze this island to the—”

Something slams into the back of Gato’s head. He slumps down into the moss, a heavy and cracked coconut rolling away from his body. Human, ghost and fox all look up. High in a gnarled tree is a chittering, agitated lemur with its baby, gesturing down at Gato and then to the crying pup on its back with angry arm movements.

Haku hums and nods up at the lemur. “Oh yes,” he replies. “He’s been most disruptive. Thank you, and our apologies.”

*Let’s move on,* Mito suggests, as if nothing happened. Hatake’s dad chuffs in what sounds like agreement, along with a wave of his tail.

Zabuza can’t quite bring himself to look directly at the fox whose son he tried to kill a week ago. So he bends down, roughly grabs Gato by the ankle, and drags him through the mud and further into the marshlands, trying not to laugh hysterically at how fucked everything is. The moth pats his head with a flap of its wings as they all descend further into the mist.
Kakashi allows himself a moment to bask in the breeze, his senses still singing to him. Yes, this is still the right direction, and they’re getting closer and closer to finding the source: another Uzumaki.

It’s not entirely clear who won the game of tag; the game ended abruptly when Tsunade cratered some private land and they had to run from the farm’s hired security, but the excitement of escaping arrest saw them all through the wide prairies of southern Konoha much faster than expected. They’re now along a well-worn path of short grass, weaving through the growing number of trees at an easy pace.

But Kakashi can’t get too relaxed. He glances back at Utakata; The kids are in his arms, passed out from overexerting themselves. His students are still susceptible to the limitations of juvenile foxes, vulnerable, and that’s what worries Kakashi the most.

“Saiken won’t let anything happen,” Kurama says, unbidden.

“Hm?” Kakashi asks, pretending he doesn’t know what Kurama is talking about.

Kurama snorts. “Don’t give me that. It’s Saiken,” he stresses, as if that explains it all. “He doesn’t have an evil bone in his body.” Kurama squints up at the sky, as if trying to puzzle something out. “Or any bones, I think. And I know for a fact he’s not going anywhere before seeing Katsuyu,” he says, ending in a mocking sing-song tone.

“Oh?” Kakashi asks, now intrigued. As a shinobi, he’s not about to turn down hearing gossip, especially something as novel as tailed-beast gossip. “Katsuyu?” The name sounds familiar.

Kurama nods his head back. “The shitluck gambler’s slug summons. My brother’s had a thing for Katsuyu for years and still hasn’t said anything,” he grins. “He’s too shy to make a move.”

Huh. Kakashi supposes giant slugs can find love, too. But considering the look on Kurama’s face, that’s not what he’s concerned about.

“But you’re not too shy to let something slip,” Kakashi surmises.

“For butting in on my business and blabbing to my siblings? Oh, I’ll make him sweat. First chance I get,” Kurama chuckles evilly. Kakashi finds it funny how an ‘all-powerful’ being can be so remarkably petty in his revenge.

It’s very… human.

There’s one possible problem with Kurama’s plan, however. “But this would hinge on Katsuyu understanding you,” Kakashi points out.

Kurama frowns at that. “Hm. Shit. I might have to get back to full power for this to work.”

“Or one of us, once we’re human, could relay it,” Kakashi adds.

Kurama tsk. “I still don’t get why you want to bother with that. You were more useless as humans.”

“Thumbs,” is all Kakashi says to that in retort.

Kurama sneers at the road ahead, his claws digging in with each step. “Don’t remind me. This first thing I’m doing is strangling Suzu with my bare paws when I’m back to normal.”
Speaking of Suzu and the foxes... “How long have you known them?” Kakashi asks, curious. Beyond sharing the same shape, he’s not certain how Kurama, part of a family of tailed beasts purely derived from chakra, relates to Uzu foxes specifically.

“Since I can recall,” Kurama admits. “They’ve been around forever.”

“They were here before you,” Kakashi says more than asks, his brow raising. He tries to slot this new piece of information somewhere into place.

Kurama scoffs. “What, did you think that I had something to do with the making of those idiots? There was a misunderstanding, and they latched onto me,” he huffs, and adds, “I don’t know why they care.”

But Kakashi’s sure he’s lying about that. “So it’s some misunderstanding that’s lasted, hmm, centuries?” he comments, mild. “And you go along with it, despite it annoying you.”

“So I humor them. Does it matter?” Kurama snaps, in a slightly wounded, desperate way that seems unconscious on his part. It must be an old and sore subject, Kakashi suspects.

He pulls back from that thread before Kurama shuts him out entirely. “Maa, well, returning from the dead as a different creature entirely doesn’t happen every day. Why not puzzle out the logistics? Could you come back as, say, a human in a similar way?”

Kurama snorts. “First of all, that would be the worst, how dare you, and second, your approach is the problem to begin with.”

“My approach?” Kakashi asks.

“What do you even know about Uzu fuuinjutsu?” Kurama challenges.

“Only a trained Uzumaki knows how to wield it,” Kakashi answers, not rising to the bait. It was widely assumed by many as a form of kekkei genkai. But Kakashi remembers those sleepless nights Minato poured over Kushina’s few Uzu scrolls, trying and failing to learn it anyway. Kakashi also recalls how he struggled to stay awake, frustrated by how he was unable to comprehend any of the designs.

But what always baffled Kakashi the most was how Kushina would refuse to help, telling Minato he had to figure it out on his own. As far as Kakashi remembered, as he got pulled away from his sensei to more and more ANBU duties, that Minato never fully managed it.

Somehow it’s the wrong thing to say, because Kurama laughs once without mirth. “If that were true, I would have been free twelve years ago!” he hisses. He stomps ahead, the conversation severed.

But Kakashi ruminates on the words, and comes up short. But that means—what does that mean? He looks back at his students, at Naruto. He thinks about Kushina, Minato, and the seal linking them all together. What is the secret to the Uzumaki’s power?

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In the mid afternoon sun, light breaking through the trees, Angry Mito trots ahead in the grass towards the path to the next encroaching forest. Sassy Sakumo is loping sedately behind him, though he keeps turning back to side-eye Utakata every so often. The kid’s somehow been tricked into becoming the de-facto baby fox carrier in the last hour, with all three bundled up and fast asleep in his arms. He looks entirely at a loss at how he got into his situation, but so determined to not drop any of them.
Tsunade laughs quietly to herself; it’s adorable. Then she laughs for another reason: she absolutely recognizes this forest, and what’s hidden within it.

“Shizune…!” Tsunade starts, excited.

“Oh, no,” Shizune responds, immediately exasperated. “We’re really going to go there for a boat?”

“I’m almost afraid to ask where we’re going now,” Utakata responds, hushed, trying not to wake the little foxes in his hold. Yes, yes, Tsunade knows exactly where they’re all going!

“Tanzaku Quarters!” Tsunade and Shizune say at the same time, though Shizune says it with much less enthusiasm.

“Hey, if that’s what the foxes want,” Tsunade says, shrugging her shoulders with a shit-eating grin. She then rubs her hands together with glee. “Ahh, you guys are so good to me!” she crows to the foxes ahead. Tsunade could find a hidden spot to gamble in even the most backwater of villages, but there was no place like Tanzaku Quarters to really make a killing. They were going to win enough money for a boat—no, a whole ship, for sure!

She touches her grandfather’s necklace. Hopefully, her disastrous luck would stay away this time. She sees pale hair and green eyes and a kind smile—she shies away from the memory. She can’t think about Dan.

But she can think about Nawaki instead. His shining eyes and boisterous laugh, and how loud he could yell when he lost at anything. Her heart’s starting to heal, and with it, the guilt she has for her brother’s death. She rests her palm across the necklace. This time it’s different. It has to be. This is for her grandmother’s homeland.

Tsunade forges ahead, a new spring in her step, and links arms with Shizune. “Chin up, Shizune, this’ll be fun. Did I ever tell you about when I taught Nawaki how to play poker?” she asks. “My brother,” she adds for Utakata, when she catches him glancing down at the little orange fox in his arms with the most hilariously confused look on his face.

Shizune’s eyes widen slightly at the name. It’s not surprising she’s shocked; when has Tsunade ever talked about her brother sober?

But Shizune then smiles, encouraging. “I don’t believe you’ve told me,” she says. “What happened?” Utakata glances over, curious too, but Tsunade doesn’t mind him listening in.

Tsunade taps a finger on her arm, thinking back. “Nawaki was, hm, five?” she estimates. “I was back on leave from a mission, and Nawaki was a week away from starting at the Academy. I think he was really nervous to start, and wanted to show off right away, so he badgered me to teach him a move. So, I offered to teach him something he’d never learn at school, and the only thing I could think of was poker.”

“That’s the only thing you could think of?” Shizune asks, a slight laugh in her voice.

“He was too young and untrained with chakra to learn anything medical, and I convinced him that poker would help him mask his emotions and how to lie effectively. Well, I teach him the rules and we played the first round, and he beats me with a royal flush!” She crosses her arms and laughs. “I remember him asking, ‘Is that good?’ and I just about lost it. I was so pissed I challenged him again, giving it everything I had.”

Shizune smiles wider. “Let me guess…”
“You’d guess right: I lost at least a dozen games in a row! And then he had the gall to get mad at me! He accused me of going easy on him and threw my card deck out the window. And then my parents yelled at me a week later because he started playing poker and betting at the Academy.”

“You just couldn’t win,” Shizune teases.

“It was a lose/lose situation all around,” Tsunade mock sighs. “But hey, I taught him something. So the moral of the story is, avoid playing poker with little kids in Tanzaku Quarters.”

“Wise words,” Utakata says, amusement in his eyes. He doesn’t ask where Nawaki is now, though, to which Tsunade is grateful.

“Hey, you think that basement place on main is under new ownership yet?” she asks Shizune, changing the subject.

“Odds are good. And the employee turnover there’s quicker than most,” Shizune comments.

“How much do you owe them?” Utakata asks.

Tsunade makes a so-so gesture with her hand. “Ehh, a couple hundred thousand?” she estimates. “No wait, a couple million.”

“Um,” says Utakata.

Tsunade winks. “It’s not like it ever matters after a decade and a change of clothes with these places. ‘New owner, clean slate!’ That’s my motto.”

Utakata shares a perturbed glance with Shizune, who smiles and leans over to pat his arm in consolidation.

“Welcome to the club,” Shizune says.

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“Hey, you doing okay, Sensei?” Kiba asks, patting Kurenai’s arm.

Kurenai rubs at her temple with her fingers, attempting to will away the dull throb. They’re headed to the closest outpost to make a criminal report, and her adrenaline crash is making for one hell of a headache. The level of genjutsu she used to subdue that entire office for the next couple hours was probably overkill, but she doesn’t regret it.

And as proud as she is for Hinata putting some fear into those masked morons, Kurenai will have to have a talk with her about what exactly happened. Yet considering the state Hinata is still in, she’s going to have to hold off until her charge is a bit more verbal.

What Kurenai’s not at all looking forward to is facing the Hokage with this disaster of a mission report. The added paperwork alone is going to be immense.

Kurenai runs her hand over her face. Shino silently hands Kurenai a pair of bright red-rimmed sunglasses. Kurenai sighs, and puts them on. This won’t be the worst state she’s been in walking into an outpost.

They’re just outside the door when Kurenai feels a small spike of chakra. She tenses, but no, this chakra feels familiar, and with the day she’s had, all too welcome.

“Saka!” Kurenai says, pleasantly surprised to see the badger summons.
“Nice look, Kurenai,” the badger comments, flat. Kurenai isn’t sure if that’s sarcastic, but Saka tends to be hard to read on a good day. “Asuma sent me. Had a warning for you.”

“A little late for that,” Kurenai sighs.

“So those light explosions I saw were you? Huh,” Saka comments. “But keep on your toes, still. He thinks something’s up with all the C-Rank missions.”

“What?” she asks, her heart starting to pound again. So his team’s mission was compromised too? And... Kakashi’s team still wasn’t back yet when her team left. What happened to them?

Before she can puzzle out Asuma’s warning further, the door to the outpost slides open, and it’s another familiar face.

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“Kurenai! Nice shades!” says Anko, grinning. She peeks out the door to where Kurenai’s new kids are standing. “You and the brats on your first outing?” she asks.

“Who are you calling a brat?” Kiba demands.

“You, brat,” Anko says, sticking out her tongue, which makes the kid growl. It’s way too easy to rile up the newbie genin. Which is probably why they keep letting her volunteer for the Chuunin Exams, come to think of it.

“This is not a good time for teasing, Anko,” Kurenai says, cutting off Kiba’s building outrage, and wow, she sounds tired. Kurenai pushes up her sunglasses into her hair, and runs through much of what happened down at Kaede.

Anko is outright cackling by the end. “What a shitshow! Ooh, want me to take over on the criminal report?” she asks, rubbing her palms together with, what some would say, way too much enthusiasm. But hey, it’s what makes her so suited to T & I.

“If you’re not too busy—“ Kurenai starts, but Anko sees Tsuru, her snake summons, slithering in from her scouting, and Anko flaps a hand.

“Oh no, it’s fine. I got done with my thing early,” she says, feeling Tsuru curl loose around her ankle. “And us goblins have to take advantage of outside time whenever Ibiki lets us free from the dungeons,” she adds with an eyebrow waggle.

Anko hears a cough from low on the ground, and she glances down at the badger.

“If you’re both done, I’m looking for someone,” the badger says.

“You’re with Asuma, right? Saka? What’s up?” Anko asks. She feels her snake curl tighter around her leg.

“I’m on the hunt for toads,” Saka says.


The black and purple snake sniffs and lifts her head and tilts it part way up, choosing to address Anko instead of Saka. “Their scent headed sssouth, but daysss ago.”
Saka tsks. “So much for that.”

Tsuru laughs, uncoiling from Anko’s ankle. “Hunting for food? Eat wormsss if you’re ssso hungry, badger.”

Saka snaps at the snake, who arches back with a wide mouthed hiss.

“Hey! Hey! No eating the summons!” Anko shouts, snatching up Tsuru and holding the snake above her head.


“Oh. Have him meet me at the usual place,” Kurenai replies.

“Fine,” Saka nods. “If that’s it, then I’ll be going. I have a debt to collect.” The ornery badger lumbers off out of the hut, and burrows back into the dirt. Anko finally lets down her hands.

Her snake slithers up her arm and into her sleeve with many disgruntled and creative hisses. “Rude, domesssticated beassst!” Tsuru spits, coming to rest around Anko’s neck.

Anko could point out that Tsuru started it, but snake will just sulk for days if she says anything. Instead she laments to Kurenai, “Badgers seriously don’t mix well with snakes. Why couldn’t Asuma just pick monkeys like the rest of the Sarutobi?” They both know it’s a rhetorical question, because anyone with half a brain in Konoha could figure out why.

But the bigger question is: “What could Asuma want with Jiraiya?” Anko asks, puzzled.

Kurenai cups the side of her face with her hand and sighs. “I’m not sure. I’m not sure about anything anymore.”

---

Jiraiya hums to himself as he coasts through the alley to one of his favorite travel stops, jotting another few notes in his writing scroll. Half of it’s coded messages for later distribution, but most of it’s crammed full of plot points for his next book. Oh yes, he grins to himself, the next Icha Icha was well on its way!

He can’t help but think of Tsunade whenever he’s here. Tanzaku Quarters is one of her favorite haunting grounds, and he always keeps an eye out for her, in the hopes of… something. To just see her, or maybe that one of them has finally changed enough to make amends. It won’t happen, but he still hopes to see her, anyway.

He takes his usual seat at a small table in the ramen shop. It’s not as good as Konoha’s, but this place is a fond memory, too. He can still picture a young Minato sitting across from him, like that first time Jiraiya took him here, and the poor kid was so overwhelmed by the wider world.

And yet he grew into such a fine young man, a hero, better than Jiraiya could ever be. And yet Jiraiya is somehow still here, like always, living in the stead of everyone he fails.

How old was Minato’s kid, now, anyway? Would he have graduated the Academy by now? Jiraiya tries not to feel guilty about his distance from his godson, but it weighs down more on him with every passing year. He knows Hiruzen was musing about assigning Kakashi to Naruto, and Jiraiya
didn’t know if that would be cruelty or a kindness. He might have to swing by and take a peek in Konoha, and see how things are going. Maybe one day he could teach Naruto a thing or two, too.

One day. One day.

“What will ya have?” the waitress asks, stopping by his table.

He grins at her, but his appetite is gone. “Just some tea to start, thanks.”

----

Kakuzu hates his partner. He’s barely a partner, really, and more a child in a sadist’s body. It makes Kakuzu the put-upon babysitter, when he’d rather cut out the little shit’s tongue and leave him to rot in the leaf litter. Hidan’s been talking nonstop about… something; Kakuzu hasn’t bothered to listen. Likely something about that half-made-up cult he keeps trying to recruit everyone into, if he had to guess. Kakuzu would rather spend 90 years watching trees wither. He sneers at the low hanging branches of a particularly flush sugar maple, wondering how he’s stooped so far down in life.

Kakuzu hates coming to Fire Country, too. It’s another reminder of his failure, though he focuses his still-burning ire on Taki. But it also reminds him of what he could’ve had, of who he could’ve had. As surreal as it was, Kakuzu would pin it as the one… good period in his life.

With the way Kakuzu planned his second, and surely successful, attempt on the First Hokage’s life, it shouldn’t have happened at all, but who else could have thrown off Kakuzu’s calculations so badly? Who else could get under his stitched skin, who else revelled in the game of outwitting mutual assassination attempts, and who else had just as much an infatuation for auditing budgets?

Kakuzu isn’t the type to wistfully sigh, so he won’t. He made such little bounty money in that time, given how distracted he was, but life was, for once, almost fun without it.

And then that bastard had to up and die.

Hidan snaps a tree branch out of the way of the path, and with it, Kakuzu snaps out of his reverie. Ugh, he wants to strangle himself for his pining. He’s closing in on 90 years old on this wretched planet, with no signs of stopping. Besides, that was a long time ago, a blip in the past. It does him no good to dwell on it for long. It’s not like wallowing in the memories of some long-lost fling pays the bills, anyway. With the Uzu folk—the Uzumaki, especially—all but wiped out, it’s not like the dead can fully come back, hale and whole.

Kakuzu smiles wryly under his mask. It’s not like he’s all that hale, either, considering the state of his insides.

Unfortunately, an idiot like Hidan found his own (and likely cursed) way to survive, which means Kakuzu is stuck with him, but the teen’s durability is more than can be said about Kakuzu’s prior business partners.

Kakuzu decides to tune in on whatever Hidan is prattling on about now: “—And the fuckin’ other new guy, Deidara?” Hidan asks, pausing slightly. Kakuzu doesn’t say anything, which Hidan mistakenly takes for consent to continue. “Now he’s got a bit of what it takes to praise Jashin. I don’t get that ‘high concept’ art shit, but that clay bomb thing, man. He could take out an entire fuckin’ town!”

Ah, young people and their terrible, terrible crushes. As much as he hates to gamble his own money, Kakuzu’s made his own bets on how that’s going to turn out. In an explosion, if he’s lucky enough to witness the fallout from a distance.
Karin huffs, hitching up her bag as she trots through the growing forest. Fire Country is lousy with foliage, and it’s not as quick and easy to navigate as her native grassland. This is going to take forever to get through.

An hour or two deep into the forest, she feels two large spikes of chakra headed her way. After the day she’s had, she’s not about to take any chances. She ducks below the bushes, trying not to snag on any branches, and suppresses her chakra as fully as she can, stilling herself behind the massive tree trunk.

And thank the stars she suppressed her chakra when she did, once the combined chakra of the two figures hits her with full force as they pass by. It’s all she can do to not gag; the first man’s chakra was disgusting, steeped in bloodlust and pain. The other man’s was just as bad, like concentrated agony, screaming and caustic, sorrowful and stolen.

She holds her breath, squeezing the handle of her kunai so tight she’s sure her fingers will bruise, willing them to leave quickly.

“Oh my fuck, we’ve been walking forever. And who decided on these coats? I’m taking my fucking shirt off. And what are we doing again?” Hidan asks endlessly, somehow still finding things to talk about. “I didn’t listen to Pein or whoever.”

“We’re after the jinchuuriki to the Gobi, named Han,” Kakuzu repeats, fantasizing pushing Hidan off the nearest cliff. “Should I cut off your ears to sell if you don’t use them?”

“You can cut off your limp dick since you don’t use that,” Hidan snipes back. “And so what, we kill him?” he asks, his eyes lighting up with excitement. “Finally, a sacrifice!”

“He’s needed alive, Hidan,” Kakuzu repeats, pleased to cause Hidan such deep disappointment.

“Alive?” Hidan asks, horrified. “Jashin won’t accept that!”

“Jashin can kiss my ass,” Kakuzu finally says, and the complete look of outrage on Hidan’s face is worth it for when he lunges at Kakuzu.

The men trade barbs back and forth as they fight their way into the depths of the forest, and Karin sits there, shell shocked by the exchange.

Jinchuuriki? she thinks to herself. Weren’t they those scary people who could command a tailed beast? And this man thinks he’s more powerful than a jinchuuriki?

She waits, and waits. She doesn't want to come across either of those men again for the rest of her life if she can help it, and hopes to every god they're well out of range. The chakra dissipates, finally, and she sighs out her held breath in one go, flexing her sore fingers. That was close. She'll just… go the other way for a while, and it’ll be fine.

She’s only walked for another ten minutes when the bloody chakra spikes, and Karin ducks. She screams as the man’s scythe barely misses, shaving off the very tips of her long hair.

“Kakuzu’s a geriatric fuck—I knew someone was following us!” Hidan yells.
Karin scrambles around the tree, trying to hide, trying to do anything. Hidan pops up in front of her with a laugh, and in her panic, she throws her kunai as hard as she can. To her surprise, it hits him dead in the face, sinking clean through his cheek, his head snapping back from the impact. But to her horror, his head snaps back forward again, unfazed by the gouge, and grinning as he pulls out the kunai.

He licks at the blood on his teeth and laughs. “You’ve got some fight in you! You’ll make for a substitute contribution, then,” he promises. He pulls back his scythe as—as the space is abruptly cast in shadow, growing larger by the moment.

A holler rings out from above: "Yaaaahooooo!"

Hidan blinks, looks up. "What the fu—"

A giant mass slams into the ground at full velocity, landing right on his head. The very earth shakes, swaying the trees and sending leaves and branches down around them. The dust clears, and…and standing in the epicenter is a huge beetle creature. It shifts, settles, and fans out its winglike tails behind itself.

Karin's legs buckle and she drops to the ground. It's a heady, overwhelming power, so much she could suffocate on it. Tails. The chakra. It all fits. This is a tailed beast.

"Hello," the beetle clicks and hisses, waving a leg at Karin in greeting. Karin weakly waves back.

To her shock, the beast fades, dissolving away in a shimmer of glitter. In its wake stands a grinning green-haired girl.

"Hey, there!" the girl says, waving again. She bounds right over Hidan’s body, loping towards Karin in an easy stride.

Her power is overwhelming, terrifying in a way that makes Karin want to collapse into a ball and cower. But under that her chakra is so…bubbly. Bubbly and happy and friendly. Karin latches onto that feeling like a lifeline, praying she’s an ally.

Fuu squints at her a little as she gets closer, and then grins again. “Hey, Chomei wants to know, are you an U—"

They’re interrupted by the sound of a branch snapping. Fuu twists around, peering into the trees. “Let’s see who that is!”

Karin tries to stop her. “No, wait—“

"Ah, there you are," says a low booming voice, breaking through the branches. It’s the man from before, from the festival, still swirling with a heady aura of crushing chakra, billowing steam from the slats in his armor.

“Oh! You’re Han, right?” Fuu asks, completely unfazed. “Chomei told me your name.”

