Second Chances

by enzhe

Summary

Naruto disappeared. Minato finds him (twelve years too late).
Chapter 1

He answered after two rings, though his hand had been hovering over the mouthpiece for long minutes before the call came in. All interior lights were off and the city spread out below him, glittering in descending twilight, the rush of traffic echoing forty floors up. Beyond the sounds of the city there was only the blood in his ears, the pounding of his heart, and the ringing telephone.

"Minato?"

He cleared his throat, forced a voice past the lump lodged there. "Tsunade."

"It's really him."

Three minutes and forty-one seconds later the suite was empty, nothing but the lazy sweep of security cameras moving across the opulent stillness as its previous occupant watched skyscrapers shrinking beneath him to the roar of helicopter rotors.

Naruto…

VvIvV

"I told him not to get his hopes up… if this is Kakashi telling me he's gone off the deep end again—"

Kushina's assistant backed up a wary step or two as the too-often explosive woman grumbled angrily while rummaging through her pack for the mobile phone only a select few could reach her on. "AHA!" came the triumphant cry, though the scowl creasing the woman's forehead did not diminish in the least as the captured phone was snapped open and lifted to an ear.

A minute later, the cell slipped from nerveless fingers. White-faced and huge-eyed, Kushina looked slowly up at her anxious assistant. One hand still hovered near her ear, fingers still curled around the space where the phone recently rested.

"Obito…" she whispered, dazed, "…I'll regret this… but… how soon can you get us back to Konoha?"

VvovV

Naruto was having a bad day. It started with Hinata crying—and he still had no idea why. There they were, eating breakfast together, which had become slightly less awkward lately, and then suddenly there was this hiccupping sound and the next thing he knew she was doubled over in her chair with her arms wrapped around her just slightly swollen belly, gasping and sobbing as tears and snot ran down her face and Naruto floundered frantically in helpless panic. But his desperate questions about what was wrong and what he needed to do were returned with her snapping at him to "l-l-leave me alone!"—snapping! Hinata never snapped! At anyone! And then she locked herself in their only bathroom until an even-grumpier-than-usual Sasuke came to drag him off to hockey practice (Hinata's fit having made him late), full of snark and snide insults that felt more sincere than usual.

Kakashi-sensei was barely thirty-five minutes shy of on-time that day, meaning he arrived just as Naruto lost it with Sasuke's nonstop taunts and forsook suiting up in favor of clocking the Uchiha with a goalie mask. The only thing keeping him from fretting nonstop about Hinata while running a ridiculous number of suicides as punishment was the smirk on Sasuke's face. Which all led up to him being more focused on causing the bastard as much grief as possible during their practice skirmishes than on tracking the puck, which took a deadly slapshot off Kiba's stick to sail on a
smooth projectory right into Naruto's head.

Fortunately, he was wearing a helmet. With the straps correctly adjusted and buckled up and all. Which was why it was utterly ridiculous that he was currently locked up in a hospital, with strong hints he really hoped he had misinterpreted pointing to not getting out any time soon. No, they had to keep going on about keeping him overnight for "observation" and how there were still people who needed to be "consulted", blah blah blah.

So he had a concussion! He got those all the time. As much as he might bluster at Sasuke's uncalled-for commentaries on the inevitable deaths of his few remaining brain cells, Naruto privately wondered how any cells of his at all—not to mention those in his much-abused head—stayed alive. He'd certainly been in enough seriously life-threatening situations to have died half a dozen times before. Did he go to the hospital on any of those occasions? …Well, that one time. And maybe a couple times when he was really little, he couldn't quite remember. But for the most part he'd been left to patch himself up as best he could and crawl somewhere safe enough to recover on his own, which suited him just fine. If he'd known how painfully un-fun and horrifyingly restricting it was to have dozens of people hovering around him, worrying over his wellbeing and telling him what was best for him, he wouldn't have wished for it nearly as frequently as a small child. In fact, he was beginning to feel increasingly less along the lines that it was care he was receiving—no, he decided, as Kakashi foiled his third escape attempt with a too-cheerily delivered suggestion that he be strapped to his bed—this wasn't care, it was underneath-the-underneath torture.

Kakashi-sensei had been acting weird a lot lately. Naruto was purposefully unobservant of the way people looked at and acted toward him, but even he couldn't pretend that there wasn't something strange about the way his team mentor had taken to staring at him. And the questions. Naruto was far too annoying for anyone to intentionally encourage more talking through the asking of personal questions—certainly Kakashi had never tried. That is, he'd never tried until the hair dye incident. Damn Kiba, damn damn damn him—the minute he got out of this wretched place, he'd beat the jerk into the pavement until his dog couldn't recognize him. This wretched place that he was in BECAUSE of Kiba. And Kiba's stupid super-high-velocity-spinning slap shot. He wasn't trying to look like Sasuke, Kiba knew nothing. The dye was a matter of life and death. Heh. Dye or die…. yeah.