“I am,” Han replies, tipping his head forward with a confirming nod. “Fuu, correct?”

“That’s me! Hey, wait.” Fuu looks around at the terrain, as if just noticing it for the first time. “I thought we were meeting in Kaede?” She pouts, hands on hips. “Aw, Chomei!” she complains to thin air. “I wanted to try that maple stuff.”
“I’m afraid that’s somewhat my fault. Here,” Han pulls out a purple drawstring bag. “I purchased this before I was… prompted to leave early,” he says, eyeing Karin slightly.

“You attacked the stage and set off all those rockets!” Karin accuses, pointing at him with her free hand.

Han inclines his head. “My apologies, I only intended to incapacitate the thieves. I was unaware of the fireworks underneath.” He pulls out another colorful, leaf patterned bag and plops it into Karin’s open hand.

“Yeah, well,” Karin trails off, holding the cute bag, not sure why she’s picking a fight with a jinchuuriki of all people. She flushes, gripping the scroll tighter, but Fuu jumps up, upset.

“I can’t believe I missed all the fun!” Fuu moans, dropping her head forward in despair. Han pats her shoulder and hands Fuu her own bag. She looks inside and lights right back up.

“Oh, you got me candy!” Fuu hollers. “Best big brother ever!” She leaps forward and wraps her arms and legs around Han like a spider monkey.

Han just stands there a moment, frozen. Slowly, he reaches up with one hand and pats her head a few times. “…You’re welcome,” he says.

“You’re related?” Karin asks. She would never have guessed.

Han shakes his head. “No—”

“Yes!” Fuu interrupts. “Chomei and Kokuo are siblings, so we are too!”

“Oh, but he seems fun.” Fuu turns around and leans over the rim of the crater, calling out, “Let’s be friends!” to the semi-crushed man.

“Fugh youuuu,” he gurgles back from within the crater, still crushed by the lingering chakra.

"No! He's not fun at all!" Karin shouts, pulling Fuu back by her arm.

"Oh, really?" Fuu wrinkles her nose for a moment. But then she smiles and bobs her head. “Okay, I’ll trust you, then!”

Han nods. "If it’s as you say, then it is not a bad idea to retreat for now."

“Alright! I’ll fly us out of here!” Fuu shouts, pumping her fists high up into the air.

“Wait, fly?!” Karin shouts back. She didn’t agree to this!
The giant beetle stomps on Hidan again, and takes off into the bright blue sky.

---

Kakuzu hates his partner, and hopes he dies. The complete idiot ran off, yelling about someone following them. As if that mattered; an actual spy would come to them and be killed more easily, and not having to track down his wayward partner wouldn’t waste so much of Kakuzu’s time. Kakuzu’s time is money.

Suddenly, the entire ground shudders in a quake, and Kakuzu barely manages not to lose his balance. What the hell was that? He crests the next clearing, and looks up at the giant mass that appears in the sky. He watches a giant beetle fly up and away out of the forest, its many tails fluttering, with a rainbow of glitter trailing after it.

Huh.

Predictably, Kakuzu finds Hidan lying in a heap in a crater. He blinks a bit at how broken Hidan looks, considering how little his injuries usually faze him, but that doesn’t stop Kakuzu from kicking the teen in the side. “Now what did we learn about running off alone?” he asks.

“Gnnt chrka btlll,” Hidan sputters.

“Speak up,” Kakuzu says.

Hidan growls and slams his jaw into his own shoulder, realigning his mouth. “Giant chakra beetle, you deaf prick!”


“Gimme—gimme a minute,” Hidan wheezes. Kakuzu watches Hidan pop his bones back into place with little pops and crackles.

“That’s the most entertaining you’ve been so far,” Kakuzu says. “Was it worth it?”

“There was a spy, you blind fuck!” Hidan claims. “A red-head kid, holding some scroll. I was going to sacrifice her, and it would have been a fucking’ decent tribute, but then—”

“And then a beetle fell on you,” Kakuzu concludes, ignoring the insult for once. A red-head with a scroll….

“It fucking fell on me out of nowhere!” Hidan continues, putting a hand over his necklace. “Jashin knows I would have made that sacrifice if that hadn’t happened. Plus that fucking blast popped out both my ear drums,” he complains, wriggling a pinky finger in one ear. “So I could barely hear shit about what they were saying. But the target was with them too, the Gobi,” Hidan adds.

Tailed beasts and a red-head. Hm. It might not be a coincidence. He needs to think. Weigh his options. Decide if this is a risk willing to take.

“So are we going after them or what?” Hidan asks, impatient.

Kakuzu makes a decision. “Don’t waste your time with some lost girl. We’re only after the jinchuuriki, and we won’t catch up to them now. We’ll return to base to make a report.” Hidan has no idea what he almost destroyed: a still-living, full-blooded Uzumaki. If Kakuzu plays his cards right, he’s hit the jackpot.
And what Pein doesn’t know won’t hurt him.

---

Itachi stands, hidden and alone, at the edge of a vacant build site in Wave. Kisame had seemed entirely uninterested to venture close to the village, which suits Itachi’s needs just fine.

It’s the soft opening of the lauded bridge to reconnect this country to east Fire Country. It’s not completely finished; there’s spaces to add the final signs, he assumes, in some sort of celebration ceremony. He walks under the bridge, along the water, and finds a name and an illegible signature scribbled on the final support beam, likely by the builder. The Great Uzumaki Bridge… the name itself and its most likely moniker makes a bold statement that Sasuke’s team was here on behalf of its completion.

Itachi hears the occasional snippet of conversation drift down from the people on the bridge. The mood is joyous, with no indication of any successful sabotage. 

And yet, as he peers around, scorch marks pock the concrete, signs of lightning violently striking the earth in unnatural places. The signs of a lightning jutsu? Something violent happened here, but Itachi can barely guess as to what.

He rubs at his eyes, and begins to walk further around the perimeter. Outside of the work site, there’s no other true, recent sign of Sasuke leaving. No residual chakra, or even blood. It’s as if Sasuke and Team Seven arrived here, and then simply vanished, all evidence washed away.

It’s beyond suspicious, and at this point, Itachi can only come to one conclusion: MIA. Sasuke is missing.

His throat seizes, and he coughs hard into the interior of his coat, the red lining masking the spit-up blood. Itachi's grip on his coat collar tightens imperceptibly. He needs Sasuke alive. He had to become strong enough to save himself. Save their clan. End this. Without Sasuke, what good was anything? What value did Itachi still have, being here?

He breathes in, once, twice, and three times. He collects himself enough to walk the long, winding path back into the clearing where his partner is standing, waiting against a half-dead tree.

Kisame flicks his straw hat up out of his eyes and glances down at Itachi as he approaches. "You find what you're looking for?"

"No," Itachi says, blank-faced, and it's the easiest and hardest answer to give.

Kisame nods and accepts that. "Too bad," he says, chuckling a little.

Itachi sees no humor in it, but he's well aware by now that Kisame is nothing but honest. It's a dichotomy he appreciates in the abstract, when all Itachi's ever lived is lies. He’s not about to give up those lies now, though, not with the plans he made, what little time he has left, and the Uchiha clan’s future at stake. Someone must know something.

“I have another place to check,” Itachi says. He has a bridge-builder to interrogate.

---

Takashi hitches his rucksack higher on his shoulders as he crests the brand new bridge connecting Fire Country to Wave. It’s mid-afternoon, and a warm ocean breeze wafts over him. He can see the
village now, its buildings appearing to wave in the haze of humidity.

He nods to his fellow travelers as he strolls ahead through the exit gate, passing a few frogs along the coast. One or two hop after him.

The village is lush with people, all merry. But it’s not only people; Takashi spots foxes wandering around as well, freely and in the open. Some foxes are bold enough to scurry around underfoot, weaving around the wandering throngs of people. The foxes glance at Takashi, and follow after him too. He keeps moving, trying not to look too closely at them, as he wanders into the main thoroughfare of the village.

The noise of the village grows louder as he makes his way down the road. Curious, he turns the next corner and spots the source. The thrum of activity is centered on an open bar, with bright and hastily tacked party banners all along the awning. The bar itself looks like it’s missing its front wall entirely, allowing groups of people to walk in and out as they please.

Takashi wanders in, sidling past a group of giggling middle-aged ladies. People of all ages seem to be crammed in at every seat, and even a fox or two have managed to sneak in. But what catches his eye are the two old men laughing and drinking together in the corner. All the other patrons are coming up from time to time to slap one of them, the bearded man, on the back or shoulder, shouting out congratulations as they pile more bottles of sake onto the table.

The other man, with a leathery tan fit for a long life of outdoor work, catches Takashi's staring. He grins, showing off a few missing teeth. "Well hey! A new face! Though I can say we're starting to get a few new faces nowadays." The man beckons over Takashi with a flap of an open palm. "Come pull up a chair!"

Takashi shrugs to himself. Why not? He goes over and sits next to the men. “Thanks.”

"The name's Hadō, and this here's Tazuna,” says the tanned man. “Now where you from, stranger?"

"Ah, call me Takashi, and South Fire Country," he says.

Hadō’s eyebrow quirks at that. "Fire Country, huh? So a few of you are trickling in already. Now, what's the latest word over there?"

"Ah, you want outside gossip?" Takashi laughs a little. "Well, I'm afraid I don't have much; I'm just checking out the area to help my dad's business; every village could use a pig merchant, right?"

“I guess so,” Tazuna nods, a bit thoughtful. “We could use a lot of folks, of all kinds.”

"And the new bridge is very impressive,” Takashi adds. “I'm sure it'll bring in even more people.”

"It sure is! Thanks to this whippersnapper here!" Hadō crows as he slaps Tazuna hard on the back, making him choke on his sake.

"I'm only three years younger than you," Tazuna complains around a cough, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Hadō barrels on as if he didn't hear it. “Though this whippersnapper put a poor old boatman out of a job!” he cries, holding a hand to his heart.
"Oh, sorry to hear it," Takashi says, but Tazuna snorts a laugh.

Hadō laughs along with Tazuna, picking up his own cup. "Don't be; I can't complain. Been threatening to retire for years. The bridge brings in more people than I could've managed alone, anyway. It's like old times, you know, Tazuna?"

"Like old times," Tazuna responds with a lopsided smile, spinning the empty bottle against the table.

Hadō grins. "Alright, enough of our waxing on. What do you think of Wave so far, son?"

“Very busy,” Takashi offers with a slight smile. “And I noticed a lot of foxes around the village?” he adds, curious.

"Ah, yeah! They must find the place more friendly again."

Takashi blinks. “Again?”

Hadō nods, sage. “I’m not surprised you don’t know. No one pays attention to Wave. The foxes used to be here all the time up until about 30 years ago, and then they almost all vanished.”

“I had no idea,” Takashi admits.

“But it’s got to be a good sign, I think, with them returning. And what with Gato getting all spirited away, too.” Hadō grins at Takeshi’s bewildered expression. “The asshole was causing all sorts of trouble here, and a few days ago he up and vanished!”

“I still think he got swept out to sea,” Tazuna argues, but he doesn’t sound all that convinced.

“You know, I never found bodies out on my boat,” Hadō argues lightly back. “Not that it means much. But you’re the one who was there,” he says, mock conspiratorial. “No vengeful spirits?”

“Like I keep telling you, I didn’t see anything,” Tazuna insists, but he sounds a little nervous. “I was just trying not to get blown away by that storm.”

“Guess we’ll never know,” Hadō says. “Not sure where the other kids went, either. Probably snuck off back home or whatever those sneaky shinobi do. But hey, it all worked out, you’re done with the bridge, and now you can relax.”

“It’s not totally done,” Tazuna complains, “I have to add the name.”

“The name?” Takashi asks, leaning slightly in. He didn’t realize it had one.

“Oh he picked a great one: The Great Uzumaki Bridge.”

*The Great Uzumaki Bridge.* Though he keeps his face perfectly interested, Takashi—Genma—nearly chokes on his senbon disguised as a toothpick. His ears are ringing from the name alone. It’s one hell of a statement to declare on an international bridge.

“It’s bound to ruffle a few feathers,” Tazuna says, “but Kiri can bite me.”

“And Iwa, too,” Hadō adds.

“Oh, can’t forget them,” Tazuna nods.

“Aren’t you worried about that?” Genma asks. “That there might be some kind of retaliation?”
The both burst into laughter. “We might be ‘civilians,’ but we’re not idiots!” Tazuna says. “We’ve got protection in high places, kid, don’t worry.”

That declaration makes Genma’s unease rise further.

“And see that?” Hadō points behind Genma, and it takes everything in him not to jump. The foxes slink by, unnoticed by his senses, loitering around and under their table. The old man carries on, "That’s the first time they’ve done that. If the foxes like you, you can’t be all bad. Hope you find what you’re looking for!"

The ringing in his ears is growing louder. He needs to leave. Genma picks up his bag, offers a brief thank you, and exits the bar with a wave, considering his next steps, and trying to block out the sound. Ignore, ignore, ignore!

He takes a steadying breath. One thing’s for sure: Tazuna is the last person to see all of Team Seven alive. Genma needs to regroup, and figure out how to glean more information from the bridge-builder, if not outright interrogate him.

But as he steps out into the afternoon sun, he spots two cloaked men headed his way for the bar. They look entirely out of place, in black and red cloud coats, and it’s setting off all of Genma’s internal alarms. But then the hat on the shorter man tips up, and it’s a face he will never forget. Genma is in the direct path of none other than Uchiha Itachi, and that’s when he realizes he’s totally and utterly fucked.
“Finally!” Tenten cries, cresting the shoreline. She gasps and plops down, exhausted. She rests her face against the cool, wet sand. They’re on solid ground again, after an entire day in the water.

They’re in the throes of their training trip, in preparation for the Chuunin Exams. It’s only a couple months away and Gai-sensei is throwing everything he’s got at them, teaching them skills to survive the potential trials in store for them. At this rate, they might really be able to do it. They could really all become chuunin in just a year after graduating the academy.

That said, Tenten’s fairly certain getting attacked by a cyclone in the middle of the ocean is not the only way to learn how to water walk.

They’ve crash landed on the shore of Wave country, if she has to guess by how far south they were flung by the wind. Neji washes up after her, his arms crossed as he’s pushed up along his back against the sand by the latest wave.

“Hm,” he grunts.

Another wave crests, launching Lee up into the sand. He pinwheels onto the shore, landing on his head. He pops back up, as if nothing happened. “That was a most youthful exercise!” he cries. A fish squirms out of the collar of his jumpsuit. “To celebrate, we should run along the beach one hundred times!” Lee pumps his fists into the air a few more times for emphasis.

Tenten and Neji share a private, and exasperated, look. Neji’s a bit of an aloof jerk at the best of times, but at least he and Tenten could commiserate on this. Lee’s enthusiasm is sometimes a bit much.

“Now, Lee,” Gai starts, galloping in great strides across the rocky waves like it’s nothing. He leaps from the top of a wave and lands in front of his students, striking a pose. “You’ve all worked hard today. It’s just as youthful to take time to rest!”

“Ah, of course, Sensei!” Lee says, abashed. He lowers his arms, a tear streaking down his cheek. “You’re so wise!”

Tenten lifts her head up. “Oh thank god,” she groans.

“A sensei must always look out for his students!” Gai-sensei gives a big thumbs up. “So I propose… a ten minute break before we continue!”

Tenten lets her head hit the sand again. “Oh, how generous,” she mutters under her breath. Neji must have caught her grumbling because she hears him quietly snort next to her. For Neji, that’s practically a laugh. Tenten wants to smile for cracking that serious shell of his, if only for a moment.

It’s a peaceful enough break, with Gai and Lee shouting their meditative breathing. Tenten is content to lie where she is, drying out in the overcast sun.

She feels something tickle her cheek. She cracks open an eye... to a fox’s snout mere inches from her face, its whiskers twitching on her skin as it sniffs at her.

“Woah!” She jolts up, but it’s already darting away into the brush. Neji sits up with her, watching it go.
“What the heck?” she asks. Neji’s brow furrows, but he doesn’t seem to have anything to add.

Then they hear a commotion farther up the shore, within the seaside village. It sounds like people shouting in an argument.

“What now could that be?” Gai-sensei asks, dropping from his handstand.

“Let’s investigate, Gai-sensei!” Lee shouts.

Tenten sighs. “There goes our luxurious break.”

——

Genma is beyond fucked. If Itachi is here, did he somehow discover Sasuke’s team was sent here on a mission? Does he have something to do with Team Seven’s disappearance?

Genma has no real answers, but now he’s the only thing standing between one of Konoha’s most notorious missing-nin and a gaggle of drunk, defenseless civilians. He has to do the impossible here, and keep them all alive.

He’s got his summons as an option; his frogs are still out and about. Take them out by poisoning, maybe? The frogs may be small and easy to conceal, but they’re not the best for direct attacks, and he doubts they can sneak past the Sharingan.

He feels one of his summons sneak up the back of his leg, choosing to hide in his coat instead. He doesn’t really blame them.

Genma also notices the shark man is assessing him, but his stare is more appreciative than suspicious. That might be the only thing he’s got going for him now, so he does the only thing he can think of:

“Hey, there,” Genma greets the shark, with his most illustrious smile.

——

Kisame’s gaze lingers on the man who just left the bar. Kisame can admit he’s handsome, though his hair doesn’t seem to match his eyes. But what eyes he has.

“Hey, there,” says the man in the coat, pulling the toothpick out of his mouth with a charming smile. “Here to celebrate?”

“Hey,” says Kisame, cheerful. “Not really. We’re looking for—“ he pauses, and turns to Itachi, questioning. He’d assumed Itachi was on the hunt for another medic, but now he’s not entirely sure, to be honest.

“The bridge builder,” Itachi finishes. “Where is he.”

“Ah, the bridge builder? That’s a good question. I’m new to town, so…” the man trails off, eyes staying trained on Kisame. Kisame notices the man is refusing to look directly at Itachi. Interesting.

But then two old men peek out the front of the bar, along with practically every other patron from the bar behind them. “The hell’s going on here then?” The tipsy one with the beard asks. “You okay, Takeshi?”

“They’re lookin’ for the bridge builder, Tazuna,” one of the patrons behind the old man whispers.
“Don’t know him!” the bearded man, Tazuna, hollers. Another one of the drunk civilians giggles.

“C’mon,” Kisame chuckles, “it has to be someone here. We just have questions. It might not even be painful if you’re quick about it.”

Tazuna tsks, brazen with liquid courage. “If you’re looking for money, you can fuck off; those kids already ran Gato and his goons out of here, you know!”

“Along with that Mist guy, Zabuza or something,” adds the other old man.

“Oh yeah,” says Tazuna. “What Hadō said.”

“Zabuza… Momochi?” Kisame asks. That's a name he hasn’t heard in a while. What was he doing here?

“I need answers,” Itachi says, brooking no room for argument.

“And I don’t got any. Whatever you’re looking for isn’t here,” Tazuna continues. “They’re all gone, and The Great Uzumaki Bridge is done! That’s that.”

Now there's a name that gives Kisame pause. Uzumaki?

The man in the coat, Takeshi, hasn’t said anything more, either, caught in the middle of the argument. But a few foxes slink in and circle around the man. They shriek at Kisame.

That and the name Uzumaki only make Kisame the slightest more uneasy. It’s a leftover from his childhood conditioning to Kiri's propaganda, he figures, mentally shaking himself.

“Not a fan of fish, huh?” Kisame jokes at one of them. The red fox hisses at him, agitated and tail twitching. Kisame grins. “I can take a hint.”

Itachi seems to have had enough. “Bridge-builder Tazuna,” he says, his gaze cold and red. “You will answer me, or I will take my answers.”

“Don’t look him in the eyes!” Takeshi shouts to the civilians, and—

“Is there a problem here, my youthful friends?” a voice booms behind Kisame and Itachi. Kisame turns to see a man in a bright green jumpsuit, paired with a flak jacket. The bowl-cut is impressively shiny, but Kisame’s stuck on the massive eyebrows.

Konoha nin are so peculiar.

“Maito Gai,” Itachi murmurs, severe, for Kisame’s benefit. So that’s his name. And judging by Itachi’s tone, he must have known him in the past.

“Let me handle this one, Lee,” Gai says to a miniature version of himself. He pushes the three children solidly behind him. “These missing-nin are not to be taken lightly!”

“Are you looking to stop us?” Kisame asks, delighted, thumbing the strap to his sword.

“YOSH! You will not bring harm to the fine people of this village!” Gai makes another stance, raising his hands to fight.

Kisame can feel Samehada purr in anticipation. He has got to fight this guy.

But then Itachi places a hand on Kisame’s sleeve. “We have to leave,” he murmurs, tense. it’s the
most perturbed Kisame’s seen him since he first joined the Akatsuki.

“I think I can take him,” Kisame argues, still smiling, but growing a bit irritated by Itachi’s odd behavior.

“You don’t want to fight him, Kisame. Now is not the time,” Itachi insists, and Kisame can’t take it anymore.

So he makes a bargain. “Only if you tell me what you’re really looking for,” he mutters back, and Itachi’s hand clutching Kisame’s sleeve makes a satisfying spasm.

Itachi frowns behind his collar, but he doesn’t say anything, and Kisame shrugs out of Itachi’s grip.

“If that’s how you want it,” Kisame says, disappointed, and turns his attention to Gai, pulling out his sword. “I hope you’re ready to meet Samehada,” he calls.

Kisame takes a step forward, but then a hand shoves at his back, and he feels an eruption of chakra throughout his system. Kisame has just enough time to turn to see that it’s Takeshi. Brown hair peeks under the black—a wig? That explains it. The man’s eyes practically glitter with the influx of chakra. But before Kisame can do anything, he feels another sharp tug in his chest, and the world around him vanishes in a twist.

——

Gai blinks at the spiraling, broken ground where the three men once were. What on earth?

Nothing happens for a long moment, and then the bar patrons begin to mutter to themselves, shuffling back into the bar. Gai relaxes his stance, pondering the last few minutes.

“Okay, time out. What happened? Who were they?” Tenten asks, confused. “That shinobi looked like a shark!”

“One of them was a missing nin from Konoha,” Neji says. “An Uchiha.”


Oh! Gai suddenly realizes who that was: Uchiha Itachi. The long hair had looked oddly familiar.

Gai turns to his students, grave. “We must report this incident to the Hokage,” he says. “I know this cuts our trip short, but this is urgent.” He’s not sure how to explain the vanishing act, but the Hokage might know more.

Gai’s students all nod, understanding the severity of their situation. He’ll have to make it up to them. Perhaps they can all climb the Hokage monument one hundred times one-handed.

——

“Jeez, that was close,” Tazuna says with an oof, as he sinks back into the bar chair.

Tsunami pushes through the crowd. “Are you okay, dad?” she asks, worried.

Oh we’re just fine,” Tazuna waves a hand. “That Takeshi guy had to be an Uzumaki.” he says to Hadō. “You see what he did?”

“Ha!” Hadō crows, slapping the table. “I knew it, I knew it!”
“I knew it too,” Tazuna snarks back. “It was obvious, what with the foxes.”

“Sure you did,” Hadō grins.

“Then… they’re really coming back,” Tsunami breaks into a smile. “Just like you said!”

Tazuna grins. “Yep! I can’t wait for you and Inari to meet them! Ahh, the gods are truly looking out for us,” he sighs, lifting another sake bottle.

But Tsunami snatches it out of his hands. “And you’re done drinking for the day!” she chides, pulling her father back up to stand. “Inari is waiting for you, too!”

“Aw, Tsunami—“ Tazuna whines, as he’s dragged out of the bar.

—-

“What was that?” Kisame asks. He shoves himself upright with a laugh. “What was that!” What a cool move! He’s got to meet that brown-haired man again!

Itachi adjusts his coat while Kisame pats at his hair. They’ve lost their hats to whatever warping move that was. Maybe Obito might know it. Kisame will have to ask later.

Right now, he’s a bit more concerned with whatever Itachi is keeping from him. Kisame has his own secrets, but it’s not like he drags his work partner into trouble with them.

“Ready to tell me what this is all about?” Kisame asks, crossing his arms.

Itachi doesn’t even look at him.

Kisame tries another tactic. “You know I’d help you with it, right?” he asks. “We’re partners.” He stares Itachi in the eyes, because he’s serious about this. He’s daring Itachi to do anything else, but he wants to show he trusts Itachi, trusts his partner.

Itachi blinks, and he breaks their stand-off. “Sasuke,” is all Itachi says, looking away again.

“You were looking for your brother?” Kisame asks. “Why didn’t you say so?”

Itachi doesn’t say anything to that, preferring to stare intensely at a blade of grass.

Kisame frowns. “I get you’re a kid of few words—“

“I’m not a child, Kisame,” Itachi interrupts, and ah, finally, Kisame gets an entire sentence.

“You were looking for your brother?” Kisame asks. “Why didn’t you say so?”

Itachi doesn’t say anything to that, preferring to stare intensely at a blade of grass.

Kisame frowns. “I get you’re a kid of few words—“

“I’m not a child, Kisame,” Itachi interrupts, and ah, finally, Kisame gets an entire sentence.

“Yeah, well, you’re acting moody enough to be.”

“Moody?” Itachi’s eyebrows rise as he glances back at Kisame, as if to say, Seriously?

“Sorry.” Kisame chuckles. “But it’s not like it’s hard to tell. Something’s been bothering you for days.”

“Hn,” says Itachi, which might be as much as a concession as he’s going to get out of him for the moment.

Kisame tries to summarize: “You’re looking for your brother, for whatever reason, but you haven’t found him yet. So, what, you want to go back and interrogate the people in that town?” he asks. “Kill them? We can do that.”
“It might be more prudent to determine where we are first.” Itachi counters. Kisame supposes so, eyeing the mountains in the distance. A snowflake drifts in front of Kisame’s eyes and lands on his sleeve. Wherever they landed, it absolutely isn’t Wave.


“Oof,” Genma huffs out, lifting his head up from the grass. He’s alive, so that’s one plus. He wriggles his fingers and toes. Ten of each accounted for, unparalyzed, so there’s another plus. So he leans up on his hands, and surveys his surroundings. He’s at the top of a cliffside, overlooking a shaded forest.

“Huh,” says Genma. This definitely isn’t Wave.

Itachi and his shark companion, Kisame, aren’t here, either, it seems. Gai’s capable of handling himself, but hopefully Genma flung them somewhere else entirely.

He runs a trembling hand through his hair, pulling off his loosened wig. He coughs a laugh, shaken. Attempting a Hiraishin like that has to be the dumbest thing he’s ever tried. Minato would kill him if he were still here. It shouldn’t have even worked, or... inverted itself like that. He’s not even sure that was Hiraishin. In any case, whatever just happened felt incredibly weird, like he was turned inside out and back again. He should probably count himself lucky. He’s not keen to ever repeat it if he can help it.

He wonders if those foxes had a hand in this. Wouldn’t it be something if his grandparent’s bedtime stories were truer than he realized.

Genma feels something wriggle in his pocket. A dart frog peeks up out of the top of it. Ah, one of his other four-legged suspects.

“So.” He raises an eyebrow at his little frog summons. “You got any answers for me?”

The blue frog ribbits, which answers nothing, and she dispels herself in a tiny plume of smoke. Genma laughs a little to himself again. Typical. His family’s summons only behaved if they felt like it, and why would it be any different now?

He sits fully up, and crosses his legs together. He pulls out a new senbon from his coat, sticking it in his mouth. Time to get his bearings. First question: Where the hell is he? Tea Country?

He leans and peeks over the cliff, careful not to shift the soft dirt and topple over the side. On the far side of the dense forest below is the sea, and with it a few distant tendrils of smoke; it’s a portside village. That means high traffic, and decent services. They may have a fast messenger bird he can rent out, too, if he’s lucky.

The only place to go is down the cliff, it seems. Something else has fallen here recently, too, judging by the dislodged soil at the cliff’s edge. An animal, maybe.

Genma pulls out his bandana from his cloak and ties it on. A robust disguise is pointless by now; he might as well be ready for any more surprises.

Into the forest he goes, as the tree branches chime in the breeze.


Sai waits in the shadows for his target.
This is the last part of his mission. His last task before returning to Konoha. To return home, but something about that seems off to him, now. As if home is the wrong word for it. Which makes no sense. A home is a place to live. Root is his place.

Something itches at that. It makes his ears ring louder. He’ll stop thinking about it. Drown it out. Focus. He is to eliminate the enemy of Root. His target is due back soon. He must strike when the timing is perfect. When night falls.

—-

“You’re doing alright?” Chomei calls above the wind.

“Where are we going!” Karin shouts, clinging onto the beetle for dear life. They’re high up above the clouds as cover, flying higher and faster than Karin’s ever been before. And for some reason, they’re flying to the southern part of Fire Country.

“We’re taking you where you need to go, little Uzumaki!” Chomei replies. “And try to relax; I won’t let you fall!”

Karin bites her lip. Don’t they know they’re going the wrong way? Can she tell a tailed beast that? And wait—

Huh?” Karin asks. “What? Uzumaki?”

“You’re an Uzumaki, correct?” the giant beetle asks. “You have the hair for it, if anything. And quite the sensory abilities, if I may guess! You were headed straight for Uzushio, after all.”

“Uzushio? Like the island?” Karin says, dumbfounded. “Is that where I was going? Hang on, why aren’t we going there?”

“We would, but I hear tell that it’s a bit complicated. Accessing it needs a bit of extra help, and time,” Han says, but it doesn’t sound like Han from before. “According to Saiken,” he adds.

“Who’s Saiken?” Karin asks, totally lost.

“Another brother of ours. We’re meeting with him. He can help you!” says Chomei.

“Two brothers, admittedly,” says Not-Han. It must be his tailed beast talking.

“Whether our other brother will be any help is another story,” Chomei sighs. “He could have talked to us, Kokuo,” she complains. “It’s not like we don’t know something happened to him.”

Kokuo huffs. “We both know he’d never do that without intervention. You know how stubborn he is.”

Chomei titters. “That’s baby brothers for you. So sensitive.”

“So I’m meeting more jinchuuriki, or, uh, tailed beasts?” Karin asks, more than a bit nervous.

“Ah, not just them. I should also mention: there’s another Uzumaki with them, too,” says Kokuo.

“Which is why I asked if you’re Uzumaki, and you definitely are!” Chomei cheers as she starts to descend towards a thick forest.

Karin’s eyes widen. If she’s really an Uzumaki, and they’re meeting more Uzumaki, that means… she’s not alone anymore? She has a family out there, waiting for her?
Dusk is starting to fall along the high walls of Tanzaku Quarters. It’s the perfect time for the high rollers to come out to play, and Tsunade plans to take them for all they’re worth.

“Alright,” Tsunade says, rolling up her sleeves, “it’s time to make some serious money.”

“I hope it’s not poker against school kids,” Shizune teases.

“Not poker!” Tsunade laughs. “I’m feeling, hm, blackjack.”

Utakata lets down the little foxes, all wide awake. “What should we do?”

Tsunade shrugs. “Cheer me on? Or try a hand yourself.” She looks down at Sassy Sakumo and Angry Mito. “Hey, you two feeling lucky?” Tsunade asks the grey fox. “Did you know your namesakes were both crazy good at blackjack?”

That catches the grey fox’s interest, and his tail twitches. Angry Mito simply sneers.

“C’mon,” she says, “I bet I’ll win plenty with you two there. And we’ll be on Uzushio before the week is out.”

The two foxes look at each other. Sassy Sakumo tips his head at Tsunade, and Angry Mito sighs loudly. And angrily. But both foxes wait for Tsunade to lead the way, and Tsunade grins, her eyes traveling to the brightest and shiniest building in town. This casino is fucked. Fox luck is the best luck!

Sasuke, Sakura, and Naruto find themselves sitting under the blackjack table. Tsunade cheers again at winning another round, with an accompanying groans from the other players, and an agitated hiss from Kurama.

Naruto sighs again. “I’m bored!” he cries.

Sasuke privately agrees, not that he’ll say it out loud.

“It shouldn’t take too long. I hope,” says Sakura.

“Let’s go look around!” Naruto says, standing up. “We can find one of my family members, yeah?”

Sasuke nods. The faster they find the Uzumaki, the better.

“Shouldn’t Sensei come with us?” Sakura asks, unsure.

“He’s busy winning money!” Naruto argues. “And we’ll be fine!”

“We can handle ourselves,” Sasuke says. They need to become more independent, more capable of protecting themselves, even as foxes.

“Okay…” Sakura concedes, “But only if we all stick together.”

“Fine,” says Sasuke. He can accept that. It’s the smartest move, considering their size and capabilities. He tries to not let it rankle.

They follow the sense down the side street. They peek around the gap behind the bathhouse a few
doors down, but instead of it being empty, a man with a wild mess of long white hair is loitering by the wall. He’s giggling to himself, muttering nonsense under his breath while writing on paper. Sasuke wants to sneer at him.

“Who’s that old guy?” Naruto asks, wrinkling his nose.

“Ew, is he peeping on people?” Sakura whispers, disgusted.

“We should avoid him,” Sasuke decides. “Let’s take the roof.”

They take to the roof, one at a time. Sakura jumps up to meet them, but she skirts the edge, and knocks a loose roof tile onto the old man’s head.

They hear an, “Ow!” from below, and Naruto and Sakura grin. Even Sasuke can’t help but find it amusing.

Naruto giggles. “That was so good, Sakura!”

“Nice aim,” Sasuke adds.

Sakura strolls up to meet her teammates, a bounce in her step. “Serves him right!” she crows. “What a creep!”

At the edge to the next roof, Sasuke’s senses sharpen to a pinpoint focus. There it is!

“I feel it,” Sasuke says, his ears perking up. He darts off, barely registering Sakura and Naruto following after him.

“Wait for us, jerk!” Naruto hollers, Sakura right on his heels.

“Sh!” Sasuke hisses to his teammates, as he jumps off the roof, and swings around another corner. He slows at the edge of the empty lot, crouching low in the dirt. He senses Naruto and Sakura do the same, all of them quiet as they sneak closer. They all peer out at the source of the feeling, the soft chime of lost and longing. Of a brother gone forever.

It’s a hurt Sasuke knows all too well.

He spots the source: it’s a boy, who appears about the same size, and probably the same age, as Sasuke as a human. The boy’s concealed himself well, but the more Sasuke focuses, the more he can peer right through the illusion.

The boy’s poking at the ground with a small stick, drawing small, well drafted designs in the dirt. He seems to be waiting for something. The boy—no, the the shinobi’s cloak and armour are distantly familiar, like something Sasuke’s repressed.

The call grows stronger, and pushes Sasuke out into the open. The boy pauses, staring at Sasuke.

The target is due to arrive in ten minutes.

Sai is waiting, still and silent. He grips the razor wire in his gloved hand. He’s still ignoring the ringing in his ears, but it grows more difficult.

He twists the stick he absently picked up in his other free hand. This activity is not in the mission parameters, but it’s yet to affect his mission outcomes, so it could be acceptable. It may give him a
moment to regather his focus.

He presses the stick lightly into the dirt, and draws the first line. He quickly sketches pointy ears, a triangle snout, and a few whiskers into the improvised canvas.

He knows human emotions and attachments are unacceptable. Sai thinks he might have understood them, once. But now they would only get in the way of his mission and his purpose. Animals, though. Animals are different. Animals don’t hide away their secrets in a smile, or lie, or even care about human missions. And they don’t mind Sai’s lack of understanding.

Sai draws a little mouth for the fox, and, after a moment of consideration, with its tongue sticking out.

Something scuffs the dirt behind him, and Sai freezes. He should be hidden, shrouded impeccably. To his surprise, the very object of his imagination is behind him. It’s a little black fox, taking cautious yet curious steps towards Sai.

Sai blinks once, and turns slowly on his heel. The ringing in Sai’s ears grows and wanes, staring at the little black fox. The fox stares back. Something hidden and childish within him swells at the sight of the animal. Sai wants to… pet it.

Sai holds out his hand, but the fox doesn’t move, staring at his other hand. Oh, he’s still holding the razor wire. He sets it down, and after a moment of consideration, scoots it away from him and the fox. He tries again, palm out and fingers steady.

A moment passes, and the fox takes a cautious step forward, sniffing at his gloved fingers. The little thing is rightly suspicious, and rather clever, but it’s still a curious animal.

Sai manages to brush his fingers against the fox’s ears, when two more little foxes fall unceremoniously out of the bush. Something in Sai’s face spasms at how clumsy they are.

He watches the orange and black one squabble, and then the pink one butting in. He tilts his head the barest fraction. Maybe they’re all siblings?

They settle their animal argument, but then the black fox stares at him again, but the gaze is different, eerie, and—

And suddenly Shin is there instead, right in front of Sai. Sai startles, falling backwards into the dirt. Sai shakes his head, refusing to open his eyes. “No. You’re dead. And I—I forgot—“

Sai, the ghost says. Sai, listen.

Sai looks away, looks anywhere else, but the ghost is still there, in front of him. “This isn’t real,” Sai whispers, clutching at his hair, eyes clenched shut. “You aren’t real.”

Sai—

Sai, it’s okay, the ghosts insists. It’s not your fault. You had to forget to survive.

Something wet goes down Sai’s cheek. “Shin...” He opens his eyes, and everything looks bleary. “Are you really…”

You survived and I’m so, so glad. Shin smiles in Sai’s warbling vision. It’s so bright and bold that Sai can hardly stand it.
Shin crouches down to Sai, and Sai manages not to flinch. But now you can find your family, he murmurs. He touches a finger to Sai’s chest, right on his heart. Now you can be free.

“Shin—“

A bell rings loud, absolutely deafening. It runs straight through Sai, shaking him from the inside out. Sai heaves once. He leans over, wracked by a wet cough, his fingers digging into the dirt. He heaves again, and a splatter of black liquid pours out of his mouth onto the ground. He breathes, heavy, in-between dissipating coughs, his mouth filled with the taste of ink.

Sai stares at the ink, eyes wide. He can feel the residual chakra on his tongue, wiping at his tingling mouth as the sensation slowly fades. Was it… is that…?

His teeth snap shut, and he covers his mouth with a hand. The seal on his tongue is gone.

He eyes the ink stain on the ground, and the little foxes corralled around him, yipping and whining.

“Did you…? How did you do that?” he asks them. His hands are shaking. His breaths are coming in shorter and shorter gasps. He needs to get a handle on himself. His mission—

“Who’s there?” a man calls out. The foxes all freeze, then scatter.

Sai’s been discovered. His seal is gone. His mission is a failure. He can no longer be trusted. He’s failed, he’s failed, he’s failed—

Sai staggers to his feet, and runs.

---

Tsunade’s been on an incredible roll, but she’s starting to get the stink eye from the casino owners. Not only that, but Sassy Sakumo splayed obnoxiously out on the table and Angry Mito’s hissing aren’t earning her any favors with the other players. Yeah, they need to move on before they get kicked out or banned.

“Alright, time to cash out,” Tsunade decides, standing with her massive pile of tokens. “Okay, little foxes, we’re going to go.” She looks down, but doesn’t see the three little foxes anywhere.

“Foxies?” she asks, and checks under the table. “Where’d they—oh no! I gotta find them!” she cries, looking frantic around the casino floor.

“I’m sure we’ll find them,” Shizune says. “They can’t have gone far.”

“We’ll help you look,” Utakata adds.

“Yeah, but they’re my foxes; I’m responsible for them!” Tsunade insists. “Shizune, go cash these in,” she says, shoving all the tokens into Shizune’s hands. “C’mon, we gotta go find your kids!” she calls out to Angry Mito and Sassy Sakumo, as she runs out into the night air.

---

“They’re not my kids!” Kurama barks after her, but of course Tsunade doesn’t understand him.

---

Jiraiya rubs at his head where that tile smacked him. Fine, he can take a hint! And better safe than sorry, he fled before anyone in the bathhouse caught him. He grumbles to himself, wandering back
to his inn. He might as well go edit some of his manuscript and fine tune his codes before the night was over.

He hears a strange noise, like someone muttering to himself. That’s not exactly uncommon in this town, and he’d usually ignore it. But it sounds way too young to be the average drunkard.

“Who’s there?” he calls out, but he’s met with sudden silence.

Jiraiya steps into the clearing, eyeing the area. Someone was just here, he’s certain, but they must have bailed at the sound of his voice.

He glances down, a shine catching his eye. Is that wire? There’s also a few scratch marks in the dirt from an errant stick, scuffed out by a shoe. There’s a spill of chakra infused ink on the ground, too. Fresh ink by the looks of it.

He snorts to himself. He hopes some dumbass wasn’t playing their hand at fuuinjutsu in the dark. Still, it all paints a weird picture. Who would—

“Inky! Pinky! Loud Nawaki!” a very familiar female voice calls out. Jiraiya freeze at the last word.

Nawaki?!

He spins around, and darts out of the alley on impulse. He skids to a stop in front of his ex-teammate.

“Hime!” Jiraiya crows, covering up his shock. “What a sight for sore eyes! What are you doing here?”

Judging by the look on her face, she’s not nearly as excited to see him. “None of your business, Jiraiya,” Tsunade snaps, unamused.

“Of all the places to run into each other; it must be fate,” he grins.

“Uh huh,” Tsunade says, raising an eyebrow. “I’m leaving now, so—”

“Hang on, are you looking for someone?” Jiraiya asks.

“Nope!” Tsunade lies to his face, popping the ‘P’ for emphasis.

“Oh no you don’t, I heard you before.” Jiraiya says, “Now I know you’re hiding something.”

“And now I know you’re pissing me off,” she counters, clenching a fist.

Shizune runs up behind Tsunade, handing her a fat stack of cash. “Did you find —oh,” she says, as she spots Jiraiya. When did she get so grown up? How long has it been? Ah, there’s a young man with her, too, and... something about him seems awfully familiar.

“Didn’t know you liked ‘em young, Hime,” Jiraiya comments. “Or is he your new fling, Shizune?”

The man’s face remains impassive, and Shizune frowns in disapproval at Jiraiya. Welp. That’s a big no, then.

Tsunade rolls her eyes heavenward. “Oh, fuck off. Not everything’s like the trash you write.”

“Which means you read it!” Jiraiya preens.

Tsunade scoffs. “Please. It’s only suitable for kindling.”
Jiraiya holds his hands to his heart, throwing his head back. “Oh Hime, you wound me!”

She cracks a mean smirk. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Well, then, you realize you’re wandering around with a wanted jinchuuriki?” Jiraiya asks, casual.

Said jinchuuriki tenses, and Shizune’s eyes briefly widen in surprise.

Tsunade glances at the missing nin, face blank. “Yeah?” she asks, turning back to Jiraiya with a raised brow. “So what if I am?”

“I was just checking,” Jiraiya laughs, leaning into Tsunade’s space. “At least tell me you’re going to Konoha with him?” he whispers to her.

She crosses her arms. “Absolutely not,” she sneers in his face. “I’m not going back.”

Then what the hell was she doing with Kiri’s Most Wanted? “I—Tsunade, you can’t avoid Konoha forever,” Jiraiya tries. It’s a bit Pot-Meet-Kettle of him, but he ignores that.

“It’s not about avoiding,” she insists, which is such a lie. Jiraiya knows her. And yet she sounds so convinced that it’s not.

—

“Maa, of course they wandered off,” Kakashi says, trotting out of the next alley. It’s as reliable as the sky is blue: Team Seven will go find trouble if it doesn’t find them first.

“Why are they worried? Those brats are around here somewhere,” Kurama grumbles, out in the bustling street. “I can easily sense it.”

“Another disadvantage of being human, hm?” Kakashi asks wryly.

“How did you guess?” Kurama grins, ignoring Kakashi’s sarcasm.

“And yet we wouldn’t have won so much money so quickly without Tsunade,” Kakashi points out.

Kurama tsks. “We could’ve stolen it.”

“That must be more than enough for six boats,” Kakashi adds, ignoring the fox’s comment. “Now we just need an Uzumaki or two, correct?” Kakashi wonders if his students have found an Uzumaki by now. Honestly, he just hopes they aren’t getting into too much trouble.

Shockingly, Kurama answers him. “Yeah. But actually entering the island right now is another story.”

“Maa, so this is where the Suzu strangling comes in?” Kakashi guesses, remembering Kurama’s comment from yesterday.

Kurama snorts. “You don’t fucking forget anything.” This time he keeps talking. “But yes. Someone else is activating the dormant seals on the island.”

Kakashi blinks, and turns to look at Kurama. “What? There’s people still living there?”

“Not until a couple days ago.” Kurama growls. “Which means we could have been sent there in the first place, you dick!” He shouts the last words at the night sky, startling a passing couple.
“So it’s Suzu’s fault.”

“Nah, Suzu’s just the closest scapegoat I can throttle. Oh Sage, I don’t get it,” Kurama mutters to himself. “Why would he do that…”?

Then Kurama remembers himself and scowls. “Anyway,” he says, “the five island seals are one part of the whole fucking mess. It takes more than a few people to revive that island. And return my tails.”

“A seal was activated then, back by Matcha.” Kakashi surmises. “Since we all sensed the bells at once.”

“Yep. Whoever’s on that island, they better be quick. Because the Uzu sensing? That’s just the start of it. You’ll see,” Kurama grins. Kakashi isn’t so sure he likes the sound of that.

Kakashi flicks an ear, not about to linger on the possibility of becoming even less human than he already is. “Who could be on the island now?”

Kurama huffs. “No idea. Not like I was awake during your brats’ summoning fiasco.”

Kakashi wasn’t exactly ‘awake’ either. Hm. Could it be...

“Sensei!” Naruto calls from behind them. The three practically bowl into Kakashi, who barely manages to stand his ground. “We found him!”

“Who—the Uzumaki?” Kakashi asks.

“Where is he?” Kurama barks.

“Well, uh…” Naruto starts, and flounders.

“Sasuke tried to reach out to him, and it seemed to work, but…” Sakura trails off.

“But he reacted strangely,” says Sasuke.

“Yeah!” Naruto chimes in. “He puked up all this black stuff and got freaked out, and then this old guy scared us all off and—”

“Slow down,” Kakashi cuts in. “So where is he now?”

All of their ears flatten. “We’re not sure,” Sakura admits.

“I see. You know what he looks like now, so we’ll find him soon. Come on,” Kakashi says, leading his students down the alley.

But then Kurama abruptly stops in front of them, blocking their path. “That toad?” he hisses, his hackles raised.

“Hey, it’s that old pervert from before!” Naruto says, looking around Kurama. That sounds like the Jiraiya.

“I dropped a roof tile on his head for peeping,” Sakura states proudly. Yes, that definitely sounds like Jiraiya. It looks like they found their seal master.

...Or perhaps not, considering how livid Kurama looks. “Don’t you go near him!” Kurama demands. But the kids are already running out there. “I said wait, you little shits!” Kurama barks after them.
A small orange fox runs out from the alley, yipping. A couple other foxes follow after.

Tsunade breaks into a beatific smile. “Loud Nawaki! Inky! Pinky! Where’d you guys all go?” she asks, scooping the little orange fox up. “Did you all have fun? Because I did! Check it out!” she crows, showing off a fat stack of cash. She flips through the money with her thumb.

“What,” Jiraiya asks, but Tsunade’s now ignoring him completely.

“This is definitely enough, and no fucking bandits to stop us this time,” she laughs. She looks around the lot as she sets the fox back down, searching. “Is Sassy Sakumo back? I want to thank him for his good luck.”