Now they wanted to draw more of his blood. Another blood test? Really? What was a blood test going to tell them about a concussion? Did he look suddenly diseased or something? Maybe he caught something from Hinata—she had certainly looked awful with all that crying that morning. Speaking of Hinata, he'd meant to check up on her hours ago—first thing after practice. He would force her to tell him what was wrong. Now what was he going to do? It was almost 7:00 p.m., the whole day had passed and he still had no idea what had happened to her, how seriously she might need help, heck, for all he knew she could still be locked in the bathroom…bathroom. If he didn't get a chance to pee in the next three minutes, there really would be something wrong with him. Another exasperated groan filled the room as Naruto banged his fists on the bed railing in frustration. Ooh, that sounded kinda cool… he could get a rhythm going…

He was still at it (and sounding awesome) a few minutes later when Kakashi-sensei decided to make an appearance again. The first time he said his name, Naruto rudely ignored the man, much more content to continue his percussional pursuits than to go to all the trouble of adding another dirty look to the collection of glares and whines he'd been throwing at the man all day. That is, until a word of undying beauty issued forth in Kakashi's bored voice.

"…I suppose if you don't want this ramen after all…"
Abrupt silence fell as a painfully bright and hopeful face whipped up to look at the masked man.

"RAMEN?"

VvovV

Hinata couldn't decide which was worse: that she'd started crying again, or that she actually had good reason to this time. It was nearing 7:30 and she'd heard nothing from Naruto. He kept a pay-per-minute cell on him for emergencies, but it went straight to voicemail, and though she'd finally forced the words for a recorded message past her anxious tongue, she had yet to hear anything back. And he hadn't answered any of the five texts she'd sent, hours earlier, apologizing for her horrifying behavior and wishing him a really good day. Twice now she'd started dialing Neji's number—something only true desperation could drive her to—but both times she'd made herself stop, breathe, remind herself of the probable consequences, and promise to wait another twenty minutes before panicking.

Any moment now... she would hear from him any minute... he'd gotten in trouble at practice again and had to stay late to clean up, he'd missed both his bus connections, Sakura or Sasuke needed his help with something and he just forgot to call—

-but no. Naruto could be called tactless, mannerless, heedless—but never thoughtless. For all that he was dense and ill-spoken and frequently misunderstood simple things, he never forgot about the people around him, or gave any less than his absolute best to honoring his relationships with them. He had been the only thing holding her together for months now and in all that time he had never let her down. It was what had brought those awful tears gushing out over breakfast—it had been so wonderful, so cozy, that this amazing warmth and comfort welled up inside her, overwhelming her thoughts and filling her foolish mind with fantasies. It was all so new and rare. It was like they were married, like Naruto was hers, like he would always be there to take care of her and just be next to her—because he wanted it, not because he was the kindest of people and could never quite bring himself to walk by anyone who needed help. She'd almost lost herself in the fictional glow of it, and the harsh talking-back-to-reality she'd had to stage mentally (in her father's disdainful and disappointed voice, naturally) had hurt so bad that the grief and shame was spilling out of her before she could stop it. And then of course he had to jump to her side and try desperately to help her just like in her dreams and the only thing she could think of was to hide. What if that was the last time she saw him? What if her last memory of the most beautiful being she had ever encountered consisted of her yelling at him—something horrifying in and of itself—with endless streams of saltwater and mucus further staining her unattractive-at-the-best-of-times face? What if he was hurt? In pain? Suffering? Oh, it would be beyond terrible if Naruto was suffering! She couldn't bear it!

The sound of a key turning in the lock sent her flying to her feet and bolting for the door, heart hammering in her throat.

"Naruto-kun! You're home! Are you okay? What happened? I'm so so-" and then the flood of relief died under the blank stare of a very different pair of eyes from the one she had so gladly rushed to meet: Uchiha Sasuke was at the door.

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He hadn't the chance to put more than one foot through the entranceway before he was rushed by a babbling girl—a crying, babbling girl. For a moment he seriously considered tactical retreat.

Naruto would never forgive him.
"Naruto is in the hospital," Sasuke said at last, looking uncomfortably away from Hinata's tear-streaked face. It was rare for the Hyuuga to lose her composure, or even make her presence known. Which was the main reason he didn't object to Naruto living with her. "Concussion," he added quickly, as Hinata appeared to be on the verge of a faint. "Not serious."

"Oh," she breathed in relief, and drew into herself, resuming her customary silence. Relieved that she seemed to be edging closer to her usual reserved and controlled presence, Sasuke stepped the rest of the way into the apartment and pushed the door shut behind him before heading silently back to Naruto's room. They were making the dobe stay the night at the hospital, and Sasuke had been sent to gather the things his teammate would need. A thread of irritation—not concern or worry, this was Naruto he was thinking about—tightened along his spine. It was another thing that just didn't add up about the entire strange day. First Kakashi assured them that Naruto was perfectly fine, just a minor concussion—the kind the dobe sustained nearly every other day, idiot that he was—and then Senju Tsunade, the freaking hospital director, was hovering around Naruto's room, snapping commands to a whole team of medical personnel before disappearing with a strained note in her voice and mysterious words about making certain phone calls—but no, no, Naruto was perfectly fine, Kakashi insisted—and no, they couldn't see him, no, he wouldn't be discharged soon, no, there wasn't something he was neglecting to tell them, and finally would Sasuke and Sakura just go find some other little friends to play with? He couldn't deal with them at the moment.