That name is a punch to the gut. Yet another person Jiraiya failed by his absence, in chasing after hints and leads and prophecies. And now Tsunade is embracing the names of the dead like it’s nothing.

“How, what’s with the names?” Jiriya asks, trying not to sound pained. “Like, er, you mentioned...Nawaki?”

She just blinks at him. “What, Loud Nawaki? Don’t you see the resemblance?” she asks, pointing to him.

Oh no. Jiraiya is in no way the poster boy for coping strategies, but projecting dead brothers onto wild animals couldn’t possibly be healthy. “Hime, uh, it’s a fox,” he tries.

“Of course it’s—wait, you don’t know?” Tsunade asks, frowning. “You don’t remember? Seriously, Jiraiya?”

Jiraiya holds up his hands. “I’m just saying, Hime, this might not be, uh, the best way to deal with family—“

“What I’m doing is for my family,” Tsunade interrupts, her eyes narrowing in the way Jiraiya knows he’s absolutely crossed the line. He’s missed something, he realizes. Something’s changed in Tsunade, too, but he doesn’t know what.

But holy shit has he pissed her off when she leaps and spins at him. He ducks as she crashes both of her heels into the wall, right where Jiraiya’s head just was. She follows his dodge with a twist of her body, pushing off the wall with a downwards axe kick, aiming to shatter his shoulder.

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“Hime, hang on—let’s talk about this—“ Jiraiya appeals, weaving away from her kicks.

“Talk?!” she shouts, “When you never listened to them?”

“Listened to what—GAH!” Jiraiya avoids another bone shattering hit. But Tsunade’s foot hooks his ankle, and he’s slammed hard into the ground, knocking the air out of his lungs.

“Of course you don’t remember what I’ve told you.” Tsunade cracks her knuckles, looming over him. “Of course you don’t listen to me. But whatever. Anyone threatens my foxes,” she hisses, “I fuck them up.”

Jiraiya’s eyes widen. Oh, fuck. Oh wait, no way. Foxes, Tsunade’s childhood stories, shit—

But Tsunade pauses her assault when a puff of pink smoke erupts on Jiraiya’s chest. A small toad
summons pops out, frantic and agitated.

“Jiraiya!” The toad cries, standing on top of him, waving his arms. “Urgent!!”

“Uh?” Jiraiya says looking up at him. “I didn’t summon anyone?”

“Jiraiya!!” the toad shouts again, ignoring his question. “We gotta go!”

“We—what?” Jiraiya says. “Go where?”

The toad doesn’t answer, and instead grabs him by the shirt front. They both vanish in a cloud of smoke.

—

Everyone stares at the spot where Jiraiya was. Tsunade lowers her arms slowly. “...What was that.”

“A reverse summoning?” Shizune muses. “But the toad summoned himself?”

“Can summons really do that?” Utakata asks, fascinated. “I’ve never seen that before.”

“Apparently?” Tsunade shrugs, scuffing the ground with her foot. “That’s one way to get rid of him. It just gives us a day or two to get out of here, instead of me burying Jiraiya’s body.” She tsks, scuffing at her cheek. “I don’t tell my family’s stories to just anyone. We were kids, but still. It mattered. Figures he wouldn’t take it seriously.”

“I’m sorry,” Shizune says. Even Utakata looks on, a bit concerned.

“Whatever!” Tsunade cheers, and claps her hands together. “Since we have plenty of time before we have to bail, what say I get us a couple inn rooms? One day of sleeping in the dirt is enough.”

“Sounds great,” Shizune smiles. “And I’m sure our backs will appreciate it.”

“Thank you,” Utakata says, sincere if a bit surprised.

Tsunade winks. “I’ll just put it on your ever-growing tab,” she teases, and Utakata tries not to smile.

“Of course,” he says. Ha, he thinks she’s joking.

They find one of the less seedy inns on the strip, and Tsunade’s busy chatting with the half-asleep innkeeper. “Two rooms for one night—yeah, sure, throw in breakfast, too.”

So she almost doesn’t notice when Utakata’s shoulders raise up, and he turns sharply left.

“They’re what? Here?” he says out loud to thin air. His gaze snaps to the door.

“Who’s here?” Tsunade follows his gaze and the inner door slides open. A red cascade of hair peaks around the frame, revealing a shy girl underneath. Tsunade’s breath catches. The girl’s hair is as red as her grandmother’s.

A taller green haired girl pokes out from behind the frame, too. She nudges the first girl gently inside. “Go on, ask!” she whispers with an encouraging smile.

The girl takes a step in, followed by her green haired friend, and an absolute mountain of a man, clad in armor. He barely fits through the door, and Tsunade’s eyebrows go up to her hairline. Quite the entourage.
The red-head takes a deep breath and looks up at Tsunade with a steady gaze. “I—I’m Karin,” she says, clutching a scroll to her chest. “Uzumaki Karin. Are you an Uzumaki, too?”

---

Deep in the darkening woods, Genma passes by an empty cave. Distant laughter echoes, but when he looks, and checks with his senses, no one is there. Genma shivers. It’s probably best not to linger any longer, in case whatever lives there comes back soon.

---

Jiraiya finds himself thrown into a field of dew-laden grass. He’s in Mt. Myoboku, as indicated by the giant leaves and toad statues. He clutches at his head where he smacked it into the ground; what is with all the cranial abuse today?

“What the hell?” Jiraiya squawks, jumping to his feet. “A little warning next time! And How did you even manage to do that, anyway?”

“Don’t get mad at me!” the young toad cries, wringing his hands. “The elders really really needed to see you!”

Jiraiya looks about. “Well, where are they?”

Right on cue, the sounds of an argument drift in from the adjacent courtyard:

“I told you we should have gotten him here sooner!” Fukasaku argues.

“I didn’t want to worry him over nothing!” Shima argues back.

“Well now it’s not nothing, and now I have to miss my evening nap!”

“What should I be worried about?” Jiraiya breaks in, cutting off what would surely be half an hour of bickering.

“Ah! Well. There’s no easy way to say it...” Shima begins, glancing at her husband.

Fukasaku finishes for her: “The Prophecy has been stolen.”
Jiraiya could swear he was just punched in the head all over again. He tries to process that sentence.
“Stolen?” he gawps. “What do you mean, the Prophecy was stolen?”

“Stolen is such a strong word, Fukasaku,” Shima chides her husband. “Maybe it just went missing, wandered off, vanished; you know. We don’t have proof.”

“You and I both know who took it, Shima. What do you want me to say? They borrowed it?” Fukasaku argues.

Shima huffs. “I’m just saying, just because it’s been 30 years since the last time—”

“Oh fine!” Fukasaku cries. “You and your soft spots. We think it was ‘borrowed,’” he continues to Jiriya, with air quotes, frowning. “Likely permanently; oh, that is so like them.” Other toads eavesdropping nod and murmur in agreement.

Them? Jiraiya feels like he’s ten all over again, when he first reverse-summoned himself, surrounded by toads talking at him but completely baffled by whatever they’re saying.

So he does what he does best and pretends he’s got this. “So it was ‘borrowed’.” As if that makes any sense. “By who? We need to get it back.”

Shima hesitates. “It doesn’t work like that, dear.”

“The prophecy is gone,” says Fukasaku. “We can’t get it back.”

“How can it just be gone? Who took it?”

“They—” Fukasaku starts.

But Jiraiya’s on a roll now. “And why not ask The Great Toad Sage about it? He’s the one who told it!” he shouts, his arms wide open. “He can just tell it again!”

“He can’t just retell the same prophecy. It no longer applies.”

Jiraiya pulls his hands down his face with a groan. “That doesn’t make any sense!”

“Prophecies aren’t just mere concepts,” Fukasaku intones, “it’s a part of time in space, and determining the flow of the universe. Think of it like the path of a river. But the flow can change, or be changed, gradually or suddenly. You can’t make a river go naturally backwards, but it may twist, or divert, or it may very well turn into a waterfall, and throw you off head first when you least expect it.”
And that flow got changed, somehow.

“So now what?” Jiraiya asks.

“We wait for a new one.” Shima shrugs a shoulder. “Prophecies used to get borrowed all the time! This particular one just lasted a lot longer than most.”

“They were probably waiting for the right time to make it the most inconvenient,” Fukasaku grumbles.

Shima sniffs. “Well, I can’t say I’ll miss that one; it was much too serious.”

Jiraiya puts his face in his hands.

“Oh, speaking of, Fukasaku, do you remember the one for the second-to-last Uzukage—“

“Do I,” says her husband. “And how that prediction only lasted five minutes—“

“Oh no, it was three minutes, tops—“

“Five, Shima; it took the old toad three minutes to even say the damn thing!”

Jiraiya looks up from his hands. “So, wait. Then that means that the Child of Prophecy…” The child Jiraiya’s been searching for years, who could save or destroy life as he knew it...

Fukasaku sighs. “There’s no such child, not anymore.”

“Does that—he’s dead?” Jiraiya says, his whole body going flush with cold. His fingers are numb. Dead. Like Nagato, like Minato. Could it be then, too, of his last remaining leads for the Prophecy, that Minato’s boy, his student’s last flesh and blood link to this world, and the child he was entrusted to as a guardian, was also...

*Had Jiraiya already failed him too?*

Fukasaku bonks Jiraiya on the head with a fist. “Calm down; you’re worse than Gamaken!” he says. “No one’s dead. It just means that the designation itself no longer exists.”

“But…” Jiriaya stares back down at his hands. “Now what do I do?”

“I guess you’re free to do what you want,” says Fukasaku. “Not that you weren’t always free, really.”

“Should I—I could talk to the Great Toad Sage again and get something new—“

“Let’s just wait on that.” Shima pats Jiraiya on the shoulder. “You got some tough news; take a break from all this. You’re much too hard on yourself, sometimes.”

Jiraiya doesn’t say anything to that. He drags himself back to his feet, and scrubs his hands through his hair. He doesn’t know who took the Prophecy, nobody seems to want to tell him, but does it even matter when the words can’t come back?

“And you all clear out, show’s over, stop gawking,” Fukasaku says, shooing the murmuring toads away. He turns back to address Jiraiya. “Feel free to stick around for a spell. Or you can take the well back to Konoha—”
But Jiraiya is already wandering off in the other direction, away from the courtyard, and deeper into the wilds of Mt. Myoboku.

—

“Does he know where he’s going?” Shima whispers to Fukasaku, worried. “We should go after him —”

“Let him be, Shima,” he says. “Like you said, it’s hard news to take. The man just had the lilypad pulled out from under him. And he’ll get dumped out in Frost Country eventually; maybe the cold air will clear his head.”

Shima hmphs, “If you say so.” She hops off, leaving Fukasaku alone with his thoughts.

“Fucking foxes,” he says to the empty courtyard. “Always causing trouble.” He swears he can still hear them laughing.

—

Kurenai walks beside her students in the growing dark of the forest path, where they’re finally closing in on the outskirts of Konoha. It’s also her chance to debrief Team Eight; she needs to glean what information she can for what surely will be the worst first C-Rank mission report for a genin team, ever.

“Let me get this straight,” Kurenai says, “the man in the red armor was actually trying to stop the scroll from being activated.”

“Yep! The guy said it would destroy the town if it did,” says Kiba, way too cheerful. Akamaru woofs in the affirmative.

“It would what?” Kurenai asks, shocked. She hears Hinata gasp beside her. “You’re sure he wasn’t bluffing?” she tries.

Shino nods. “He appeared sincere.”

“But he thought throwing steam at the stage would do the trick,” Kurenai counters, still skeptical.

“That was pretty cool, huh,” says Kiba, oblivious. Shino sighs, beating Kurenai to it.

“I see…” Kurenai trails off. “And as for you, Hinata,” she says as she turns to her now-responsive student, “can you tell me what you and that girl were doing with the scroll?”

Hinata nods, and it’s remarkable how Kurenai can still see her blush in the darkness. “She, um, Karin was certain it belonged to her.”

Kurenai has a name for the girl now, though she’s not sure it will be of much use. “It belonged to her? Did she have something to do with the stage act?” Kurenai thought it was some nondescript man who delivered the scroll.

Hinata shakes her head. “No, not at all. She said she could sense the scroll was in the wrong place, and was going to take it to its home.”

Its home? This is just getting weirder and weirder. Kurenai’s getting a headache again.

“We’ll finish the debrief tomorrow morning, first thing,” Kurenai decides. “And then we’ll deliver
our mission report.”

“Going to go see Asumaaa, huh, Sensei?” asks Kiba, grinning as he draws out the name. “Is it like a date?” Her terrible, terrible students all look very interested to hear her response.

Kurenai simply nudges them all along. “Hurry up, we’re almost to the village,” she says.

The high walls of Konoha finally appear, in relief against the white light of the waxing moon. Kurenai’s never been so happy to see the village in her life. The kids are all varying levels of dead on their feet from all the travel; Kurenai steers Kiba from running into another tree trunk. It’s definitely best to rehash this mission after a night’s sleep.

Kotetsu, stifling a yawn of his own behind the counter, checks them all in at the main gate. Kurenai doesn’t miss her turns on border duty as a chuunin, especially the night shifts.

Kurenai addresses her students once they’re all past the gate. “Go get some sleep. We’ll meet at Training Ground 8, usual time.” Kiba groans a little, but Shino ushers him along, towards the direction of the Inuzuka clan grounds.

They all wave their goodbyes. Once her students disappear into the village, Kurenai leaps to the closest roof, bypassing her apartment and taking the most direct route to Asuma’s meeting place.

Kurenai passes under the banner at Ichiraku’s. It’s an open secret amongst Kakashi’s closer contemporaries that the ramen shop is the perfect place to dish secrets, and to not have them overheard by anyone unsavory. Something about Teuchi’s shop creates that space; Kurenai glances at the graffiti carvings in the doorway. She suspects the Yondaime and his wife had something to do with it.

The shop is empty, save for Asuma at the very end of the bar. He spots her and jumps to his feet. “Kurenai!” he says, enveloping her in a bear hug. “Saka said you were okay, but I wanted to be sure —”

“I’m okay,” Kurenai assures him, patting him on the shoulder. “Are you?”

“Ah.” Asuma lets go and steps back from her. He scratches the back of his head and coughs awkwardly, his ears turning red. “Uh, yeah, so.” His expression turns into a frown. “I have a few things to tell you.”

He beckons her to sit. Teuchi sets a mug of green tea next to her, and he lets them be, busying himself in the kitchen.

“Saka mentioned your mission went south. I was, ah, hoping we could compare notes,” he begins.

Kurenai blinks. Sharing mission details tended to be a breach of protocol, but Asuma must have good reason to break it. “Okay,” she says. “What do you have?”

So Asuma runs through what happened on his teams C-Rank, with the Sannin Senju Tsunade, the hunter nin (fake and real), and the scroll that turned out to be more than it appeared.

Kurenai gasps at that. “An Uzu scroll? Aren’t those powerful?” she asks, with a sinking feeling about the scroll that was in Kaede.

Asuma nods. “They’re said to summon gods,” he says. “I don’t know how true that is, but the one we came up against split the entire town in half with a river. Damn near broke open on top of us.”
Kurenai’s eyes widen. “You’re kidding,” she says. “There was a scroll in Kaede, too. It was supposedly for a light show, but a jinchuuriki claimed it could destroy the place.”

Asuma coughs on his cigarette. “A jinchuuriki?” he choking out. “And what happened to the scroll? Did it…”

Kurenai shakes her head. “Someone took it out of town before that could happen. A girl Hinata met.” And then Kurenai wonders. A red haired girl with an Uzu scroll…

“I’m not certain,” she begins, her voice low, “but I think that girl was from Uzu. An Uzumaki, maybe.”

A ladle clatters in the kitchen. Asuma falls back in his chair, his shoulders sagging in surprise. “An Uzumaki?”

“She was taking the scroll to ‘its home.’ That has to be the island.”

Asuma pulls the cigarette out of his mouth and shakes his head. “An Uzumaki…” He looks Kurenai in the eyes. “Don’t let on that you know what that scroll is, or that there’s even another Uzumaki out there.

“Asuma, what—“

“There’s something wrong with all of this,” he says. “Two Uzu scrolls happen to appear in two C-Rank missions. The one in Kaede was already there, but where is is the only possible place the scroll in Matcha could have come from?”

From Konoha. “You think…” Kurenai trails off.

“You and I both had a mission that turned out to be a set-up, and Team Seven still hasn’t returned from theirs.”

Kurenai bites her thumbnail, trying to stave off her growing alarm. “So you think it’s a conspiracy.” She hesitates to even say any suspected names, even in Ichiraku’s. “Is that why you were asking for Jiraiya?”

Asuma nods. “I wanted to talk to him first. My dad trusts him, and I know certain people here can’t stand him enough to even try to influence him. He’s the safest choice.”

“But why target the genin teams?” Kurenai asks. “What’s gained from it? Who would do such a thing?”

Asuma is silent a moment. “…Genin are the easiest to pick off,” he says. “Even with a jounin, their attention is split three ways.”

Kurenai doesn’t want to believe it, but it makes sense.

“We’re only seeing part of it, and there’s too many options I can’t even see. To create intentional strife? Endanger clan bloodlines? Stoke another war, even? Can you imagine if any of that succeeded? Our teams got lucky,” he says, grim. “That’s all.”

“And if Kakashi’s team is missing…” Kurenai grimaces. She hopes they’re all safe, but they very well could have fallen victim to a summoning, or worse.

“I don’t want to believe they’re dead, either,” says Asuma. “Not until I have to.”
“What do we do?” Kurenai asks. “What can we do?”

“We have to be careful,” Asuma says. “Stay in the village, for now, and stick together. We can claim we’re focusing on training for the Chuunin Exams.”

“With only one C-Rank under their belts?” Kurenai says, skeptical. But she sighs. “It’s not the worst cover. We don’t have to actually sign them up.” She leans forward, gaze severe. “But we’re not just going to sit on this, Asuma. Someone tried to hurt my students, and all of our students, for their own gain, and I won’t stand for it.”

Asuma’s frown cracks into a smirk. “Of course not, Kurenai. We’re going to fuck them up.”

----

Tsunade shuts the door to her inn room behind her, where everyone has crowded inside. “Alright, let’s get this straight,” she addresses Utakata, Han, and Fuu, “you three are all jinchuuriki.” She points to the two new ones, “And you two were also instructed by a fox to find me?”

“That’s what Chomei said!” says Fuu, grinning. Han bows his head slightly in a nod.

“And which fox was this?” Tsunade asks, fairly certain of the answer. Sure enough, the two of them point at Angry Mito, who bares his teeth at them.

Tsunade’s eyebrows rise. “You were busy, huh?” she asks the fox. Angry Mito, predictably, sneers in response.

She nods to herself. “Alright, I can accept all that.” Then she crosses her arms. “So why do three jinchuuriki from different countries all want to go to Uzushio so badly?”

“We’re homeless,” says Han. “We left Iron decades ago. But it would be nice to finally settle down.”

“Chomei and I want to belong somewhere, with friends who like us!” says Fuu.

“We’re tired of running,” says Utakata, “and being hunted.”

Tsunade stares at them, and tips her head with a sigh. “Ahh, I can’t exactly argue with any of that, can I?”

The three jinchuuriki look a mix of excited and relieved. “We appreciate your generosity,” Han says.

Tsunade just waves a hand. “Yeah, yeah. And how about you?” she asks Karin, much more gently.

Karin shakes her head. “I… I ran away from my village. In Grass,” she admits. “I had to. I couldn’t ignore it.” She waves a hand by her ears.

“Ah,” Tsunade says. “So you hear it.”

Karin nods. “It’s loud.” Then she stiffens. “You’re not going to send me back, right?” she asks, panicked.

Tsunade juts her thumb at the jinchuuriki. “Didn’t you hear those three? All of us are runaways, kid,” she says. “It would be hypocritical of me to kick you out.”

Karin’s eyes widen. “You’re telling the truth—"
Tsunade suddenly finds herself being hugged tight around the middle. “Thank you,” Karin says into her robe, half broken with a sob. “Thank you!”

Tsunade rests a solid hand to her back, holding her steady. “You’ll be just fine, now. You’ve got Auntie Tsunade looking out for you.” She glances at the scroll Karin’s holding. “And an Uzu scroll, huh?”

“I found it,” Karin confirms. It felt like it was in the wrong place.” She shrugs a shoulder, looking a bit embarrassed. “I didn’t know I was trying to take it to Uzushio. I, um, the scroll felt the same as the energy of the island.”

“Felt the same—you’re a sensor?” Tsunade says, surprised. Then she grins. “Hey, just like my Great-Uncle Tobirama, you know!”

Karin breaks into a surprised smile. “Really?”

“Yeah. He could pick out people across the continent.” But Tsunade frowns a little. “So where’d you find the scroll?”

“Over in a town called Kaede,” says Karin.

“We happened to run into each other there,” Han adds.

“And we all met after that!” Fuu cuts in. “Chomei fell on a guy, and Han gave me candy and Chomei flew us all here!”

Tsunade’s eyebrows fly up. “You flew?”

“She’s a big beetle! Hey! I could just fly us to Uzushio, too!” Fuu says.

“NO THANKS!” shouts Karin. Everyone turns to stare at her outburst and she wilts. “Um, I mean…”

“Not all of us a great with heights,” Tsunade cuts in, to say nothing of a humongous tailed beast drawing everyone’s attention. “We’ll stick with the boat for now.” Then she stretches up both arms, with a yawn. “Alright, enough for tonight. Shizune, let’s go find a storage closet to raid for futons.” She beckons Han with a hand. “You too, Big Guy, you can be our lookout. Hold down the fort, Angry Mito!”

Han coughs once, hard, as he goes to the door. Fuu covers up her mouth with both hands, giggling. Angry Mito hisses open mouthed at everyone.

—-

“Hey, wasn’t there another brother?” Karin asks, looking around the room. The five foxes are the only other ones in the room, but they don’t feel anything like a tailed beast.

Utakata and Fuu glance at each other.

“Um,” says Fuu, biting her lip.

“Well…” says Utakata.

“You’re all hiding something,” Karin says to them, accusatory. “I can tell when people lie.”

“Ah. Sorry!” Fuu says, and puts her palms together. “It’s just a little secret! I swear it’s not bad or
anything, but Chomei says it’s not our secret to tell. Okay?” she asks.

She seems to be telling the truth about that. “Okay, I guess…” Karin concedes, reluctant. “As long as it doesn’t hurt anyone.” People have their reasons for secrets, as much as Karin doesn’t like it.

Then something paws at her leg. Karin looks down. All the foxes are looking at her.

“Hi there,” she says. “Um, hang on.” She sits down to greet them, and the orange one clambors all over her, yipping excitedly. “Oh! Uhhh, hi?” she says, bemused.

The grey one with the black muzzle calmly picks the little orange one up by the scruff and sets him back down in front of her on the floor. The other foxes seem to have the concept of personal space, but they’re looking at her with varying levels of curiosity.

These are Uzu foxes? She peers closer at them. “You’re all connected,” she says slowly, tracing an imaginary line between all of them. “And you’re connected to me, and Aunt Tsunade, too.” All these links, when only a day ago she thought she had none. It’s kind of amazing.

She reaches out gingerly, and brushes the little orange fox’s head. She barely holds in a holler: *Holy shit, his ears are so soft!*

—

“Try not to climb all over people you don’t know, Naruto,” Kakashi says.

“But I know her!” Naruto tippy-taps his feet, as Karin pats his head. “She’s an Uzumaki, too!” He pauses mid-step. “Is she my cousin?”

“Possibly,” Kakashi says. “Maa, a more distant cousin?” He doesn’t know anything about Kushina’s extended family, unfortunately. And another Uzu scroll, this time in Fire Country? Curious.

Naruto looks at Kurama, expectant. “Is she?”