Kakashi knew well enough that Sasuke wasn't about to accept it. Any of it. But standing in a hospital corridor glaring at adults wasn't going to change anything, and Naruto would ask about Hinata, so he took the errand. He stuffed heavy shoes, duct tape, a couple knives, and a lock-picking set in the bottom of Naruto's old school backpack, covered them with clean jeans, a long-sleeved shirt, pajamas and underwear, and topped the lot with a plastic bag containing toothbrush, toothpaste, and deodorant. If the idiot needed anything else, he would come back for it. Satisfied with this conclusion, he turned to the door, only to be met at the doorway with a determined looking Hinata, dressed in coat and boots and clearly blocking his way.

"P-please take me with you, Sasuke-san," she murmured, and though he huffed in annoyance, Sasuke knew there was no arguing with her at this point. So he shrugged and let her lead the way out of the apartment. He would consider it her reward for not bothering him with pointless questions about what he was doing and where he was going and what he knew about Naruto—she'd obviously made her own accurate deductions. It was nice that she was so tolerable.

They wound their way down the dimly lit stairway of Naruto's run-down apartment building, stepping around garbage bags waiting to be taken out to the dumpsters and a bicycle with both wheels removed propped up outside a neighbor's door. A heavy metal door at the bottom led to the basement parking garage where Sasuke had stowed the beat-up moped he and Naruto shared.

"Ah, Sasuke..." he looked over to where Hinata was fastening the chin strap to her helmet. "...if you could refrain from mentioning to N-naruto that I took the moped rather than the b-bus..."

Her voice disappeared, but he understood and graced her with a slight nod. Naruto had become alarmingly overprotective of her; not allowing her on the two-wheeled vehicle was just one of many restrictions he tried to hold her to. Sasuke rolled his eyes under his own helmet. Dobe.

Their ride through town to Konoha Hospital was uneventful; Sasuke wove expertly through traffic, Hinata's hands loosely clutching the sides of his coat with Naruto's overnight bag safely tucked between them. She slid off the back of the seat the moment he brought the moped to a standstill in the parking tower, and followed noiselessly as he led the way through the double glass doors, ignored the reception desk, and set off briskly towards the room they'd been keeping Naruto in.
Until he came to a sudden standstill and Hinata nearly walked into him.

A full detail of security officers held watch around Naruto's room, and standing just out of sight of the window in Naruto's door, with Kakashi on one side and the hospital director on the other—Tsunade had a comforting hand on the man's shoulder—was someone Sasuke had never imagined seeing in person, but whose image the entire world was familiar with. Konoha's Yellow Flash stood right outside the dobe's door.

VvIvV

Rin was beside herself with worry. A dozen conflicting emotions—fear, elation, disbelief, to identify a few—writhed ominously beneath the mental rug she'd shoved them under, and the lumps were threatening to peek through and compromise her professional presence. But she of all people needed to remain calm. No one else appeared to be keeping cool; even Kakashi was looking twitchy. If there had been even slightly less at stake, she would have laughed her silly over the obnoxiously implacable man's uncharacteristic lapse in external control. She watched out of the corner of her eye as he shifted his weight to his other foot, tried leaning nonchalantly at the wall, then stuffed his hands into uneven pockets—one in his jacket, one in his jeans, all the while sending surreptitious glances at Minato, who was by far the worst of the anxious gathering.

Her cell phone beeped for the third time, letting her know that Obito had yet to pick up. If he let it ring through to voicemail, he would have the most scathing message she could come up with waiting for him—"Things haven't fallen apart there already, have they?" came a cheerful voice, and Rin sighed into the phone in relief.

"They're falling," she said shortly. "Do we really have to hold this together for another three hours until you guys get here? And it's not just sensei I'm worried about—the kid's tried to escape three times already, and he doesn't even know what's going on! And that was before our whole entourage showed up outside his door…I heard Kakashi telling security they couldn't let the kid get so much as a glimpse of them or he'd scram before you could say 'boo'—"

There was a silence, then: "So this is really it, Rin? We found him? Everything's really coming true?"

Rin took a deep breath. "I looked over the DNA results myself. It's real, Obito."

"Just…wow."

"…Yeah. Can you please get here soon? Minato-sensei will have everyone in this building going beserk any minute now…he's already crossed that line himself…Obito…"

She imagined him wincing. "Sorry, babe, this plane doesn't fly any faster."

"Give me the phone," said a new voice, and Rin heard Kushina's strained tones coming through her earpiece next.

"How's he doing?"

"Minato-sensei? He's staring at the door Kakashi's Naruto is behind looking like he'll have a heart attack any moment, just like he's been doing for the past twenty-five minutes, and will continue to do for the next three hours. …Pretty much "
"Naruto." Kushina whispered, so quietly the name hardly made it through the connection. When the woman spoke again, it was with a compassion that, though tinged with a certain hesitant resignation, had rarely softened her tone in recent years. "Don't make him wait for me, Rin. Let him see our...the boy. I'll get there soon enough."