“Hey, don’t look at me,” Kurama frowns. “I’m not an expert on your family tree. And what about the brat who ran off?”

Naruto’s ears flick. “Well he didn’t look like me or my mom at all, but he must be a super distant cousin?”

“No,” Kurama snarls, “what are we doing waiting around in here when he’s still out there? He could have left Tanzaku Quarters by now!”

“Oh! We can find him!” Naruto squints his eyes, and then widens them. He falls over. “He’s… he’s in this room?” he says, facedown on the floor.

“I think that’s coming from Karin,” Sakura says. She tries next, but she shakes her head. “I can’t sense much past her.”

Kakashi hums in agreement. Karin’s beacon has become so strong it’s muddling anything nearby. Judging by Kurama’s deepening frown, it’s the same for him, too.

“What else do you know about this other Uzumaki?” Kakashi asks. They can try and track him down again if they have clues.

Sasuke is the first one to speak up. “I think he’s ANBU.”
Kakashi’s brows rise. “ANBU?”

“What’s that?” Sakura asks. Naruto looks completely lost.

Sasuke tries to explain to them. “It’s an elite group of shinobi; they handle dangerous missions.”

“Woah, cool,” Naruto says. Then he tilts his head, puzzled. “How’d you know that, Sasuke?”

But at that question, Sasuke’s mouth snaps shut, and his expression shutters.

Kakashi cuts in. “He’s correct, ANBU deals in assassinations and tactical missions. You might have seen them around Konoha if you’re sharp; they have distinctive animal masks.”

Kurama squints at Kakashi. “Right. Didn’t you have a stupid dog mask?”

Kakashi gives Kurama an entirely unamused look. “Their identities are also meant to be secret.”

“You’re in ANBU? Are you an assassin?” Naruto’s mouth falls open. “Our sensei is secretly a super assassin,” he says, starry-eyed, to his teammates. Sakura and Sasuke look equally impressed with Kakashi, for once.

“No, I’m retired from ANBU,” Kakashi sighs, accepting the revelation of yet another secret. At least it took the attention off of Sasuke.

But Naruto doesn’t seem to hear the ‘retired’ part. “A super-secret super assassin? Mom’s right, Kakashi-sensei really is intense,” he adds, awed, and Kakashi has no idea what that’s supposed to mean.

Back to the subject at hand: “So this Uzumaki was in a uniform like ANBU,” Kakashi summarizes, but he has a sinking suspicion it’s not quite his division. “And you said he spit up something black?” he asks, trying to recall Naruto’s chatter from before. “Not blood?”

Sakura nods. “It looked like ink to me?”

“It was ink,” Sasuke confirms.

“Then he freaked out,” Naruto adds. “and then he left when that old pervert showed up.”

Kakashi puts all the pieces together. “The seal,” he says, stunned. “You removed the seal on his tongue.”

“A seal?” Sasuke asks, surprised. “I removed a seal?”

“Is that good?” Naruto also asks, his face scrunched up.

The Uzumaki boy had to be in ROOT. It makes Kakashi shudder to think how long he’s been involved in the organization. Hopefully his lack of distinctive features obscured his heritage from Danzo. But with that described reaction, and without that seal, there was no way the boy was going to return to Konoha.

And if Sasuke was capable of doing all of that to a member of ROOT unwittingly, who knows what they could all be capable of the longer they remained as foxes.

—

“Are the foxes talking to each other?” Karin whispers to Utakata.
“They tend to do that,” Utakata replies, shrugging a shoulder.

“That is so cute,” she hisses back.

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The marshlands of the island grow thicker, the path surrounded by gnarled trees sticking out of the swamp. They’re navigating giant felled trees and moss mounds in the brackish water, the dimming light of the night stars becoming more impenetrable through the leaves. The flicker of fireflies are their only source of light now.

The mossy rock face begins to rise from a low wall, until it’s towering above the trees. It seems to surround them, and Zabuza isn’t sure how they’re going to manage to pass it. Climbing it is a no-go, what with Gato still unconscious. There might be a way through. But before that, they have a seal to activate; the third seal is somewhere around here, he’s sure.

“Then just two seals left,” Zabuza mutters to himself. The moth in his hair flutters, and settles again. They could be off of the island by the end of the week if they keep this up. But, then what? He picks up where he left off? Still broke, with fucked up chakra and nowhere closer to achieving his goals? What happens at the end?

*Something on your mind?*

Zabuza glances over at Mito. “What?”

*Your face is all pinched,* she says, gesturing at his face. *You’re thinking too hard.*

“You’re not going to tell me anything, so what’s the point in asking you?” Zabuza mutters.

But Mito just smiles, indulgent. *I see. You know, as our new friend pointed out to me earlier,* she tips her head to the fox, *I may be letting my older habits get the best of me.*

Zabuza furrows his brow. “What do you mean?”

*I will try to answer a few of your questions,* Mito offers. *Within reason. I may not be capable to fully answer all of your questions now, but you will know everything in time. Is that acceptable?*

Haku looks back too, curiosity in his eyes. The fox’s ears perk up.

“All right,” Zabuza starts, eyeing Mito. “With these five seals, what’s really going to happen? You mentioned a heart, way back.”

Mito huffs a laugh. *You don’t dally with your words, do you? The ‘heart’ is what can be called the very center of Uzushio, of Uzu. The heart currently lies dormant; as a consequence it has sealed the island off from all outsiders. The five seals are lode points, of sorts, which draw energy into the heart. With the heart fully activated, it will breathe new life into the land. She gives Zabuza a knowing look. And, of course, it will allow you to leave, if you choose to.*

That’s all well and good, but first thing’s first: “Is it a real heart?” Zabuza asks. He’s got 70:30 odds on it being real, and really horrifying.

*You could say it is, or was, very real to the Uzu people,* she replies, back to her cryptic nonsense.

Zabuza gives her a flat look. “Just say yes or no.” She returns his look with an arched one of her own, and he adds a sighed out, “Please.”
She grins. *No, it’s not like a giant human heart.*

Haku nods slightly. “So the heart is a euphemism. What could it be…?” he muses aloud.

*I’ll leave it to you to think over, for now, Mito says. We’ve arrived.*

They’ve come to a cavern opening in the water, with long weeds and mossy stalactites hanging down from the outer walls and low interior ceilings. Somewhere within it is the third seal.

They descend into the grotto, under the hanging ferns. The main entrance does not extend very far, only leading to a pool of water at the other end. Zabuza can spot no other entries; it seems the only path inside is completely submerged by the inky black pool. He has no earthly idea of the depth of the water, and he still has no jutsu to fall back on.

That means they may have to wait for the pool to recede to enter further into the cave, and who knows how long that will take. He burns with energy underneath his skin, like an overheated sauna. His chakra still bothers him, and he might have to finally suck it up and ask Mito about it again.

His eyes drift over to Haku first, who’s still chatting with the fox, though it’s more like *at* the fox. And really, what does Zabuza even call the fox? Mr. White Fang? *Hatake Senior?*

In any case, they’ve started a game of Yes/No questions and answers. The conversation’s pretty surface level, as far as Zabuza’s aware. Nothing about Copycat’s come up so far, anyway; even Haku is avoiding the topic of the fox’s son. *That’s a jar of eels no man wants to open.*

“Ah,” Haku’s eyes meet Zabuza’s briefly, “do you know much about the heart?” he asks the fox.

The fox makes what might be a so-so gesture, tilting his head from side to side.

“We know it’s not a real heart,” Haku says as he cups his cheek with his hand in thought. “But the Uzu people found it real. Hmm, it could be a statue, perhaps?” he muses. “Or maybe a treasure?”

The fox chuffs, and Haku’s face lights up. “You think it might be one of those?”

Zabuza settles against the wall, crossing his arms. Gato is still knocked out, and he’s not in the mood to try his luck against talking to a fox about anything, so that leaves Mito, who’s now swirling little seal designs in the wall with her finger. Each finished one glows in the moss and then wanes, disappearing into the rock.

She catches him watching out of the corner of her eye, and gives him an amused little smile. *Care to try one?* she asks.

Zabuza scoffs, “I don’t know fuuinjutsu. Not off the top of my head.”

*You’d be surprised,* she says, *at what you can figure out. But here, I’ll start one for you.*

She begins to draw larger curves and lines. It begins to unfold into an intricate and complicated pattern before his eyes, before it fades. But there is a pattern to it.

*Finish this one,* she offers, leaving one tiny spot undrawn in the pattern. It’s painfully obvious where the last line goes; Zabuza rolls his eyes, and swipes the imaginary last line across the mossy rock.

“There, done. Happy?” Zabuza asks, sarcastic.

*Don’t forget the catalyst,* Mito adds, like a teacher instructing a student.
...Of course, the only possible catalyst is blood. Feeling like he’s been somehow tricked, he glares at her. She just raises her eyebrows back at him, waiting.

He holds back a sigh, and breaks the skin of his thumb with his teeth. Whatever fresh hell this invisible seal creates, he just wants to find the actual seal they’re looking for, and get out of here. He sets his hand against the wall.

Something chimes, and Zabuza lets the tide take him. The warm rush of energy he pushes into the seal is easy as breathing. With a clearer head, he realizes it’s more than just his chakra that’s loading the seal, it’s something else intertwined with it.

The grotto alights in a brilliant bioluminescent display, the green glow reflecting the water onto the cave walls. The lights travel down into the pool in a series of skips, lighting it all up from within. He can see the water spiral down in a whirlpool in the increasing light, draining down.

“Zabuza-sama, look,” Haku calls, over the loud rush of water, where he and the fox are crouched at the lip of the pool. They watch rock stairs appear one by one as the water rapidly recedes. Hidden beneath the pool is a staircase carved directly out of the stone, the walls around it covered in serpentine seal designs that cut through the algae.

See? You did it, Mito says, her smile warmer than she’s ever given Zabuza before. Even better than expected.

“That’s not just chakra,” he accuses, hushed. “How can I even do that?”

You were each granted spiritual energy, she murmurs back. A great amount of it, as a gift to aid you.

“I get that, but how long does it last?” he asks. But Mito’s silent stare is answer enough. He scrubs at his face with his hand. “It’s permanent, isn’t it.”

It’s changing you irreparably, yes. She hums a little. You’re becoming more like the Uzu folk.

It’s like being dunked in ice water, with no way back through to the surface. Zabuza’s hand grasps at his shirt front. “I’m from Kiri,” he grits out. “I don’t want to be changed.”

No one ever does, she sighs, as if talking from personal experience. But it would not work if there was no basis for it within you.

Zabuza doesn’t want to touch that last statement with a fifty foot sword. “At least I should have a say in what you did!” he hisses.

Mito lifts an elegant eyebrow. I had nothing to do with granting it. You may take your complaints up to our gods.

“Maybe I will,” Zabuza mutters; he could fight a god or two.

As upsetting for you as it feels, this is rather mild a result, Mito comments. Consider yourself lucky you still have the thumbs to heft that sword of yours.

Thumbs? Zabuza squints at her, uncomprehending. But he follows her head nod over to The White Fang Fox, who’s still sitting alongside Haku in admiring the strange staircase, and Zabuza becomes uneasy all over again. Oh. That’s what she means by no thumbs.

Shying away from that thought, he takes a glance at the passageway down, now empty of water. The
stairs curve, obscuring whatever is below. It looks like it goes down a long way. Time to drag Gato —

“Haha!” Gato shouts, standing at the entrance of the grotto. He’s holding up a sad little knife. “Now I know your game!”

“A game,” says Zabuza, flat. He’s not following.

“Don’t play dumb!” Gato cries, gesturing with the knife. “I heard you talking! There’s treasure here you’re hiding!”

Zabuza wonders idly if hitting Gato with the blunt end of his sword won’t kill him. Then a rush of energy cascades through the room, freezing Gato in place.

_Gato_, Mito calls, in a commanding tone, echoing all around the grotto.

“Who was that?” Gato screams, looking around wildly behind him. “A ghost? Don’t come near me!” he says, stepping backwards towards Zabuza. It seems Gato still can’t see her.

Then Mito catches Hatake Fox’s eye and taps at her mouth. He nods. She fades, and reappears, but now she’s standing behind the fox. The White Fang opens his mouth as she speaks again.

_Gato, I am a messenger of the gods. You have been chosen_, the fox appears to declare.

“The fox is talking!” Gato squeaks, and tries to run behind Zabuza to hide. Zabuza shoves him away with one hand and he falls to the floor.

_You are astute, Gato. The real treasure of the island may only be uncovered... with your help._

“Me?” Gato stammers as he props himself up. “What can I do?”

_You were granted a special power by the gods, a power that will reveal the treasure’s path._

“Wait!” Gato says, bopping his fist in his palm. “That scroll I used! It gave me its power?”

The fox’s claws flex dangerously, but Gato doesn’t seem to notice.

“I don’t get it, but I can’t say I’m surprised. These gods must know how important I am,” Gato preens.

_Perhaps. The gods are very, very mysterious_, Mito says, but Zabuza can see her rolling her eyes.

The fox coughs, and it almost sounds like a laugh.

She continues, _The path to the treasure lies below, but it is up to you to take that journey._

“Path to treasure.” Gato looks down the curving stairs, and takes a step back. “Er. You can go first,” Gato says magnanimously to Zabuza.

“You’re the chosen one,” Zabuza says, and pushes Gato down the first few steps. He haphazardly slides down them, with the stairs still slick with wet algae.

Haku and the fox go after him, both gliding down the stairs with much more control. The ceiling is low, and it’s a tight fit for Zabuza and Kubikiribōchō; he pokes at the moth in his hair to take refuge on his shoulder so it doesn’t get crushed.

But they all make it, and Mito meets them at the bottom, in a long room. Water trickles down from
slats in the tops of the walls, running into the large swirling design cut into the cobbled floor, slowly re-filling the space between the stones. The spaces grow bigger farther down the room, until it’s a single circular platform, surrounded by a shallow moat of water.

Fox Hatake hops over a gap between the stones to stand before Mito again, ready to continue their prank.

“Where are we?” Gato asks, looking around nervously.

*A place of reflection, Mito intones. A sacred space of the Uzu people.*

“Sacred?” Gato snorts, stabbing his shoe at a wet cobblestone. “Could use more gold trim.”

Zabuza and Haku gravitate over towards Mito, watching Gato pinwheel his arms as he almost trips between two stones into the water.

“Do we actually need him?” Zabuza whispers to Mito, incredulous. Even Haku looks dubious.

*This seal cannot be suited to you two,* she murmurs back to them, her eyes never straying Gato.

“What are you whispering about?” Gato demands.

“Just hoping to watch you fall in and drown,” Zabuza calls back, bored.

“I see through your act; you haven’t killed me yet,” Gato grins. “That means you need me! None of you can hurt me.”

*Do not be so sure, Gato. The path to the treasure requires a strong heart. You must be willing to put your life on the line.*

“My… my life?” Gato hesitates, unsure. Then he steels himself. “You can’t intimidate me with your reverse psychology! I won’t be tricked out of treasure.”

Mito looks unimpressed with that answer. *The first step is at the end of this room, the seal you will see within the circle. By activating that seal, you accept the consequences for its revival. Are you capable of reflection?*

Consequences? Zabuza gives Mito a sharp look, but she doesn’t waver from her focus on Gato.

“Of course I am,” Gato laughs, walking over to the seal, “Why give up this power? I deserve it!”

*If you are certain, I cannot stop you,* she says.

Well she sure as shit could stop him, because this is going to end badly. But Zabuza considers what may happen, and keeps the expression on his face suitably blank. He knows enough stories. Oh, he’s going to *enjoy* watching this.

Gato pulls out a damaged ink pen from his tattered suit coat. The metal nib is sharp, and he pricks his finger. “Treasure, treasure,” he sings quietly to himself. “What reflects? Why, gold and jewels, of course!” He presses his hand to the seal without any hesitation.

The grotto rumbles around them. Zabuza can feel a pressure, an influx of energy from around them, pushing inward. It’s wrong, different from what he felt back in the ocean cave.

His eyes widen slightly in realization. The order is reversed; the energy of the *seal* is pouring into Gato first!
The pressure reaches its peak. “I feel it!” Gato shouts! “The power of the gods flowing through me! Hahaha—“ His laugh cuts off, and the expression on his face twists. “Ahh! AHHHHHHH!” He pulls at his hand sealed flush against the stone in a struggle to free himself. But he’s stuck fast.

Waves and waves of energy billow out, snaking through the grotto and beyond. Zabuza could imagine it wrapping around the earth, steeping into the very oceans.

These seals… they’re doing much more than reviving an island.

Zabuza snaps away from that thought when the screaming begins to echo and seemingly multiply. It’s still Gato, but he’s changing. Something is writhing under his skin. The skin on his arm turns color and scales over, and Zabuza watches as it lopes off his arm in coils to the ground.

Zabuza takes an involuntary step back. Hatake Fox snarls at the coil, and Haku grabs him around the middle and pulls him bodily away from the transformation.

It cascades, and Gato’s body collapses in a heap below his clothes, his body writhing and undulating underneath with a fervor.

This is a place of reflection, Mito says again, eyeing the twitching mass that once was Gato. I warned him, but it seems he was not capable of such insight.

A pile of garter snakes start to slither out from under Gato’s coat.

“What the fuck,” says Zabuza, watching the snakes fall off the column and into the shallow water. “Did it reject him?”

The seal reflected his insides for him. She tilts her head, watching the snakes slither away. Just a bit of Uzu humor.

Something groans, snaps, and Zabuza feels the rush of water pouring in around the stones under his feet. The walls begin to gush in streams. He looks back at the stairs and the trickle of water there has turned into a full-blown waterfall. Oh fuck.

The floor rumbles again, and the stones begin to shift and sink. Zabuza picks up Haku, who’s still holding onto Fox Hatake. He has no time to freak out about a fox right next to his face; he needs an exit, fast.

The fox barks, and points its snout at a rapid churn of water getting pulled through the floor. Zabuza takes the chance, and leaps in. The water sucks them right down, and they’re thrown into large aqueduct under the grotto. They slide through the stone duct, and it dumps them out near the shore of a lazy river, across the way from a wooden dock at the base of a steep river bank.

It looks like a dock for small fishing boats, though it’s been neglected by time. Zabuza hefts Haku and the fox on top of it, and he swims back under the water. He spots Kubikiribōchō in the sandbed, being investigated by minnows; he grabs it and hoists it back up to the surface.

Zabuza pulls himself up onto the dock. “Ugh,” he says, lying on his back on the sun-warmed wood. He feels a flutter and he turns his head slightly; the moth looks perfectly dry, fluttering on the green rotted board above Zabuza’s head.

Haku looks up as he squeezes the water out of his hair over the edge of the dock. “Are you alright, sir?”

“Peachy, Haku,” says Zabuza.
Fox Hatake shakes out his fur on the other side, and hops off of the dock onto the weed-filled beach. Zabuza watches the fox navigate the half broken stairs, up the steep hill in the moonlight.

“Where is he going?” Zabuza asks, watching the fox crest over the top.

After a moment, the fox comes back, and he barks at the top of the hill, insistent. Haku runs over to the steps, and Zabuza hoists himself up to chase after Haku.

They reach the top, and Zabuza stops dead. What stands before them is the remains of a village, cast in the moonlight. The light is dim, but it doesn’t hide its total destruction, half-formed and collapsed buildings still standing as a testament to the eradication of an entire country of people.

It’s the village of Uzushio. Or what used to be it. Zabuza always knew Kiri had a hand in this, but to actually see it firsthand…

He looks down at the fox, who looks silently on at the destruction, and Haku, who has his head slightly bowed.

Zabuza can’t begin to imagine what Mito thinks of all this, but he can’t see her. In fact, he hasn’t seen her since the seal was activated.

“Mito?” Zabuza asks in the still night air. But Uzumaki Mito is nowhere to be found.

----

Cat drops silently to the awning of the building across the way of a half-collapsed tea house. The Hokage has entrusted him to investigate the circumstances around a C-Rank mission. It was intended as a simple courier mission, but instead grew into what looks like a natural disaster.

The entire thoroughfare is transformed into a steady rushing river, as wide as the road. The water brushes close to the front thresholds of the bracketing buildings. Makeshift bridges now cross over the road from the windows of the upper floors. The current is brisk enough to sweep anyone away.

It’s hard to imagine something so spontaneous occurring, and yet remain so lasting. As a potential water jutsu, or even as some strange summoning event, the water still refuses to run out.

Cat seeks the source point of the possible jutsu, the epicenter of the river’s appearance. The water is dark at this time of night, but Cat casts out his other senses. The entire river is imbued with… chakra? No, it’s different than that. It’s another sort of energy, growing stronger in his senses; it’s something that makes his skin want to break out into flowers.

It’s a strange feeling. He should stop having such strange thoughts.

Something shadowed slithers below the water in the low lantern light. It’s a sea snake. He looks closer. He can spot snatches of other life: fish, and the barest tips of seaweed. It’s as if the river were here all along. It should feel impossible; it should be impossible. Can an entire ecosystem be transposed to a new and incongruent place?

Part of Tenzō wishes Kakashi was here; maybe he’d have some insight.

----

Kakashi feels a rush, energy circulating within him and through him, casting over him like a tidal wave. It’s heady, and he almost staggers with it. His students aren’t so steady, and they lean into Kakashi’s side to keep from falling over.
Kakashi looks over, and sees orange flames dance at the soles of Kurama’s paws. Now how is he doing that?

“Ha!” Kurama crows. “Something useful!” He takes a big leap into the air, the fire seemingly buoying his weight, allowing him to float. He pushes off the wall, and coasts along the top of the room.

“Ooh, flying foxes!” Fuu says, delighted. Karin gasps.

Utakata stares up at Kurama, a bit wide-eyed. “This is very new.”

“Check it out, guys!” Naruto shouts, leaping into the air. Small flames lick at his feet as he makes little bunny hops along, heading near the window.

“Naruto,” Kakashi calls, “not that way—“

“Fuck!” Kurama shouts, and he drops like a rock onto the bed.

Naruto crosses over the threshold of the open window, but he starts to stagger. “Woah!” he cries, the flames sputtering out.

“Gah!” Karin yelps, nabbing Naruto out of the sky before he can plummet to the ground below. “What are you doing?” she cries. She turns and plucks a tumbling Sakura out of the air for good measure. “Your energy feels very unstable!”

And that’s when Sasuke sets the curtains on fire.

Han knocks, and opens the door. “I heard a yell—Ah,” he says, watching the ugly green fabric go up in flames. “Is this a bad time?”

“Here—“ Utakata blows a few bubbles on his pipe; they surround the fire, and snuff the flames out.

“Oh no! The innkeeper’s not going to like that,” says Fuu, but she’s laughing.

“Maybe we can replace them?” Utakata suggests.

“I can sew,” Han offers.

“Where the heck are we going to find fabric in the middle of the night?” Karin asks, still clutching Naruto and Sakura.

Tsunade takes that moment to burst in with a pile of bedding, with Shizune close behind her. “Clear out, boys, the ladies and foxes are going to bed!”

Everyone freezes. The kids try to look as innocent as possible. Kurama is still lying motionless on the bed.

“Something’s different in here.” Tsunade squints at the window. “Didn’t we have curtains?”

The jinchuuriki all look at each other, but don’t say anything.

“Hmm,” she hums, eyeing them suspiciously. Then she shrugs. “Whatever.” She tosses Utakata a key. “You and the big guy are next door. Be up for breakfast.”

Utakata and Han leave, and Tsunade deposits her spoils from the supply closet. They’re hideously mismatched sets of futons and pillows, but at least they look clean. “Pick your poison, girls!” she
says.

“I want polka dots!” Fuu calls out.

“Family picks next,” Tsunade says with a wink.

Karin smiles shyly. “The purple one,” she decides, picking up the lavender striped blanket.

“You sleeping there, Angry Mito?” Tsunade asks, dumping the extra bedding next to the fox.

“Hhghh,” says Kurama, as he leans over the side of the bed.

“So you didn’t knock yourself out,” Kakashi observes from below.

“What, is the dog too good for foxfire?” Kurama asks, rolling off the edge and onto the floor, landing on his feet.

“I’m considering testing it for later,” says Kakashi. Much later.

“You don’t know what to do, huh?” Kurama grins.

Kakashi levels the demon fox with an unimpressed look. “Should I ask the expert skydiver?”

“Tch, it just needs to stabilize! Besides, little kits have it easier,” Kurama says. “The orange brat the easiest,” he snorts.

“As an Uzumaki? Or is it something else?” Kakashi asks.

“You think too fucking much,” Kurama says. “There’s your hint; you can leave me alone for the night.” He claws his way back up onto the end of the bed.

—-

It’s just before dawn. He steps from one dimension to the next and touches down in the grass, silent and unseen. The informant is to meet him here. There's also noise of a tailed beast sighting in the area.

Nagato believes Madara’s doing him a favor in information gathering. Zetsu believes Obito is here to silence a man who knows too much about their plans.

He presses a hand against his chest. All he believes in is doing what is right, in following whatever will fix this hell this world is trapped in.

His hand spasms when a phantom sensation slashes across his senses. The smell of medicinal herbs and wet dogs, the sounds to ring them in as a team—

It’s gone again, and he shakes himself. It’s not real. None of this is real.

But it will be, soon.

——

Kakashi’s eyes snap open to the dissipating smells of herbs and sweets and smoke. He sensed something new, just then, he knows it. He sits up.

His students are all asleep in a pile, commandeering the center of Karin’s futon. Karin seems content
to let them, sound asleep herself, though lying halfway off the bedding into Fuu’s futon.

His left eye is itching. He feels *something* there too, just under the surface. It’s nagging at him, how little he understands what’s happening to him. It’s just as well. He might as well go put Kurama’s hint into practice.

A soft gust of breeze brushes past him from the window, still cracked open the slightest.

He thinks too much? Then he’ll just try clearing his mind in the fresh air. He’ll be back in time before anyone knows he’s missing.

Kakashi stretches his body upwards, and steps carefully around the futons. He slinks up to the window, and hops silently onto the sill. He half-expects to see red, but when he checks in the reflection of the window, two gray fox eyes stare back at him.

His eye is mystery for another day. Now he’s following his instincts, letting the wind and slight smattering of rain carry him along. He wanders past people staggering home in the quieted streets, quelled by the encroaching dawn. He trots out the main gate, under the nose of the snoring watchman.

He keeps up his mantra of a clear mind, taking a path along a small brook in the woods. He won’t go far, but something in him, a memory of sounds and scents he can barely snatch at, keeps sparking along his nerves.

He stops in between a copse of trees, and tries to focus on the feeling. But it’s gone again. He suppresses a growl of frustration. No, he’s better than that. He can be patient.

He catches a new sound: a light footed paw slipping on a wet leaf. Kakashi crouches low, and waits.

A nearby bush wriggles, and out pops a twitching nose and long ears. He spies a brown rabbit in the brush, and Kakashi’s tail twitches. Practice makes perfect. Maybe he can try something like his Sight on an animal, first.

Kakashi ducks forward and sneaks silently towards his target, unaware of the uncovered red eye watching him from across the brook.
GO WEST.

Roshi’s not exactly the best person to appreciate Snow Country, what with the magma monkey keeping everything stuck on Boiling. Roshi likes seeing the snowfall, though, and how clear the stars are in the aftermath. He could call it one of life’s little pleasures, and he takes those where he can get them.

GO WEST.

Roshi might as well take his time, and enjoy another of life’s pleasures. He walks down the frost covered side street, slides open the closest bar door, and steps in. It’s a dim but cozy place, filled mostly with sleepy bathhouse workers drinking to dawn.

GO WEST.

Roshi tries not to burn the wood frame straining under his fingers. He would scream at the Yonbi to shut up, but this bar isn’t nearly rowdy enough to cover his shouting over other drunken ramblings.

Instead, he shuts the door behind him, and nods to the bartender. All the tables are taken, and the only two open seats are both bracketing a mountain of spiky white hair slumped over on the bar. Either the guy’s passed out or dead, and honestly, that’s still not enough of a deterrent for Roshi right now.

As he closes in, the mass of white hair shifts, and the man’s head turns in Roshi’s direction. He glances out at nothing, his eyes sunken and his face in total despair, half squashed into the wooden counter.

So the man’s not as passed-out as Roshi thought. He’s maudlin, which is so much worse. It’s still the only spot. Roshi braces himself and sits down anyway, which causes the man to squint up at Roshi, vaguely suspicious.

"The other spots are all full," Roshi says. "Probably because you look like a distressed hedgehog."

The man snorts. "That’s one way to put it," he croaks. With an ‘oomph,’ he lifts his head up from the counter and leans back in his seat. "I look that bad, huh?"

"Evening, sir!" the bartender interrupts, addressing Roshi in a voice too chipper for the ungodly hour. "What will you have?" she asks.

"A bottle of whiskey to start," Roshi decides, sliding over enough ryo to cover it.

"A bottle?" the man comments, a bit too idly for Roshi’s liking.

Roshi side-eyes him. "I might even share if you don’t give me grief about it."

The man holds up his hands, waving them in denial. "No, not like that. It’s just—" He then pitches a bit forward, and leans his cheek on his fist. "It reminds me of a friend of mine who can drink twice that as a starter."

Roshi makes a considering face. "Sounds fun. I’d want to meet him."
“Her,” the man corrects absently. He sighs. “Though I don’t even know if we’re friends now.”
So that’s the reason for moping. “You got in a fight,” Roshi deduces. “And now you’re here.”
Then the bartender returns with the bottle, and two glasses balanced in her other hand.
“Might as well swap names, if we’re gonna drink. Roshi,” he adds. He fills one glass halfway and slides it across the bar top.
“Jiraiya,” the man says, accepting the whiskey. The name twinges at Roshi’s memory; he’s heard it before, in passing, but he can’t quite place where.
“And nah,” Jiraiya adds, twirling the glass against the table. “I mean, yeah, we got in a fight, but we always do.” He’s silent for a few moments. “You ever have something you’re supposed to do, destined to do, and then suddenly no one cares about it anymore? Is that even allowed?”
“Oh no, of course I sat next to a philosophical drunk,” Roshi mutters overtop the rim of his glass.
Jiraiya’s lips twitch, despite the gloomy cloud around him. “Not into personal destiny?”
Roshi snorts. “I never vibed with that pre-determinism crap. It’s fortune-telling. People do shit you can’t predict all the time.”
“And yet they happen. They’ve come true before,” Jiraiya argues. The Yonbi makes a strange noise, but Roshi ignores it with decades of practice.
“You saw them come true?” Roshi asks, skeptical.
“Well. Toads told me about most of them,” Jiraiya admits.
“Toads,” Roshi repeats, flat.
Jiraiya nods. “Yes.”
“Right. So toads are making claims for you. Or you’re clinging to any circumstantial evidence to support your or their claims, ignoring the parts that don’t fit.”
Jiraiya raises his eyebrows. “Sheesh, you really don’t like predictions.”
“Who would?” Roshi shrugs. “What’s the point of anything if everything is decided for you?”
Jiraiya’s quiet for a moment. “You sure you’re not the philosopher here?” he finally asks.
“I’d need to be drunk first,” Roshi deadpans. He raises a hand, and the bartender blessedly stops by with another bottle.
“You just don’t like being told to do anything,” Jiraiya accuses with a slight grin.

**APPLAUSE FOR THE HEDGEHOG**, booms the Yonbi.

Roshi doesn’t even flinch. “No one likes being told what to do,” he counters, “or have their lives decided for them.” He brings the glass to his mouth to make himself shut up. That’s skirting a bit too close to the truth for his liking.

But Jiraiya is much too quick on the uptake, even a few glasses in. “What was decided for you?” he asks.
“I can’t remember.” Roshi lies, smirking slightly. “Forty years is a long time.” Now he can feel the Yonbi burning the alcohol out of his system even faster than usual. Dick.

“Anyway,” Roshi presses on, vowing to drink just as fast, “please tell me you have something else going for you than talking to frogs.”

“Toads,” Jiraiya corrects quickly. “Trust me, big difference. And I guess? A few things.” He lifts the glass to take another swig, and he lets out a slight sigh. “I could always focus on my writing.”

“Writing?” Roshi asks. He wouldn’t have guessed.

Jiraiya gestures at Roshi with the glass. “I’ll have you know I’m a famous author!” He drains the rest of his drink in one gulp, and sets down the glass as he hisses through his teeth. He pats down his side, before pulling out an orange book. “Here, one of my latest.”

Icha Icha? Oh. Now Roshi remembers where he’s heard Jiraiya’s name. He absently flips the pages, picking up the occasional lurid phrase. “Oh yeah. A friend of mine likes these,” he says. “Claims he reads it for the plot.”

Jiraiya grins. “That’s what they all say.”

“With Han I can never be too sure,” Roshi comments. He goes to slide the book back over but Jiraiya holds up a hand to stop him.

“Keep it,” Jiraiya says. “Give it to your friend when you see him. Or read it!” Then he throws back another glass of whiskey in record time. He hisses a little at the burn when done. “I love my fans. But Icha Icha won’t save the world,” he sighs.

“Doing that through porn would be a sight,” Roshi says, amused. Then he squints at Jiraiya. “Your destiny was saving the world? Seriously?”

“Nooo, not me,” Jiraiya denies. “No way. I’m supposed to be looking for someone who would save the world.” Then he shrugs, tilting in his seat, his movements starting to get sloppy with all the whiskey in him. “Or destroy it.”

“...Uh huh,” Roshi says slowly. “And now you think you can’t do anything about it?”

Jiraiya scratches he head, laughing a little. “You know, I really thought I would be close to figuring it out this time.” Then he drops his head onto the countertop. “But now the old toad’s apparently saying that the whole thing’s done and gone. Or ‘borrowed,’ whatever that means.”

“And now you’re here,” Roshi finishes for him. “Drowning your sorrows.”

“And now I’m here,” Jiraiya says, muffled, into the wood paneling. “Waiting for them to tell me what’s next.”

Roshi’s definitely missing some of the details with the World Saving Frogs thing, but he can still see the main problem. “Listen to yourself,” he barks, slapping his palm on the counter. “You’re letting others tell you what to do again. What did I just say before? Why can’t you just find your own path?”

“Find my own path...?” Jiraiya lifts his head from the counter. Then his eyes twinkle with incredibly drunken determination. “You’re right, Roshi. You’re right. I have to be proactive. I could... I could even find the Prophecy thieves!”
Roshi lifts his brows. “The prophecy what—“

“If the prophecy’s a thing you can take, then I can take it back, right? There’s a chance!”

“That’s not what I—” Roshi begins but pauses, not wanting to send Jiraiya fishtailing into depression again. “Fine, whatever. Do you have any leads on these thieves?” he asks instead.

Jiraiya opens his mouth and shuts it. “Ah—no,” he says, face falling again. Dammit, now they’re back to maudlin. And Roshi’s still painfully sober.

**GO WEST,** the Yonbi bellows, somehow louder than ever.

“You go west,” Roshi finally snaps at the tailed beast, the whiskey in his glass starting to sizzle.

“West? Who’s going west?” Jiraiya asks, blinking his bleary eyes several times. Roshi tries not to wince, moving his glass out of sight.

But Jiraiya’s face lights up. “Great idea!” he shouts, leaping to his feet. He stumbles out of the bar and into the alley, nearly slamming the abused door off its tread.

“Okay, shit, hang on—” Roshi grabs the book, thinks better for a moment and throws more money on the counter, then hops off his chair and goes after Jiraiya.

“Gonna go west,” Jiraiya sings to loudly himself, already ambling along the main street. “Gonna go west. I have to take charge of my own life! I’m on a mission now!”

You’re drunk!” Roshi calls out to him through the light snowfall. “And going the wrong way!”

“Oh,” says Jiraiya, and he pivots on his heel with a grin. “Thanks!” he adds, as he stumbles past Roshi. “We make a great team!”

“A team?” Roshi mutters to himself, appalled.

“C’mon, partner!” Jiraiya calls, beckoning a hand as he twits to look back at Roshi. The motion nearly causes him to fall on his ass in the snow.

“...Only until you sober up,” Roshi hedges, as he jogs to catch up. That’s partly his fault, anyway, for offering the guy so much alcohol. He forgets non-jinchuuriki don’t take much to get sloshed.

The Yonbi rumbles in his mind, but tellingly says nothing else. Roshi grumbles in return. He happens to be going west because he feels like it, and to partly stop Jiraiya from hurting himself.

And no one or nothing else is going to tell him otherwise.

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A Hokage’s job never ends, Hiruzen muses, yawning behind his hat. One of these days he could use a long vacation. Or retirement, again. He’s been called in early—very early—for an emergency briefing, from Maito Gai of all people.

He sweeps into his office, with Gai and his students trailing in after him. They stand quietly behind Gai, and Gai steps forward, waiting to be addressed by Hiruzen.

Satisfied his security seals are still in place, Hiruzen sits himself behind his desk, his fingers steepling together. “Ah, Gai, you and your team back earlier than expected,” Hiruzen comments. “I’m glad to see you are all well. But may I ask why you requested a meeting?”
“Yosh, sir!” Gai says, animated. Hiruzen always wonders how he can maintain so much energy. He’d guess a kekkei genkai, recalling Dai, but Gai has somehow managed to pass it on to his charge Lee as well. Neji and Tenten appear asleep on their feet, but Lee is still wriggling in one spot, doing his best to stay still.

Hiruzen brings himself back in to focus as Gai continues. “Apologies for calling you in before the sun! My team and I were in the middle of our training trip, and we encountered the missing-nin Uchiha Itachi in the village of Wave, along with a suspected and bright blue accomplice! I deemed it important to inform you right away!”

“Uchiha Itachi in Wave?” Hiruzen asks, careful to not add too much inflection in his voice. The ‘accomplice’ must be Hoshigaki Kisame. And another incident so soon in Wave bodes ill, especially with Genma already—hopefully—still secretly investigating. He wonders what Itachi already suspects—or even knows—about Team Seven’s absence. Hiruzen will have to find a way to make contact with him much sooner than expected.

“So close to Fire Country…” Hiruzen trails off as he folds his fingers together. “This is most grave, and will require investigation.”

Gai tips his head. “Ah, well, if it’s helpful, I do not believe they are in Wave anymore, sir.”

“How can you be certain?” Hiruzen asks, curious. The possibility certainly exists that they’ve traveled elsewhere, but Gai has an odd look on his face.

“Because… they vanished completely!” Gai exclaims, spreading out his hands.

Hiruzen can’t help but lean forward in his seat. “Vanished? How so?”

“In a burst of light! I’m no chakra sensor, but it seemed quite powerful! Young Neji could not find any evidence of them still in the village, as well.” Hiruzen glances to Neji, who nods once.

Hiruzen thinks. A teleportation technique? That’s truly a surprise; he was unaware of Itachi or Hoshigaki having such capabilities. The last Hiruzen truly had seen such a move was Hiraishin, and Minato could not have taught the full technique to anyone. Especially not Itachi, who would still be much too young at the time of Minato’s passing. “Was it Itachi who used this method? Or his accomplice?” Hiruzen asks anyway.

Gai shakes his head. “No, there was a man in civilian clothing who seemed to have caused it,” he says. He scratches his chin. “Who, come to think of it, must not have been a civilian at all.”

Hiruzen sits back in his chair, now truly worried. His assumptions at this juncture feel too far-fetched, but they cross his mind. He knows Genma was taught a version of Hiraishin, but that required three people to operate in tandem with each other. Whether Genma had a hand in the current incident, or was even there, remains to be seen. And yet, the possibility, however impossible...

Hiruzen levels Gai with a serious look. “Please ensure that your students understand this is to remain top secret.” He casts his gaze to Gai’s team, who have managed to wait patiently. “We do not want to cause undue stress to the village at this point in time.”

“Understood, sir!” Gai calls out. His students all nod, taking in the gravity of Hiruzen’s words.

Hiruzen dismisses them, sighing after the door swings shut. More questions, more worries. The mystery of Team Seven, and of Wave, seems to grow as the days pass. He can only hope for his shinobi’s safe return, though the hope fades with every new sunrise.
Karui suppresses another yawn. Training on night guard duty is the worst. And it doesn’t help that Omoi is here with her, as much a catastrophizing daydreamer as usual. Her skin prickles from the dry air, already blowing in from an unseasonably cold front. It’s threatening to snow, too, she can tell. It might even stick, if she’s estimating the night temperature correctly.

Oh god, she’s so bored she’s thinking about the weather. Ugh. Night guard duty is beyond the worst.

Only an hour to go until sunrise, when she catches a noise of a tumbling pebble. It’s probably another bat making its way back to its cliffside home, but she glances over to the cliffs ahead anyway.

Oh. That’s definitely not a bat. What she spots instead is a mountain of a man ambling along the cliff face and down to the ground, with a familiar silhouette, and a very familiar rhythmic gait.

“Is that… is that Killer Bee?” Karui hisses to Omoi.

Omoi blinks, rolling the lollipop in his mouth. “That’s weird; he never leaves the village,” he says, his eyes narrowing slightly.

Hm, he has a point. “But why now?” Karui whispers, mostly to herself. “Where is he going?”

She regrets even saying anything out loud once she sees the look on Omoi’s face, running through every worst-case-scenario he can think of.

Karui tries to cut him off at the pass. “Or we can go follow him and find out—”

She gets up to give chase after Bee, but Omoi holds her back.

“Hang on,” he says. “We don’t know the situation. He could be on a mission, or the Raikage has him doing something secret.”

“Oh or he felt like leaving,” Karui mutters, just to be obstinate. But still, they both edge closer, furtive, towards the border gate to the outer bluffs. Karui fidgets, unsure of what to do. Do they tell anyone about this? Do they just let Bee go? Will Bee get in trouble for leaving?

Ugh, she’s thinking like Omoi now.

But then Omoi blurts out, eyes wide, “You’re right, we need to follow him.”

“We need to—oh, now you agree with me?” Karui asks, irritated. “What happened to ‘what if he’s on some secret mission?’”

“But what if he is going off without telling anyone? What if he gets kidnapped outside of the village?” Omoi counters. He squishes his cheeks with his hands in despair. “What if we’re the only ones who know where he went, and aren’t there to help him?”

“Cut that shit out!” Karui hisses, pulling Omoi’s hands off his face. “First off, who’s gonna kidnap Bee? He’s one of the strongest people in our village, and, like, in the world!”

“One of,” Omoi parrots back, a bit mullish.

“And two,” she adds, trying not to punch her teammate, “what are two genin going to do?”

“I guess, but,” Omoi says as he starts to sweat, “I realized we’re supposed to be watching the border;
we might be in serious trouble either way if we don’t do anything.”

Karui stares at Omoi, starting to sweat a bit herself. *Shit, he’s right!*

She grabs his arm without replying and tugs him out the gate. Karui’s thinking of the best way to alert Bee that they’re approaching, but Bee’s head turns sharply back.

They freeze, and Killer Bee slides out a sword from his sheath, dropping into an offensive stance. “Yo, whoever’s sneaking around tonight, I’m gonna give you a helluva fight!”

“Bee, wait, it’s us!” Karui manages to hiss, waving her hands. “It’s cool!”

Bee straightens up out of his stance, resheathing his sword. “Oh. Yo, Karui, and Omoi too? What are you kids trying to do?” he asks, a bit wary.

“Ask him!” Karui says, pointing at Omoi. “It’s his idea!” she adds, throwing him under the cart.

“But you said—uh, oh,” Omoi starts and stops, put on the spot. He looks to Karui for help but she just raises her eyebrows at him and juts her head in Bee’s direction.

“...We saw you out here and thought you might need our help,” Omoi says. “Uh, just in case?” he adds with a wince.

But Bee just breaks into a grin. “I see how it is; you’re sure you want to go? We’re going far, just so you know.”

“Yes, we’re sure,” Karui says, resolute. “No matter the distance.” Omoi nods.

“I can’t stop you, so...” Bee shrugs. “Fine by me, and Gyuki. We’re on our way to meet family.”

“Family?” Omoi asks. “And not... not the Raikage?” he adds, confused.

Bee shakes his head. “Not A, and I didn’t let him know...” he trails off, and adds, “I got way more siblings out there, bro.”

Karui and Omoi look at each other. Oh no, this is a secret from the Raikage? They might get into way more trouble now. Scratch that, definitely get into way more trouble.

Bee laughs at the horrified looks on their faces. “Yeah; I’ll likely be in deep shit, but you two won’t take the hit, I’ll make sure of it.”

Karui’s not so sure about that, but it’s too late now, anyway. “Where are we headed?”

Bee points at his skull. “Yeah, so I got a message in my head; turns out the island isn’t dead.”

“Island? What island?” Karui asks, speeding up her strides to match Bee’s pace, Omoi loping behind her.

“No clue, yo, that’s all he said! Before I could ask, he left my head!” Bee stops, and pulls out a little book. “Wait,” he mutters, flipping through the pages, “I already rhymed with ‘head.’” He coughs once, putting away the book, and says, “I mean—I guess I’ll ask Gyūki instead!”

Bee’s silent for a few moments. “Oh!” He looks down at Karui and Omoi. “He can’t say. It’s a secret, ok?”

Karui makes a face. “Seriously?”
“So you have no idea where you’re going?” Omoi deduces. “Isn’t that weird?”

“Nah!” Killer Bee marches on ahead again, due south. “It’s not as weird as you say; a slug told us to go this way!”

Omoi and Karui look at each other again.

“...That just makes me even more confused,” Omoi whispers to Karui.

Karui can only nod, baffled. A... family slug? Brain messages? What the hell. She tries to think what that could mean. And siblings—

“...Wait a minute,” Karui says, dread building within her. “Are these siblings—is this the Hachibi’s family?” she cries, aghast. “All the other tailed beasts?”

Omoi’s lollipop nearly falls out of his mouth. “We’re sneaking out of the village to meet all of the jinchuuriki—potential enemies?!” he nearly shouts.

“Shh!!” Bee hushes Omoi, clapping a hand over his mouth. “You’re going to give us away!”

“Sorry,” Omoi says, muffled behind Bee’s hand.

“...A’ight,” Bee says. Seemingly satisfied by the apology, he removes his hand. “So that’s why I can’t tell A; he’d also take it the wrong way!”

“Well. It does sound really sketchy,” Karui admits with a grimace.

"And with, uh, Gyūki," Omoi adds, a bit hesitant, “You’re doing this... because he asked?”

“Oi, being partners means com-pro-mise!” Bee declares, drawing each syllable out with a slash of his hands. “If I ignored Gyūki that’d be mad unwise!” He nods his head with resolve. “He trusts me so I trust him, too; if he needs to see his siblings that’s what we’re gonna do.”

“We trust you too,” says Karui. “Even if it sounds sketchy.”

“Yeah,” Omoi agrees. “And it would probably be worse to back out and return now,” he adds with a grimace. “Imagining the possibilities all lead to punishment anyway.”

Bee shivers, and it’s not from the snow. “You know that’s right; I don’t need A’s Iron Claw tonight!”

----

Karin drifts up from sleep, a bit lost as to where she is. Oh, right, this isn’t her apartment. She feels the bright power of Tsunade’s chakra radiating nearby, like a sunrise. Tsunade’s not as familiar to Karin as her old village was, yet, but it’s undeniably so much better. The chakra all around her makes her feel safer than she has in a long time.