"Kushina-san... are you sure? He was planning on waiting for you."

There was a chuckle that may have ended in a shuddering breath. "I'm sure." Rin waited for something else, but the line was silent for several seconds, until Obito's voice came back on.

"She's made up her mind, Rin," he stated reassuringly, and something in her chest loosened a bit, allowing her breathing to come a bit easier. "Just take care of sensei for us, keep things under control, we'll be there soon." The line went dead. Obito never made proper goodbyes.

During the course of the conversation, Rin had wandered around the corner and into an empty examination room, seeking privacy. Now she took advantage of being alone to take a few minutes to steady herself; deep breaths, a splash of cold water over her face from the sink in the corner, the soothing ritual of unraveling her hair form its bun, combing briefly through it, and resetting it in place. Kushina, Rin knew, was coming for Minato, not for the boy whose DNA identified him as the baby she had loved and lost so long ago. Where Minato-sensei had survived by keeping his hopes open and insisting on believing in the impossible—or at least highly improbable—chance that their little son was still alive, Kushina had done the opposite. For the first few years they searched together, Kushina's tireless optimism keeping them both afloat while those that loved them mourned in their behalf. Until Kushina broke.

Rin straightened her shoulders and stepped back around the corner, where Minato stood unmoving, gaze desperate and unwavering. To stay afloat, Kushina had to let their little boy go, had to stop looking, stop hoping—her heart didn't mend, but she accepted it as broken and, eventually, built a new, baby-less life. She could not let herself believe that her baby was here, couldn't picture the tiny child she had laid to rest in her heart as a grown and growing boy, would never survive another false hope. She had to stay strong while Minato searched and hoped and broke again and again and again.

"But we're sure this time—it's real this time!" Rin reassured herself, and looked up to face her sensei.

"Kushina-san will be here in a little under three hours, traffic pending," she said slowly and clearly, giving Minato time to pull himself together enough to fix his focus on her. The sharpness of his stare was almost painful when his attention flickered to her, and she felt Kakashi tense beside her. "Minato-sensei, she would like you to meet with the child now. She doesn't want you to wait all this time when you are so close."

Minato looked at her, clearly torn. Some sense of duty warred briefly with the desperation tightening the lines around his handsome features, until he said with almost childlike uncertainty,

"You're certain?"

Rin nodded, and he strode to the door his eyes had spend the past half-hour trying to see through. Tsunade reached out and grasped his arm just as he was about to turn the handle.

"Minato," the seasoned healer spoke gently, "Perhaps you should let someone introduce the situation to Naruto first. This will come as a huge shock to him. You've been waiting for this moment for all these years, but he's had nothing to prepare him for what's coming."
Behind them, Kakashi nodded. "Plus... he tends to overreact." Rin thought she caught a hint of a smile beneath the man's mask. "Though he should be in a good mood since I snuck him ramen..." now he was definitely smiling, eyes merrily squinting shut as Tsunade turned to glare at him.

Minato stood frozen, one hand on the door handle, and Rin felt her heart go out to him. Slowly, painfully, he took a step back, made his outstretched hand release the doorknob as his arm fell limply to his side. Without turning to look at her, he called her name.

"...would you, please?"

Rin nodded, and stepped into Naruto's room.

VvIVV

Naruto was feeling significantly more cheerful since consuming the three large servings of take-out ramen Kakashi-sensei had smuggled him. It was a suspicious thing for Kakashi to do—he never went out of his way if he could help it—but Naruto figured the man was feeling guilty for keeping him in the hospital and being so weird and secretive all afternoon and evening. If he weren't so worried about Hinata, and fighting his (very reasonable, he felt) fears of being confined in an unfamiliar place for unknown reasons, he'd be quite content to just enjoy the warm room and full stomach he currently possessed. Especially since he'd discovered that the handrails of the bed weren't too widely spaced to practice a handstand on.

Which is why he was upside down when the door opened again, and a pretty woman with dark hair and warm eyes stepped in.

"Hey, hey!" He greeted enthusiastically. "You're here to tell me I'm free to go, right? You don't need any more blood or anything? I need to keep some of it for myself, y'know..."

"Hello, Naruto," she answered, sounding amused and... something else. "No, I'm not here to take your blood. But I do have something very important to talk to you about."

Naruto studied her intently, forgetting for the moment that he was still upside down. "Something important? 'S not bad, right? 'Cause sometimes it's better just not to know the bad stuff..."

"It's not bad at all," she said quickly. "It's amazing. And will probably be very unexpected. Maybe you should sit?"

Oh yeah. He looked down at the mattress he was suspended over and let himself collapse on it, rolling head over heels to come popping up in a sitting position at the foot of the bed, looking expectantly into the stranger's face. She seemed to be unsure of where to start.

"My name is Rin," she said at last, slowly. "I work for your father. He has been looking for you for nearly twelve years."