She can’t quite believe everything she’s done in the past 24 hours: abandoning her village and becoming a fugitive from Grass, meeting Hinata, flying with Fuu and Han, finding out about Uzushio and Tsunade, and how it all means that Karin doesn’t have to be alone ever again.

She’ll have to find a way to repay everyone. Karin only has the savings from her meager genin stipend hidden in her backpack, if that, but it seems like Tsunade is not hard up for money right now, anyway. Karin hasn’t told anyone yet about her other ‘gift,’ and she’s reluctant to mention it. But with family, healing them when they need it wouldn’t be so bad, right?
Karin blinks again, now more fully awake, taking the world in. She casts her senses further through the inn room, and makes a count. Fuu, Tsunade, Shizune, the four foxes—

Wait, four? She counts again. One of the foxes is missing, the grey one. Sassy… Sassy-something, from whatever Tsunade said in passing last night. Sassy isn’t in the room at all. He’s somewhere, though; she can get a twinge of it, leading outside. She spreads herself out farther, into Tanzaku Quarters, prodding and dropping the hundreds of chakra signatures as her senses billow through. Just a bit beyond the town’s edge and—there. He’s there, alone. Then her senses lurch, and latch onto the flicker of something strange, and dark.

She sits up like a shot, and turns her head just in time to see Angry Mito dropping out of the window.

Oh no, Karin’s not about to let another of the foxes off on their own with that freaky chakra spike. She creeps up after him, careful not to jostle the tinier foxes from their sleep. She grips the windowsill, and throws herself over, snagging the rain gutter. She slips a little, but slides down the downspout of the inn’s rain gutter no worse for wear, hitting the wet ground with a little splash.

Angry Mito jolts, spins to eye her, and hisses. He jerks his head back up at the inn window, as if demanding Karin go back inside. Karin scoffs. Like that’ll happen. She knows her instincts.

“It’s about Sassy, right?” she whispers to the fox. “You’re going to find him. I can sense him out there.”

The fox eyes her a moment, and turns back to trot up the road. It’s as much an invitation as she’s going to get, and she picks up the pace to catch up.

Karin’s bare feet slap against the wet pavement, as she and the fox traverse the streets, jogging past sleepy and tipsy people stumbling out of shuttering bars and gambling dens. All the while, the intermittent flux and wane of that dark chakra near Sassy is worrying her; she wonders if Angry Mito can at all sense it, too.

It’s a strange kind of chakra. It at times feels overly light, childish, almost nostalgic, but is run undercurrent by a seeping miasma, a concentration of what she can only describe as hatred. It scares her; she knows her hands are already starting to shake from the sensation, but she presses on despite it.

Angry Mito doesn’t look at her as he runs alongside, but he strays slightly closer to her, too.

---

Obito’s waiting for his, or really, Madara’s target, who’s suspected of selling sensitive information to the wrong people.

Another worthless informant, believing he can betray the Akatsuki and get away with it. And of course the man would think that. People betray each other, hurt each other, kill each other, because they believe that’s the only way to get ahead. The world wouldn’t be the hell it is if not for the system of cruelty within it. Nagato truly believes in the pain of it. He’s utterly lost to the false realities of this place. Madara and Zetsu see beyond it, it as a means to an end of suffering.

Obito looks at his gloved hands. He knows what he has to do, to end suffering once and for all, for Rin. And privately, secretly, for Kakashi, too. But he needs to keep his distance. Once it’s over, it’ll be fine. Then they’ll all be together. Maybe, if it works out perfectly, he can show Kakashi, too, before they all move on into the new world.
Usually he squashes down these thoughts; he shouldn’t have time for them. Distractions, Madara would say.

Speaking of distractions, that grey fox keeps catching his attention out of the corner of his eye. Obito decides to watch what it does next. He can guess; he spots the rabbit right when the fox does. It must be breakfast. There’s something to be said about animals, and former teammates who had a fondness for them over people. Animals are so much more simple, working instead on instinct than evil. They still kill, but that’s animal nature. Most societies have no excuse.

The fox leans forward, its gaze intent on the rabbit. But, surprisingly, it doesn’t strike. Instead, it continues to stare at the rabbit, leaning further and further forward... until it flops over onto its face. The rabbit startles at the sound and hops away into the underbrush. The fox sits up and hastily looks around, as if it hopes no one saw that. Then it shakes out its fur, trying to look composed.

What on earth is it doing? Obito bites his lip, trying to stave off the quirk of a smile. Maybe he needs to eat his words on animal behavior being ‘simple.’

That should be the end of it, Obito knows he has work to do, but he opts instead to watch in amused fascination as the fox skulks back into the brush. Obito follows along, silent and curious. Oh, now the fox has spotted new prey, with a squirrel. The fox stalks forward, as silent as before. Is it going to try to eat this one? Obito watches, enthralled. But no, the fox does its weird staring again, lasting a minute longer before tumbling over into the ground.

The fox sits up. The baffled and offended look on its dirt smudged face is so ridiculous; it’s a dead-on impression of Bakashi. Obito can't quite stifle a snicker at it, unable to squash childhood memories back down this time as he covers his mouth with his hand.

The fox seems to twitch its whiskers at the noise, and that really gets Obito's attention. Can it sense him? It shouldn’t be able to. He stands still in the grass, and waits to see what it does next. The fox sniffs around, cautious. It creeps further into the clearing where Obito is standing. He watches as the fox wanders dangerously close to his leg, but no, it otherwise still can’t seem to detect him as it swivels its head around the forest, still searching. Apparently satisfied after another minute, it composes itself into a look of practiced boredom.

Laughter bubbles up within Obito again. Feeling impulsive, he wonders how the fox would react if he suddenly appeared. It might be funny to surprise it. Madara’s ‘client’ isn’t close yet, either. It wouldn't hurt anything to play for a minute.

Obito creeps around, positioning himself in front of the fox. He drops his genjutsu and watches the fox jump about a foot in the air. It shoots back into the brush like a shot of lightning, and the forest goes still.

"Come on, I didn't mean to scare you so bad," Obito calls after it into the silence. His sentence hangs there, a dull ringing in his ears from the eerie quiet. He huffs out a sigh through his nose. So much for that. He should have expected it. He shouldn't screw around anyway, he needs to stay focused—

A small rustle catches his attention, and Obito stays perfectly still. And then a black snout pokes back through the leaves. It’s the fox again, eyeing him curiously. Obito fights back a laugh behind his mask. The dumb fox hasn't left after all.

Opting against startling the fox again, Obito crouches slowly down to the ground and waits. The fox blinks at him, and places a cautious paw forward. It takes a circuitous path around Obito, edging
closer until it’s just out of arm’s reach.

Obito doesn’t say anything, letting it sniff at him, its tail waving once before stilling. He moves his hand, slowly this time. The fox steps back a few paces, but drifts back forward when it deems Obito harmless. That’s funnier than it should be. But now what to do…?

Oh, Obito has an idea. "Hey, watch this," he says. He holds out one hand, fingers spread out and palm down, as he lets a kunai phase out of it into his other outstretched hand. The fox watches, rapt and whiskers twitching as Obito repeats the ‘trick,’ more kunai seemingly appearing out of nowhere.

Obito clacks them together and throws them up in quick succession, juggling the four of them. It’s one of the many things he did in the cave to pass the time and regain his dexterity. He’s thought about using it a certain persona he’s been working on, and he might as well try it out with a willing audience.

After a minute, he lets the first three fall back through his palm into his eye’s dimension, and catches the last one by his finger through the ring of the kunai’s handle.

"Ta da!" he says, sing-song, spinning the last kunai round and round.

The fox just stares at him, eyes half-lidded.

Obito lets the kunai swing to a stop. "Wow. Tough crowd," he says, wry, as he tucks the last kunai safely back into his sleeve. He better check his goggles too—

His hand freezes in his hair. What is he doing? He’s performing parlor tricks for a fox? He’s not a child anymore, he needs to get a grip on himself.

"That’s all you get. Now get out of here," he says, standing up.

If anything, the fox steps closer to him, whiskers and tail twitching again. Obito stares back at it, as he feels pressure build in his chest.

"I told you to—" he starts, but the words are caught in his throat, as more memories rise like bile. The smell, the scent memory of herbs and grilled fish and seaweed and blood is overwhelming—

Then Obito feels a low flare of chakra—an ambush—a second too late. Before he can react, the fox jumps between him and the attacking informant in a flare of white fire. It snaps its teeth perfectly through the uncovered fingers of the informant, forcing him to drop his weapon. But the man is quick with the other hand, slashing into the fox’s side.

The fox falls, and Obito’s vision goes white: the white chakra of a father’s blade, the white glare of the opposing attack, the back of the white-grey hair of the stupid boy protecting Obito at the cost of his eye—

All he can see is white. White, and then red red—

Obito comes to, roots and branches burst up from the ground and billowing around him, creating the inside of an enormous hollow tree to engulf the clearing. The informant himself is ensnared in a spire of roots and vines, unable to move.

“Please, no,” the man pleads. “Don’t kill me; I had to—I was forced to—”

Madara was supposed to interrogate him first, but it’s too late for that. He doesn’t bother with a
response; instead he holds up his palm, and clenches his fist shut. The roots obey, with an echoing crunch.

Obito then looks down, his focus all on the strange grey fox.

"Shit," he mutters, assessing the gash in the fox’s side, its breathing shallow. The dumb thing actually tried to protect Obito. He can at least put it out of its misery.

But he hesitates. He doesn't... he doesn't want to kill it. He doesn't want to leave it alone to die, either. It shouldn't matter at all, but.

Obito pulls off his gloves. He covers the wound with one of them, applying pressure. He reaches forward and feels the fur under his other hand; he still feels the thready pulse of this creature stupid enough to defend him. He feels its heartbeat dance along his fingers, and something deep down, deep-rooted in Obito clenches under his ribcage.

He remembers the sharp tang of iodine, and the scratch of bandage wrapping on his skin, and he knows exactly what Rin would do. He scoops the limp fox gently up into his arms. He can take a hint from Rin. He can do this one thing. He’s got time. It doesn’t change his plans at all.

Obito hears a scraping noise outside the tree hollow; it could be nothing, or someone trying to investigate. Either way, he’s fucked up enough for one day; time to leave before it all gets messier. He’ll forget the tailed-beast sighting for now, as well. There will be more leads. He can come back later.

Decision made, his grip secure on the fox, he whirls away into his eye's dimension. What Zetsu or Nagato or anyone else doesn’t know won’t hurt them.
Tsunade rolls awake, and something isn’t right. She doesn’t hear Angry Mito’s sleep wheezes next to her ear, which she’s grown used to in the last few days. She sits up, and her eyes catch the half empty futon where Karin should be. Karin’s bag is still there, along with her scroll. She counts the three little foxes, but that’s all she sees. The window is wide open too, blowing in the morning breeze.

Angry Mito and Sassy Sakumo are missing now, and so is Karin.

Tsunade leans all the way out the window, and she spots a far-off dot of red; there they are in the distance, running for the main gate. She leans back into the room, grabs her shoes, and hollers behind her, “I’m going after Karin, Shizune!”

And then she leaps out, fracturing the window frame, and cracking the pavement below with the force of her landing.

----

Shizune jolts awake at the sound of Tsunade’s voice, and a loud boom, right outside the window. Going after Karin?

“Tsunade-sama—!” Shizune calls after her through the thoroughly broken window, but Tsunade’s already disappeared down the road.

Shizune sighs, but gathers up their things as quickly as she can. Another day, another emergency escape from extra inn charges.

“I’ll help!” Fuu jumps to her feet and gathers up all the little foxes into her arms.

Shizune goes to grab the rest of their party, but Utakata and Han are already at the door.

“Time to leave?” Utakata asks, taking a bag off of Shizune’s hands.

She nods. “Tsunade-sama’s headed for the gate; Karin’s that way too, I think.”

“Here we gooooo!” Fuu shouts, somersaulting out the window in a flurry of glitter, the little foxes in tow chittering in her arms. Han and Utakata go next, with Shizune not far behind them all.

But their escape obviously doesn’t go unnoticed. “H-hey!” the morning innkeeper shouts angrily, running out the front door. “You all have to check out! Alright, that’s it; I’m calling the patrol guards —”

But they all ignore his threats as they rush down the road towards the gate.

----

Kurama knows Karin is starting to falter from the feeling of the chakra ahead of them. He can feel that seeping anger, the palpable rage, the closer they get. He knows that hatred anywhere; he’ll never forget it. Kurama picks up the pace, willing himself to go faster.

“Mito—Mito, wait!” Karin calls out, but there’s no time to lose.

He hears Karin cry out and stumble behind him as the anger explodes outward in a fury of chakra.
Far ahead of them, roots and vines burst out of the ground. They spiral higher and farther, creating a wall between them. It crests above the treetops, forming into a twisted facsimile of one of Konoha’s mokuton trees.

Kurama races ahead, dodging the newly forming growths. He spots a man in a mask for the barest moment between a gap in the roots, before the clearing is fully engulfed by the tree.

It’s him. That masked Uchiha.

Kurama snarls as he hits the wall, scratching gouges in the growing bark with his claws. He’s putting all his rage into it, but it’s not getting him anywhere. It should be NOTHING for him to tear this wood apart. At his highest power, he could tear anything apart without a thought.

But his claws are no longer the claws of a demon; he’s only a fox. He’s weak and helpless and he hates .

With that the Uchiha’s hatred vanishes. He’s gone. And now the idiot fox——now Kakashi is gone, too.

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“Karin!” Tsunade calls out as she comes to a stop, picking the rattled girl up off the ground. “What are you——” Then her eyes catch on the writhing roots and vines, and Tsunade nearly falters at the sight. Mokuton. That has to be mokuton. But how…?

Tsunade looks ahead, and sees that Angry Mito is scratching deep gouges in the bark, shrieking.

Karin starts to speak. “There was someone in there, bright and angry, and they took Sassy, and I can’t—I can’t sense either of them anymore,” she tapers off, her voice shaking.

And Tsunade knows Karin can feel as far as the eastern oceans. No one can possibly move that fast and that far, can they? And to take a fox, one of her foxes—

Tsunade doesn’t want to believe it. She needs to be sure, and runs over to Angry Mito. She fits her fingers in a gap in the gnarled wall, and grips tight as she pulls. The wood splinters under her hands, and she tears the bark open in one fell swoop.

Tsunade pushes her way into the hollow trunk. A wall of roots and vines surrounds the entire space, casting it in darkness. She squints, willing her eyesight to adjust. She doesn’t sense anything inside, or catch any movement.

Another, smaller spire of gnarled tree roots stands off to the side. But she ignores it for what she spots on the ground. It’s a small patch of blood in the short grass, with a small tuft of grey fur. Her stomach drops, and her hands begin to shake. The fox is nowhere to be found. But the blood, that might be his blood, and that means——

“Tsunade!” someone calls out, but she can’t respond, her vision going black.

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Han and the others arrive to the sight of a giant tree made of roots and vines towering over the forest. Han is at a loss as to who could have caused it.

Mokuton, Kokuo murmurs, and he sounds uneasy.
Meanwhile, the large orange fox is pacing, snarling, and Karin is shaking like a leaf.

Shizune goes to Karin. “Are you okay? Is Tsunade-sama—”

“In there,” is all Karin manages as she points to a large hole in the side of the tree, the girl’s hands unsteady as she points. Shizune makes it inside the hollow first, just in time to catch Tsunade from totally collapsing.

“Tsunade!” Shizune cries, trying to hold her upright, but the medic nin is dead to the world, passed out. Han steps forward, and picks Tsunade up easily, hoisting her over his shoulder.

“Thank you,” says Shizune. “We should get her out of—”

“Hold it right there!” a voice shouts from behind them. “You’re all in violation!”

A patrol guard, some stationed chuunin most likely, from the town gate drops down from the branch, and lopes towards them into the hollow tree. “You’re all charged with damages to two inn rooms, and bypassing proper gate-exit procedures!”

“This isn’t the best time for this right now,” Han begins, but the guard scoffs.

“Trying to pull a fast one on your charges, huh? I know your type, thinking you can claim ignorance, and sneak away from responsibility!”

Even Fuu is waving her hands, trying to stop him. “Seriously, mister, not now—”

But the guard keeps going. “It takes more than that to outsmart—IS THAT A DEAD BODY?” he shrieks, pointing at the gnarled tree roots where a human foot is sticking out.

Utakata holds his hands up. “If you would just listen—”

The guard fumbles with a seal tag and snaps it open. “Back up, I need—I need back up—”

It’s time to leave, Kokuo suggests. Let me run?

Han has no arguments to that. “Everyone grab onto me,” he declares, shifting Tsunade onto his back. It may be best to recuperate and regroup in River Country.

Han closes his eyes, sinking back to let Kokuo take over. They grow and grow, breaking through the hollow and dead tree with a mighty headbutt. They tower over the forest, and with a leap, Tanzaku Quarters is left behind as they all take off like a shot to the west.

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One of the summoned stationed chuunin watches as the giant horse beast gallops away into the middle distance. He looks down at his passed-out colleague, and pokes him a bit with his foot.

“We should report this. To, uh, to someone,” he decides. The other stationed chuunin all nod.

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Past the forest and through the fields, Genma treks down a rolling hill onto the dirt path leading up to the portside town, just before dawn. He’s made it to Chaba, as noted by its cheerful wood sign hanging outside a postal shop. Perfect; he needs to send a message to the Hokage about how his mission has gone south, somehow literally.
The shop is open, at least, which is a good start. He steps in, a little bell tinkling from a door as he opens it. Stacks of letters and packages are on carts shoved against the wall. Feathers litter the floor, and a giant map of the Elemental Nations is tacked to the back wall, with various symbols drawn on it.

The sole clerk behind the main counter looks up from her newspaper. She has heavy bags under her eyes.

“Hm?” she asks, sleepy. “What do you need?”

Genma quirks his lips up in an easy smile. “Morning. I need to rent a messenger bird to Fire Country; your fastest, preferably,” he adds.

She sighs as she heaves herself up from her chair. “The fastest’s gonna cost you,” she calls out as she wanders into the back room, pulling on a falconry glove as she goes.

“I’m aware,” Genma calls back, pulling out his message and his stack of reserve money. One of the few perks of technically still being on a mission is the ability to expense anything and everything related to it. One just has to make it back alive to claim it.

The clerk returns with a young raptor perched on her glove. It’s a juvenile red-tailed hawk, and it looks incredibly eager to fly out, judging by how often it fluffs out its wings, smacking the woman in the shoulder with one of them.

“He’s young, but good,” she says. The hawk screeches, delighted, kicking out its clawed foot in anticipation for a package.

The woman squints at the bird, and then at Genma. “Oh yeah, you’re not sending anything heavy, right?” she asks.

“Just this scroll right here,” Genma says, holding up his coded and sealed message.

“Just a scroll? That should be okay. Toss it on the scale there,” she directs, pointing to the little scale on the counter.

He does, and the clerk nods at the number. She starts to jot down the final rental price as she asks, “How far is he going into Fire?”

“Konoha,” Genma answers, reading her handwriting upside down and setting the money in a dish on the counter.

She nods again, picking the scroll up from the scale. “He can make it there. You a shinobi?” she asks, tying the scroll to the hawk’s leg. Or at least she’s trying to tie it; the bird’s practically vibrating with anticipation. “You look like one.”

“I get that a lot,” Genma replies with a wry smile.

The clerk snorts. “Definitely a shinobi. We get you guys sometimes around here, but not often. And I figure someone should know about the river,” she adds.

Genma brow furrows at that. “The river?” He doesn’t recall one around here on any map.

“Yeah, exactly,” she nods at his puzzled look, “the river that wasn’t there a few days ago. It just showed up from the north, cutting across one of our travel roads and everything!” She makes a sweeping motion with her hands.
“That definitely sounds... odd,” Genma offers, trying to think what could possibly cause a river to spontaneously appear.

“You think it’s some weird jutsu thing?” she asks. “Ninjutsu or whatever?”


“It looks pretty damn real to all of us,” she lobbs back. “But check it out for yourself; north of town, can’t miss it.”

The hawk squawks loudly between them, impatient.

“Alright, alright, time to go.” She taps the leaf symbol on the wall map, getting the bird’s attention. “Get to Konoha.” She looks back at Genma. “Get the window for me?”

The hawk chirps, taking off as soon as the window’s barely open, leaving a couple feathers behind. Genma watches it fly off through the sky, turning into a mere speck in the distance in no time.

The clerk tiredly grins, shucking off the glove. “Told you he’s fast.”

“He is,” Genma agrees. “No false advertising there.”

“Not in this shop! You have a nice day, shinobi. And you go check out that river too, if you got the time.” With that, she picks her newspaper back up from the counter, hiding behind it again.

“I might take a glance at it.” Genma places a senbon back in his mouth, resigning himself to his own curiosity. It’s on the way back to Konoha, anyway.

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Kakashi slowly rises from the haze of sleep, disoriented. He shifts, and immediately regrets it with a wince. His side aches; it pulsates with a low throb of pain. He tries to recall what happened. He was outside of Tanzaku Quarters, experimenting in the clearing and—ah, right. He threw himself in front of a masked shinobi. On instinct, like an idiot.

(Another near-death in less than a week? His students will be apoplectic.)

By all means, he should still be in that clearing. But something doesn’t seem right. He opens his eyes to a twilight sky, devoid of any familiar sound. This isn’t the forest. This isn’t Tanzaku Quarters. This isn’t even the afterlife.

Naturally, Kakashi starts to panic. He tries to lift himself up on his shaking legs, with his tail thrashing, but he’s sluggish to move. He’s too slow, too weak. He doesn’t know where he is, or whoever’s taken him here. Because as much as his senses screamed it on instinct, it can’t possibly be Obi—

"Shh, cut that out," says a deep, yet familiar cadence, as a gentle hand slides through the fur on his back. "No one’s going to hurt you."

Kakashi stills. It can’t be, he can’t be, but he is. From the scent of the masked man alone, Kakashi can’t help but go boneless under the hand in disbelieving joy. This man smells of forest, yes, but his understory is smouldering, familiar. Burning.

In the undergrowth, in the raging forest under this man’s skin, Kakashi knows it is Obito.
“See?” Obito says, “I’m just petting you. And you better not bite me when I have to re-check your bandages.”

Kakashi lifts his head, and glances down at his wrapped-up abdomen. Obito did that for him?

Obito huffs. "Yeah, those bandages. Dumb fox; that knife would've just phased through me, if not healed faster," he adds, mostly to himself, as he scratches softly behind Kakashi's ears.

Ah. Well, how nice to know that Obito could somehow do that now. Of course Kakashi didn't think. He didn't have time to hesitate. Not after the cave.

The cave. The boulder. Obito was crushed; Kakashi saw it, and seared it into his mind. He’s carried Obito’s sacrifice with him for every single day of his life since then. But no, Obito is right here and alive. He’s somehow, impossibly, wonderfully alive alive alive, and Kakashi can’t even begin to float back down from that revelation any time soon.

He drifts along for another minute or two until Obito speaks again.

"Hey, Fox. You’re going to have to be my little secret, alright?” Obito says, conspiratorial. “And I don’t show this place to just anybody. You better be grateful.”

That's fine. That's more than fine. It gives Kakashi some time to figure out how in the hell Obito's still alive and where he's been all these years. It would be even better if Kakashi wasn’t currently trapped in the form of a fox, but he’ll take a miracle for what it is.

...And the ear scratches aren’t exactly terrible, either.

“IT helps you’re so cute,” Obito grumbles, barely audible behind the mask. “I don’t show my face to just anybody, either.”

At that, Obito lifts his right gloved hand, and grabs the edge of his mask, pulling it up and off from his face. It takes everything for Kakashi not to jolt, as memory and reality come crashing together.