Naruto felt a rush of cold shock run through him. His father? No...

"I don't have a father," he said blankly, shifting subconsciously into a position from which he could jump out of the way and make a run for it if necessary.

The woman looked sad. "I know you grew up without one, Naruto," she said softly. "But you have a father, one who loves you very much. You have a mother, too. You were separated from them just a few months before you turned three. We don't know what happened, exactly. You disappeared. But we've found you now, and-" she stopped, swallowed hard, and Naruto was alarmed to see tears in her large, dark eyes. The last thing he needed was another woman bursting
into tears on him today. "—that's why the hospital staff has kept you here all these hours. They ran blood tests to confirm what Kakashi had already guessed. The results are positive. We had to make sure—"

Naruto was standing, though he couldn't remember when that happened. Her words were just starting to process in his mind. *You have a father who loves you very much.* He looked hard into the eyes of the person talking to him, searching for any hint of malice or deception. He saw many things there—none of them telling him that he was hearing anything but the truth. *He's been looking for you…* Naruto swallowed hard against the overwhelming fear, hope and disbelief welling up in him, vaguely aware that his mouth was moving in voiceless shock. Rin looked back, concern blossoming over her expressive face.

"Hey—Naruto—don't forget to breathe!"

Breathe. He gasped in air and flopped back to sit on the bed, reminding himself of a fish. His mind was whirling so fast he couldn't even tell what direction his thoughts were taking anymore. So he focused on the most pressing issue.

"I—I have—parents? Alive parents?"

"Yes, Naruto," she answered gently.

"And they're here?"

"You're dad's here. Your mother is on her way; she'll be here in a matter of hours."

They were silent for a few minutes; Naruto could feel his face twisting as he struggled with what to do, what to think. He had parents. They wanted him. They had been looking for him. His father was *here.* Maybe right outside that door. In response to that last thought, his eyes snapped to the window embedded in the door panel: he could see one of the hospital people there—Tsunade-sama, he thought she'd been introduced as—her head turned away, clearly talking to someone. Could it be true? Could all this be real? Everything seemed suddenly unstable, like the room was on rockers that kept tipping different directions….

"Naruto," Rin was speaking again. He looked at her reflexively, but his eyes turned back toward the door again immediately of their own accord. "This is all very sudden, and… there is no way for news like this to come as anything other than a huge shock. What would you like to do? Would you like some time alone? Would you like Kakashi to come talk to you? Or—if you think you're ready—would you like to meet your father now?"

"My…dad…is right there? Right on the other side of that door?"

"Yes," said Rin. "Do you want me to maybe tell you about him before you meet him?"

But Naruto was already up again, moving as if in a dream to the door, feeling the cold metal handle beneath his fingers, distantly seeing Rin reach uncertainly towards him—and then the door was open, and he was looking up into the bluest eyes he had ever seen. He could feel his blood rushing with the frantic pumping of his heart, setting his ears ringing.

"D…dad?"
Kakashi knew everything was going to hell approximately two seconds before it happened. Had he anticipated it even heartbeats sooner, he might have been able to do something to prevent it. Instead he watched in mounting, helpless horror as Naruto reunited with Minato: first the boy simply stared, holding on to the door, gaping with desperate intensity at Minato's face and stumbling haltingly through a name he'd had no one to call in twelve years; this was along the lines of what Kakashi had expected. He'd watched Naruto make shattering discoveries before.

Then a flash of recognition lit the boy's stunned expression, and brought in its wake a mask of absolute, abject fear and—loathing? Kakashi felt his insides freeze.

"You," whispered Naruto. And his too-bright eyes flashed dangerously in a suddenly white face. "No." He shook his head as if to dispel a nightmare, a quick, panicked gaze making a hunted sweep of the hallway, sharpening with betrayal when they landed on Kakashi. Sasuke, who had been stoically avoiding his sensei's attempts at getting rid of him and was currently positioned slightly behind Kakashi, reacted immediately to his teammate's tension by shifting offensively and reaching for his pocket. Mental swearing took over Kakashi's thought processes. There was no way this was going to end without some sort of violence—but why?

"Naru—" Minato tried to say, dismayed and bewildered, but his son wasn't listening to anyone.

"NO!" Naruto was screaming the word now, and Kakashi's gaze flickered back from Sasuke in time to see Naruto place both hands on his father's chest and shove with all his might, sending a wide-eyed Minato reeling into the opposite wall. Naruto stumbled forward with the momentum of it, stocking feet skidding against the floor as he pivoted and burst at a dead sprint down the hallway, one elbow coming up reflexively to fend off a security officer who stepped uncertainly into his path. Kakashi signaled frantically to the other bodyguards, hoping against hope that they could contain Naruto and get him to calm down enough to explain what the hell he thought was happening—but Sasuke was already there, brandishing brass knuckles and well-aimed kicks to clear the way for his teammate before they were both around the corner and dashing out of sight. Two officers started after them immediately while the others looked to someone—Minato, Rin, Kakashi—for direction, having been assigned to protect the kid, not protect from him.

"Naruto," gasped Minato, and leapt after his son. Kakashi managed to lurch into action in time to wrap an iron grip around his sensei's arm, and was consequently dragged forward a few steps as Minato glanced over his shoulder and snarled at him.

"Don't chase him," Kakashi warned urgently, though his better sense was telling him to make himself as small and non-threatening as possible in the face of Minato's wrath. "Do you want to confirm to him that you're a threat?"

Minato's eyes widened in horror, and he visibly forced himself to still, muscles trembling. "I can't just let him go," he whispered wretchedly. "I barely got a glimpse of him." He sucked in breath. "What did I do? Why did he react like that?"

Rin appeared at their sensei's other shoulder, eyes huge and fixed on Kakashi, her silent gaze echoing everything Minato asked. Kakashi felt his shoulders slump in defeat.

"I don't know," he muttered, and the guilt washed up, nearly drowning him. "'M sorry, sensei…"

"Well," cut in Tsunade briskly, her professional persona naturally taking hold in the midst of chaos.
"Let's approach this rationally. Kakashi, you know our patient best. I take it you didn't expect Naruto to respond to meeting Minato-kun that way?"

Kakashi shook his head mutely.

"Then there's no point in speculating on what happened, as no one here is in a position to make an educated guess. We need to figure out what to do next." Her gaze snapped to Kakashi again. "Do you have any idea where he might have gone?"

Feeling utterly wretched, Kakashi could merely shift his shoulders in a helpless shrug. "The last time he got really spooked, he hid for a week, until he finally decided to come out on his own. Not even Jiraiya could find him..." And the closest we got was Jiraiya tracking him to the sewers, he added mentally, but a glance at Minato confirmed the inkling that now was not a good time to introduce the man to some of the harsher realities of his son's life. It's not like we'd have any chance of finding him even if we did start our search there. "But I have hope that he's not quite that desperate. Once he's satisfied that no one's following him, he'll probably pick one of several safe spots he keeps in mind for this type of situation, lay low for an hour or two, and head home when things look clear. So long as we don't do anything to up his sense of how much trouble he's in."

Minato seemed to have recovered enough to be back in full command. "Call off the two who followed him," he clipped off to his security captain, who turned immediately to murmur into a radio. Kakashi was addressed next. "Safe spots?"

Kakashi tried not to sound shifty. "Eh... how much do you know about street kids, Sensei?"

To Kakashi's immense relief, Rin stepped up to help. "Oh—Obito told me about this! A lot of the kids he and Kushina-san have worked with have a sort of network of hidey-holes—they try to have one within running distance of anywhere they have to spend a lot of time. It increases their chances of survival. Abandoned buildings, underground metro station bathrooms, sheltered fire escapes, places like that."

I.E. the sewers, Kakashi thought grimly.

To his credit, Minato-sensei didn't get hung up on the street kid part (he'd discussed that much with Kakashi many times over the preceding two weeks, though the latter was very careful about which bits of data he shared) and jumped to how this information might be useful. "So he may be somewhere nearby?"

Kakashi was sad to burst this small bubble of hope. "Not likely, Sensei. Two reasons: this hospital, this neighborhood, aren't part of Naruto's territory, so he's less likely to have a local hidey hole. And two: you saw the kid who attacked your security people to clear Naruto's getaway? That was Uchiha Sasuke, my other cute little mentee. If he was here, their motorbike was probably here. I'd be willing to bet that Naruto's not making his escape on foot."

Rin raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Uchiha Sasuke? What's an Uchiha doing running with a kid like Naruto?"

Kakashi squinted his eyes in their cheerful upside-down parody of a smile, though he really didn't feel like smiling at all. "That's a whole 'nother story. Though I must say I was impressed with their teamwork!"

"And not so impressed with my security team," muttered Minato under his breath. His security detail looked shamed. "So what's our best bet? Wait for him to return to his apartment? How do we keep a watch on the place without risking him finding out?" The unspoken message was clear: we
are re-finding my son, and I am not taking my eyes off of him ever again. Silence fell as the assembled considered their options.

"Perhaps we could contact-" began Tsunade, but she was unexpectedly, if timidly, interrupted.

"Ah—excuse me," came a quiet voice from the end of the hall, and Kakashi's eyes widened when he saw who stood there. Sakura, who obviously had not obeyed his orders to go home anymore than Sasuke had, and Kurenai's little student—one he'd seen more and more frequently with Naruto of late, he realized quite suddenly. A close relative of Neji's, if he wasn't mistaken.

"These are friends of Naruto's," Kakashi introduced the two girls quickly, lest one of the adults shoo them away before he'd had a chance to determine if they might be helpful in the current crisis. "What is it, girls?"

The little dark-haired one braced herself, lifting her chin to look directly at Minato as Sakura squeezed her hand reassuringly. "I know where Naruto will be," she said clearly, and then seemed to shrink and lose the power to keep up her steady gaze as the attention of every adult present focused laser-like on her, and directed her next words to her feet. "But I will only tell you if I know it w-won't hurt him."