The scars all along Obito’s right side are jarring, but Kakashi should have expected them. It hurts to look at them, knowing he was the cause of them. His gaze is so much more serious, and world-torn, from the bright-eyed idealism of his youth. His hair is longer, too. It seems to suit him and yet doesn’t in the slightest, all at the same time. So much of Obito is different from Kakashi’s memory, but Kakashi can still see Obito for who he is, and who he was, despite the changes.

"I didn't think ones like you actually existed anymore." Obito muses, breaking Kakashi from his thoughts. “Or at all.”

Kakashi blinks up at Obito at that, unable to contain his own surprise. He must be talking about Uzu foxes. How Obito came across that knowledge is a mystery. But the last thirteen years of Obito’s life are a mystery to Kakashi altogether, so anything’s possible.

Obito pauses at Kakashi’s intent gaze. "You... are you really a lucky kitsune?" he asks, looking down at Kakashi with an odd expression.

...A what?

Obito tries some more prompting at Kakashi’s blank face. “Lucky kitsune? Super old Uchiha legend? With the fire?” He waves his hands at Kakashi’s paws.

Kakashi blinks again at Obito, increasingly baffled. Don’t tell him there was another legend with
foxes with the Uchiha instead. Sasuke had never mentioned anything like it, despite their situation. Maybe Sasuke doesn’t even know about it, which is even more odd.

Obito continues, “I saw that fire when you jumped in front of me. Grandma said—” He cuts himself off as his face goes oddly blank. Then he frowns at Kakashi’s uncomprehending look, the scars pulling down at the corner of his mouth. “Fine, don’t tell me what you are,” he says. “It doesn’t matter in the end, anyway.”

They lull into another strange silence, with Obito absently petting Kakashi’s side, all while Kakashi’s thoughts spin in useless circles.

“I shouldn’t keep calling you Fox,” Obito comments, abrupt. “I should give you a name.”

Despite himself, Kakashi perks his ears up. This should be amusing. Anything has to be more sensible than what Tsunade came up with.

Obito squints in the middle distance for a moment in thought. "Hm. How about Konkon?" he suggests.

Oh god no. Kakashi lays his head back down with a huff.

Obito huffs back at him. "You don't like that one? ...Yeah, it’s a bit obvious," he concedes. He hums again. "How about Kawa?" He gestures with his hand at his own mouth and nose. “The darker fur on your face kind of looks like a mask.”

Kawa... hiding one's true nature. Kakashi likes the irony of it. He sits up, a bit wobbly, and leans his head into Obito's hand in approval.

"Hello, Kawa," Obito greets as he scratches at Kakashi's nape, beckoning him forward. Kakashi, playing along, unsteadily follows Obito's hand, crawling over his crossed legs. He plops down into his lap with little fanfare.

"Oof," Obito grunts out from the added weight to his lap. "Still tired?"

Kakashi can't help it; he yawns.

"I bet you are a lucky kitsune," Obito starts again, running a hand along Kakashi’s back. “You only have one tail and don’t talk, but you seem to understand me. You don’t sense like a summons, either, but you have foxfire. But do you like fried tofu—"

Kakashi's tail droops from the rhythmic petting, and he shuts his eyes with a sigh. He falls back asleep to Obito's curious voice, and to a sliver of contentment he hasn't known in nearly twenty years.

----

Kawa dozes off in Obito’s lap. And Obito stares down at Kawa, wondering what he’s done to deserve this. The thought of foxes dregs up pain and fire and plans and betrayal—

But it’s tempered too, now, by damp soft fur and ginger and chamomile. He’s not about to insult a message; it’s a gift from Rin, it must be, if that’s what Kawa is.

Obito flexes his fingers at his slip-up from before. He hasn’t thought about his grandma in ages. He
hasn’t thought about anything that long ago since he lost everything, and he himself was ground to nothing but a singular goal. He lets himself think now; he pushes past the sea of sea-fire-destruction-hate burning in his chest to earlier memories still, to his former self.

Obito loved asking for stories about his parents from his grandma, no matter how small. There were no pictures of Obito’s father to look at, who died before he was born, and scant few of his mother that Grandma had held onto, but Grandma had stories she could share about Obito’s mother. She’d share how his mother was an accomplished shinobi, who travelled all over, and who could wield the fire of the Uchiha with the best of them.

And then there was the story of the lucky kitsune, and how Obito’s mother met one. Grandma claimed the lucky kitsune would visit people when one needed it most. They could carry visiting spirits with them in trails of foxfire, and bring good luck and fortune to those who saw them. It was that good luck that supposedly brought Obito’s mother back to the village from a dangerous mission while she was pregnant with Obito, saving both of their lives.

Obito, understandably, asked his grandma to tell him that story countless times. And yet Obito was never visited by a lucky kitsune, or the spirits of his parents, no matter how many countless times he wished for it as he fell asleep, still alone.

Obito frowns as he thinks more about it. Grandma also said it was an Uchiha secret. Nobody else in the clan would talk about it, or even hint at it, not that they ever talked to Obito very much. So Obito assumed everyone else kept it secret, too.

(And there’s no one to ask about it now. What a dead end.)

Really, the only time Obito tried asking anyone else was Madara early on in the cave, which was a big mistake. Obito only got the word ‘fox’ out of his mouth when the old man interrupted and told him to forget whatever nonsense he was going on about. Zetsu said as much, too, and told Obito to forget about it. So Obito pushed it all out of his mind, to make space for Madara’s persona, their plan out of this hell world, because by then none of the stories from Grandma mattered. No fox tales or spirits or good luck mattered. It didn’t exist in an Imperfect World. Nothing but their plan mattered, after Rin.

Obito watches Kawa’s whiskers twitch in his sleep.

Maybe Madara was wrong to discount it so quickly. Maybe Zetsu is wrong to tell him to forget it. This so-called ‘nonsense’ is now sitting right in his lap. Ideas are spinning in Obito’s head; little blossoming ideas, but his own ideas all the same. If Kawa is here, then what does Obito need most now? What’s changed?

Maybe Rin is trying to tell him something with this, something important—

Obito clutches his chest and shakes his head, knocking those thoughts away for now. His weird musings can wait. He has more business he must attend to, and information to chase for the Akatsuki. But he can’t take his sweet time. He doesn’t want to leave Kawa alone for long. Kitsune or not, Rin wouldn’t approve of any patient left unattended.

He has a strange urge to check in on Kakashi again, too. Obito hasn’t gone to see him in a few weeks, and it’s making his right eye itch terribly. But that can wait just a little longer. Kakashi will still be there.
The twilight of the nearing sunrise begins to cast over the destroyed village of Uzushio. Zabuza’s first impression of it is… green. The ruins of the buildings have been so enveloped by moss and vines, it’s difficult to imagine them ever once whole. Amongst the wreckage, red flowers and clovers are jutting up within the broken stone pathways, like a rolling foam of red and white across a sea of neverending green.

The encroaching light of the rising sun reveals the scattered glint of metal; old, half-rusted and bloodstained weapons must be littered amongst the flowers. And yet, no signs of bodies or decay can be seen here, either.

As a shinobi of the Mist, Zabuza is no stranger to massacres, especially their aftermath. Here, however, the complete lack of evidence of former human life makes his hair stand on end.

He glances over at Haku; the boy’s face seems as neutral as ever, but he can’t quite keep the haunted look from his eyes. Zabuza could make a decent guess as to what he’s remembering. But then Haku catches Zabuza’s gaze, and grants him a questioning look.

“What should we do, sir?” Haku asks, finally breaking the silence. Hatake-fox is listening, too, waiting for them to decide.

Zabuza grits his teeth. If any part of the island was cursed, or riddled with seal traps, the village of Uzushio would be the heaviest contender. The current absence of Mito is hitting him harder than he thought, and isn't that a hell of a thing to think about. But Mito or no Mito, another seal is in there somewhere, he can feel it. They’ll have to make the best of it.

“Let's go,” he says.

And so they cross the threshold into the village proper, stepping onto an overgrown pathway. Nothing happens, and Zabuza exhales, walking further in.

They pass by what must have been a neighborhood of houses. A small part of Zabuza expects to run into early risers from the few buildings still standing, of Uzu people throwing open their windows and doors to begin their morning. Of course, that won’t happen.

Zabuza scuffs a foot along the cracked stone slabs as he walks. He can see impressions of former seals in every inch the pavement; there must be thousands of hidden seals along the ground itself, let alone the rest of the buildings.

The moth glides along ahead, coasting down to one of the many beds of red flowers. Zabuza stops to crouch down and watch the moth flit about them. They saw these flowers before by the river, way back upstream in the dry forest. He pokes the flower the moth lands on, and the moth flaps its wings about. Maybe there’s something special about these.

Zabuza turns to glance back at Haku walking up the path with Hatake-fox in tow. “What did you say these were?” he asks. “Lilies?”

“Yes. They might be spider lilies.” Haku pauses, then murmurs, “The flower of the afterlife.”

Zabuza slowly leans away from the flowers, and stands back up. No more touching the death flowers for him.

They continue to coast through the streets and across half broken bridges overlooking lily-lined river paths, but it all feels a bit aimless. Destroyed as much of it is, the village itself is huge. He doesn’t know exactly where the seal is, but Mito isn’t around to answer. It feels a bit wrong to even speak aloud here.
He watches Hatake-fox sniff at the ground as he trots along, but he doesn’t seem to be going in any direction in particular, either. So much for his help. Then the fox goes still, his ears sticking up.

A bright orange frog jumps past them on the path, leaping into a side alley overrun with tall strawgrass. It’s the first sign of animal life Zabuza’s seen, and at this point he’ll take it as a sign of anything. The grass twitches as the frog jumps further through the alley, and Zabuza follows after it.

The frog leads them through throngs of billowing grass, winding and wading through narrow alleys. Finally they emerge from the grass sea into an enormous courtyard, of what used to be a fine garden. The river flows here too, growing smaller as it follows along a spiral path. In turn, the size and number of red lilies grows larger as the path twists further in, until it’s an ocean of red.

And in the center, untouched by moss and blood and time, is an enormous stone, the place of an equally enormous seal.

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Kokuo’s gallops begin to slow down to a loping gait, down in the fields of River Country, where he finally comes to a stop along some farmland. Their passengers drop off by an acre of horses and one very startled farmer. The animals all look at the large horse with curiosity, but soon enough, Kokuo’s form falls away, leaving Han standing there.

“I’ve never done that before,” he comments, dusting off his armor.

“It’s fun, huh?” Fuu says as she waves hello at the farmer, who just continues to stand there in shock.

“Is everyone alright?” Shizune asks. There’s a chorus of yesses. And Tsunade is awake again, but she’s sitting cross-legged on the ground, silent and furious.

---

Tsunade growls, slamming her fist on the ground. It cracks into a splintering spider web of dirt under her hand. Bad luck keeps following her, no matter what she does. “I’m going to tear whoever took him apart.”

“Why would anyone kidnap a fox?” Shizune asks. “Uzu foxes aren’t common knowledge anymore, right?”

“Whatever it is, they’re going to regret it,” Tsunade promises. “Any luck, Karin?”

“I still can’t feel anything,” Karin says, voice small.

This isn’t good. “Just keep—keep trying, okay?” Tsunade says, running her hands over her face. “For something, anything.” He can’t be dead.

Karin nods, looking unsure. But then she asks, suddenly intent, “What about you; how are you feeling?”

“What? I’m fine,” Tsunade denies, caught off guard. “Are you?”

“You passed out, that isn’t okay,” Karin argues, ignoring Tsunade’s deflection. Dammit.

“. . .It happens. I have a thing about blood,” Tsunade admits. “It’s getting better,” she adds, which isn’t technically a lie. She has been getting better, ever so slightly, since that fight in Matcha.
“Oh.” Karin bites her lip, nervous. “I don’t know if I can heal something like that,” she says. She hesitates, before rolling up her sleeve. “But we could try in case?”

“Try what—” It’s then that Tsunade sees the bite marks all up and down Karin’s left arm, and what Karin is suggesting as an Uzumaki all horrifyingly clicks.

Without thinking, Tsunade reaches forward and grabs Karin’s arm. “Who did this to you?” she demands.

Karin’s eyes go wide. “I, um, in Grass, I worked in a hospital—“

“A hospital? Whoever runs that sorry excuse for a hospital needs to learn proper medical jutsu, not exploit a girl with a still-developing chakra system for every problem!” Tsunade snarls.

Shizune gasps, catching onto Tsunade’s meaning. “They didn’t—that many chakra transfers could kill her!”

“I know!” Karin shouts back. “I know that! It killed my mom! Why do you think I ran away?” Then she hangs her head, tears streaming down her face as she sobs. “But this—you—I just! I just wanted to help. And I couldn’t help Sassy—”

On impulse, Tsunade leans forward and pulls Karin into a hug. “Hey, no, I’m not mad at you,” she says. “We’ll get Sassy Sakumo back, kick that kidnapper’s ass, and buy a boat to Uzushio. We’ll make it work out somehow.” She pulls away to look Karin in the eyes, adding, “And on the way I’ll burn down that hospital, too.”

“We’ll help!” Fuu cheers, who just looks excited to cause more property damage.

Han raises a hand. “I can offer steam to go with that fire.”

“See? It’s a great plan,” says Tsunade. “And with the bite transfer: I appreciate you trying to help with that, but I don’t want you hurting yourself unnecessarily.”

Karin nods, but doesn’t look happy about it. “But what if it’s an emergency?” she asks.

“I’ll make you a deal; you hold onto that ability for a true emergency, and I’ll teach you a few techniques in the meantime.”

“Really?” Karin asks. “You’ll teach me?”


“It’s true,” Utakata adds. “She has a reputation.”

Tsunade pulls a face. “A ‘reputation?’ That just sounds bad.”

“Infamous’ might be the better word at this point,” Shizune teases.

“That sounds about right.” Then Tsunade’s mood soberes again. “But we need some kind of lead. I can’t let Sassy Sakumo down.” She turns to Angry Mito and the little foxes. “I know it’s hard for me to ask you this now, but can you help me?”

---

*Can you help me?*
Kurama could gloat over the witch’s granddaughter appealing to them for help, but he can’t even enjoy that. Because now three little fox kits are staring back at Kurama in various stages of emotional devastation, and Kurama would like that to stop right fucking now.

“What do we do? What if Sensei’s—Sensei’s dead?” Sakura asks, her eyes wobbling with building tears. Naruto’s not too far behind her, sniffing angrily.

Oh Sage, the last thing he needs is them all crying. “No,” Kurama grits out, possibly lying through his teeth, but they don’t need to know that. “He’s not dead.”

“How do you know, huh?” Naruto demands, his tail bristling.

“And we don’t know that he’s not in danger now,” Sasuke argues.

“He got stolen!” Naruto shouts. “He’s totally in trouble, Kurama! He could die! Again!”

“He’s not going to die again!” Kurama barks, willing them to all shut up. “We’ll find your stupid sensei and get to the island and everything will be fine if you stop freaking out!” he repeats. “So focus!”

“Focus?” Naruto asks. “Focus on what?”

Kurama miraculously refrains from snapping. “Think about your sensei,” he says slowly. “Try to find him and focus on his location.”

“What?” Naruto whines. “How do we even do that?”

“Oh, I know!” Sakura pipes up before Kurama can scream again. “Like when we felt that energy of all the other Uzu people! We can find Sensei in the same way!”

“You are so smart,” Naruto says, awed.

“Sure,” says Kurama, making it all up as he goes along. “Like that kind of focus.”

“Okay.” Sakura shuts her eyes in apparent concentration. Sasuke looks at her, and after a moment follows suit.

Naruto finally squeezes his eyes shut, too. “Okay, yes okay—” he mutters until Sakura and Sasuke both shush him at the same time.

Kurama watches, not daring to say anything else. This is the tricky part with Uzu-bound spiritual energy; he can’t tell them what to do here, or how, only that they can do it. Any second now, he expects them to give up and complain, and Kurama will have to start them all over again on another tactic.

But to Kurama’s surprise, they don’t give up. He watches as colorful plumes of fire spiral under their feet, growing and interconnecting together, their senses amplifying in harmony as it casts out through the fields and into the countries beyond.

----

Kakashi wakes up again with a jolt, dreams of whirlpools and flames dissipating around him. He’s wrapped up in blankets, and alone. Obito isn’t around. He’s not here; is he gone again?

But no, he’s left a quick handwritten note tucked under a food bowl: running errands, back later.
Errands? Vague. What does Obito even do nowadays? Part of Kakashi wonders if he still swoops in to help little old ladies carry their groceries. But why did Obito never come back to Konoha? What kept him away all these years? Either he was unable to return, or he didn’t want to return.

And after all these years, he must know about Kushina and Minato and Rin—

Kakashi shakes his head. Not now, not now. He’s not about to have a breakdown just yet.

He refocuses on what’s around him, grounds himself in the present. In the food bowl, Obito left Kakashi a freshly killed rabbit, and some water in another bowl, and... oh, a little plate of fried tofu, of all things. Obito still thinks Kakashi’s some kind of lucky Uchiha fox, which is, admittedly, adorable.

And honestly, maybe Obito’s onto something with that, as much or as little Obito knows about Uzu foxes. Kurama’s known as the Kyuubi no Kitsune, after all, and he’s got some kind of connection to Uzu foxes, whatever that is. Perhaps the Uchiha used to have a connection to Uzushio, too.

It’s all a guess, because the Uchiha were insanely secretive about their clan on a good day. And Kakashi would be the last to know anything about the clan, since most Uchiha refused to acknowledge Kakashi’s existence after receiving Obito’s eye.

Kakashi sighs, resting his head back on the blanket. More questions. Always more questions. But hopefully Obito holds the answers.

His stomach growls, but he ignores the food a bit longer in favor of assessing the place he’s in instead, as little of it as he can at the moment.

The place is a bizarre microcosm: eerie floating pillars, still, soundless, and perpetual twilight. The pillar he’s occupying is marginally more cheerful with the little oasis of mismatched blankets and throw pillows, all lying under a single blossoming tree pushing out from the stone floor. He peers across the platform, and the gloom of the endless void below. He doesn’t trust himself yet to try foxfire to jump to another pillar and not plummet to his death, so he opts to stay put in his blanket.

It feels like its own private, impenetrable world, and it makes Kakashi’s left eye itch terribly.

He worries about his kids, too. That must be what he’s feeling now. As dim a flicker as it is, he knows they’re fine and alive out there. But there’s not much else, or much of anything, he can sense after that. He needs to find them all again, but he has to figure out how to bring Obito along with, too. And how to solve every other mystery surrounding Obito while he’s at it.

Sure. Easy.

Kakashi sighs again in one long exhale at the task ahead of him. He picks himself up and wobbles over to nose at the rabbit while he waits for Obito to return. At least his students still have Kurama with them, and it’s a little surreal to find that a comforting thought.

----

Iruka runs into the frame of his bedroom door while getting ready for work, startled by a loud chime.

“Ow,” he groans, rubbing his forehead. That was embarrassing. He looks around for the source of the sound; he half-expects it to be some kind of prank Naruto left for him, but he doesn’t spot anything. Strange. He waits to see if he hears it again, glancing about his apartment, but nothing happens.
In any case, he wonders how Naruto’s doing. He must be still on his mission with Sasuke and Sakura. That seems like a long time for a C-Rank mission.

Iruka worries about Team Seven; they’re all still so young, and still have so much to learn. Their jounin sensei worries him too; Hatake Kakashi might be an accomplished shinobi, but there’s more to teaching than simply being more experienced. And in the most charitable way Iruka can phrase it, Hatake seems to have a very... hands-off approach to teaching, which is not a method some kids respond well to.

But Sakura has a knack for theory. Sasuke knows strategy. And Naruto’s nothing if not full of ingenuity. It was hard to see that before, and to see Naruto beyond the demon fox. He regrets that now, but he can make it right.

Together, they could make a great team. But for now, they just have to make it back. Maybe he’ll treat them all to ramen when he next sees them.

----

The desert, inhospitable to most, is where Gaara likes most to wander. There’s nothing much to kill here for Mother, but he likes to count the cacti he comes across as he coasts through the sand dunes during the early morning. It keeps him awake. So far this hour he’s at twenty-one counted, and four different species. At night he tries to count the stars, but he often loses track.

Mother’s been subdued the last couple days. But her sand has been shifting, too, tracking towards the east more and more. He coasts along, around and around in a neverending sea of sand.

The sound of a ringing bell cracks through the dry air, shooting through Gaara’s mind, echoing endlessly.

It hurts. It hurts.

Gaara’s heart rate spikes at the thought of some unseen injury. “Mother?” he asks, small and frightened in the sandswep wind. Is something wrong with him? His head is starting to throb. He doesn’t like it. Just then, the pain releases as a dull clang echoes again. Gaara startles and looks all around. No other living soul is nearby, and it’s no sound the desert’s ever made before. The clang echoes again and again, the pressure in his head building and waning with each strike.

“Mother, what is that?” he asks, eyes wide.

**IT’S A TRICK**, she hisses, upset. **ONLY A TRAP.**

But Mother’s sand continues to dance, trickling towards the east.

----

Zabuza and Haku walk the looping stone path bordering the river, careful not to step on the bracketing lilies. The stone standing in the courtyard is easily the size of a house, and the closer they get, the more apparent it is that its every surface is etched in seals, and not just the large, angular spiral in its center face.

It’ll be another seal done, with only one more to go. Zabuza goes to bite his thumb when the moth whaps at his hand, stopping him. It actually stings a little.

“Ow— what?” he yells at the moth, which proceeds to simply whap him in the hand again.
“It doesn’t seem to want us to,” Haku surmises. “Mito-sama said the same for the last seal, as well.”

“Hm,” says Zabuza. “Yeah, I remember. She said whoever activates one takes ‘responsibility’ for it.”

Haku looks at his own hand, pensive. “It may be dangerous for us to activate more than one, then.”

And neither of them would want to end up as a pile of snakes, either.

Zabuza scrubs at his face, exhausted. “Well, now what? We can’t just stand here and do nothing.”

Hatake-fox then barks, walking up between the two of them to get their attention.

Zabuza looks down, surprised. “What—are you going to do it?” he asks.

Hatake-fox nods.

“You’re sure?” Haku asks, and Hatake-fox nods again.

“Can you even—” Zabuza stops himself with a sigh. “Whatever, fine. We’ll make it work.”

Hatake-fox chuffs at that, and trots up closer to the stone. He’s within touching distance when the moth flits in front of Hatake-fox, too, stopping him. It lands on his nose, waving its wings, and the fox sneezes. After a few moments he finally backs off, and the moth flies onto the stone and stays there, as if guarding it.

Zabuza, Haku, and Hatake-fox all stare at each other as a long, bemused moment passes.

“...So, what, none of us are activating this seal?” Zabuza asks the moth, irritated. “Then what are we here for?”

*NOT YET!* shouts a rasping voice from everywhere and nowhere, causing them all to jump. Haku casts his eyes about, his needles ready in his hands. Zabuza’s hackles raise. Hatake-fox is wary, too, his tail flicking in anticipation while flanked in front of the two of them.

Just then, an absolute violent ringing pierces Zabuza’s mind. He covers his ears, but it does nothing to stop the sound. Haku doubles over next to him, clutching his head.

Hatake’s ears go stock up, and he alights in a wave of white flames engulfing all of them.

“What the fuck!” Zabuza shouts, falling back from the fox in shock as the fire licks up his own sleeves. But no expected pain comes. The flames subside on his clothes; Zabuza isn’t burned.

Hatake-fox looks at them with shining eyes, and bounds away in a streak of white light across the garden. He pauses at the end of the path leading back into the village, and barks at Zabuza, waiting as the fire continues to circle his paws. Zabuza can feel something too, now, a beacon somewhere in the north of the island.

“Come on, sir,” Haku says, harried, picking himself up with a wince.

Zabuza scrambles to his feet, and they chase after The White Fang into the depths of the ruins and beyond.

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