"Tell us what's going on, explain why you're looking for him, and we might help you find him," Sakura added smoothly, her green eyes calculating. These girls might sound naïve, Kakashi mused, but Sakura had a right to her confidence. Very little escaped her analytical abilities once she set her mind to figuring it out. They were information-gathering; playing innocent and slightly dumb, letting anyone foolish enough underestimate them while they ran interference for their friend.

Minato turned a quirked eyebrow to Kakashi, questioning.

"Maa… I'd listen to them," Kakashi vouched, and prayed to anyone listening that nothing bad would come of this as his mentor's face sparked with renewed hope.

viliv

Sasuke trailed Namikaze's guards until they slid back through the hospital doors and stayed there, the best reassurance he was going to get that they really had been called back and hadn't pulled off his tail as some sort of trap. He'd managed to get both pursuants hot-footing it after him while Hinata guided Naruto to the moped. The dobe'd better have made it out okay.

Satisfied that his next job was to make himself scarce, Sasuke turned away from his view of the hospital. And nearly leapt out of his skin as a lithe section of shadow stepped forward to meet him.

"Sasuke," Itachi greeted tonelessly. There was the slightest of creases between the dark eyes that emerged from the blackest recesses of the alleyway the brothers were skulking in. Sasuke fought hard to suppress the audible swallow and hitched breathing that would give away the fright Itachi'd just set in him and scowled instead.

"Itachi—the hell you doing here?"

"I believe I have the greater right to questions here, little brother," replied Itachi smoothly, and Sasuke knew the man was taking in every detail of his appearance. Somewhat belatedly, his right hand moved behind his back, managing to make the move casual even if Itachi would never fall for it. If only he'd hit that final growth spurt that would prevent Itachi from looming over him the way he was now.

"Why," continued the elder Uchiha, his tone just a tad too passive to work as conversational, "have
you spent much of the previous three hours—most likely longer than that—in the hospital or traveling between Naruto's home and the hospital, followed by a sprint through downtown Konoha that ended with hiding on a by-street wearing brass knuckles (which I was told you no longer owned) and Naruto's hockey jersey?"

"You're stalking me again!" Sasuke accused, enraged. Itachi merely raised an eyebrow at him.

Uchiha Sasuke answered to no one...with one exception. His brother. Anyone else he could out-glare, out-class, or simply ignore while doing whatever he pleased. All Itachi had to do was look at him, and the words GAME OVER flashed vindictively behind Sasuke's eyelids. Itachi must have checked up on him when he didn't show for dinner. Damn. He thought he'd managed to hide his acquisition of a new cell phone chip cleverly enough that Itachi would still be tracking the old one. Stupid overprotective psychotic genius brother.

Despite his best efforts at affected nonchalance, Itachi sensed his foolish otouto's defeat and turned to walk sedately in the direction of the hospital parking garage. Hating every second of it, Sasuke slumped silently after him, having long experience with the cold reality that when it came to Itachi, resistance was futile. Besides, he was hungry. There would be dinner at home.

It wasn't until they were securely seat-belted into one of the Uchiha cars and gliding through the streets that Itachi spoke again. Sasuke was staring morosely out the window, wondering what on earth someone like Namikaze wanted with Naruto of all people, and if Naruto was safe from the man for more than an hour or two—anyone with that much money and influence would have a long reach—when Itachi's quiet reprimand pierced the air between them.

"You worried Mother."

It was all he had to say. Feeling stupid and childish, as Itachi was remarkably adept at making him feel, Sasuke pressed back into the leather seat with squirming insides. He wanted to tell Itachi what had happened—it still didn't make sense, and he wanted to see his brother's reaction, find some reassurance that the world wasn't tipping as sharply as it seemed to be—but his ego demanded he keep his silence. Itachi had humiliated him enough for one day; to acknowledge that his brother's most recent words had affected him would be the final blow to his bruised pride. So he sulked instead.

viliv

Four and a half years as a junior high special education teacher had conditioned Umino Iruka to take adolescent crises of all shapes and sizes smoothly in stride. He wouldn't survive a day in his classroom otherwise. So when Naruto showed up on his porch, half-dressed in a hockey uniform, missing his shoes, and trembling uncontrollably, he merely pulled his door opened wide and welcomed the panicked teenager inside. And went to heat water for ramen. Whatever trouble Naruto was in, ramen was always the first step to making it better.

When he returned to his tiny living/dining room, his former student was curled into a ball on the farthest corner of his couch, head tucked behind his knees and white-knuckled hands gripping his hair. Despite a professional propensity to stay somewhat detached, Iruka's worry was mounting. He knew that Naruto would not come to him if he thought he was in physical danger—the boy would never put someone else in harm's way. Usually Naruto would seek him out to mooch a free dinner at Ichiraku's and celebrate something, or when he was desperate enough to beg for help with figuring out checking accounts or girl problems or schoolwork. Once or twice the only motive Iruka could discern was that he was just terribly lonely. Whenever he was in real—as in life-or-death, urgent and unavoidable—trouble, Naruto would hide from everyone with huge grins and embarrassing gaffes while stubbornly brushing off any attempts at aide or guidance, even from a
trusted and adored mentor like Iruka.

What Iruka was seeing now didn't fit any of the behavior patterns he'd come to associate with his most resilient student. And when a steaming cup of instant ramen set deliberately in front of the boy failed to unfurl even the very edges of his trembling ball of misery, Iruka found himself fighting down the first ripples of panic.

"Naruto—are you sick? Are you hurt? What happened? Can you look at me?" Naruto didn't look at him. Iruka counted out a cautious half-minute in his head, and carefully laid out a mild threat. "Naruto—if you can't tell me what's going on, I'm going to have to make a decision ignorantly—and with the way you're looking, I'm thinking the best course of action might be to get you to a hospital—"

Ah. There was a reaction. Flinching as if from a violent attack, panicked blue eyes popped up from behind defensive knees and one hand waved frantically in front of them, as though to fend off an attack.

"NO! Iruka-sensei, no no no, not the hospital, aagh—" and the child lunged in what Iruka correctly interpreted as an escape attempt. Startled but not entirely surprised, the older man caught his former student's shoulders and pushed him back onto the couch, not entirely surprised at how strong the teenager was. If Naruto really decided to vacate the premises, there wouldn't be much Iruka could do to stop him. He caught the kid's wildly flickering eyes and maintained eye contact.

"Okay, not the hospital," Iruka amended carefully, and waited a few seconds to allow the initial panic to die down a bit. "At least not right away. How about a glass of water?"

Reluctantly, Naruto nodded, and settled back onto the couch, though his posture was no less tense. In a show of trust, Iruka left the room and went to fill a glass of water in the kitchen. He didn't know what he'd do if Naruto wasn't there when he returned, but suggesting the hospital had obviously been a bad move, and he had to do something to make up for it. If the child had come to him for sanctuary, the last thing he needed was to feel watched and caged. So he took his time clattering around the kitchen, filling a cup with ice and running the tap for a full minute before sticking the cup under it. Re-emerging into the living room, Iruka was relieved to discover a much more self-possessed looking Naruto. Much of the panic was gone, chased from the expressive features with slightly sheepish embarrassment.

"Sorry, Iruka-sensei," the boy mumbled, not quite able to meet the other's eyes while he accepted the glass of water. He still shook a bit, making the ice rattle. "I just... just..."

"It's okay, Naruto," Iruka replied, when it seemed he wasn't able to finish that sentence. "Nothing needs to happen right away—take your time, I'll just sit here with you for now. But I am worried."

"I spent all day in the hospital," Naruto admitted after a moment, unable to keep a tinge of resentment from his voice. "I got hit in the head in hockey practice this morning and Kakashi-baka-sensei used it to get me locked up there." This was followed by much not-very-coherent but clearly caustic swearing directed at Kakashi. The man apparently came from very questionable ancestry.

"Naruto," Iruka cut him off sternly. "I understand that you're upset, but that is an entirely inappropriate way to speak of your mentor."

Blue eyes flashed his way, and a belligerent retort seemed imminent, but instead the little rebel just descended back into unhappy silence. Unease spiked in Iruka's gut.

"What happened at the hospital, Naruto?"
Naruto looked at him warily, apparently struggling with what to say.

"Naruto…" Iruka used just a touch of his special 'don't mess with the teacher' tone.

The boy swallowed, hard. "They did all these tests…" his voice trailed off while Iruka did his best to project patience, support, and encouragement. "They wouldn't let me go, or let anyone in to see me…they had me sign some papers…they were really hard to read... I knew something was going on, but no one would answer my questions, not really, they just made it sound like I was kinda silly for asking—and Kakashi-sensei—" again a flash of something, anger or panic or—was that it?—betrayal, flashed across the scarred face. "He must've planned it all! I hate that bastard!" And to Iruka's unadulterated horror, Naruto's eyes filled with angry tears. "He's been weird for months—always staring at me and asking weird questions—and I ignored it 'cause I'm supposed to trust him!"

Iruka was having heart palpitations. This was it, he knew something truly upsetting must have occurred, but this was a nightmare beyond nightmares. Naruto had some deadly disease—oh, what if it was something awful, incurable? Osteosarcoma? Tuberculosis? Leukemia? Heavens knew the kid had lived most of his life in unsafe environments—the possible toxins, the probable malnutrition—Kakashi must have noticed the symptoms and taken the first chance to get the kid to a doctor—Naruto was crying, that kid never cried, he hadn't for years—

With a ragged breath, Naruto pulled himself together, hastily wiping any evidence of tears from his face. "So anyway, they kept me there forever until finally this lady came in and she told me—ah, Iruka-sensei?"

Realizing that some of his inner hysteria must be showing on his face, Iruka made a herculean effort to return to at least a façade of calm. "What did she say, Naruto?" he asked gently, wondering if he was really ready to hear the news. But no, he had to be strong, be strong for Naruto—

Who just looked at him strangely for a long moment. But somehow, seeing signs of panic in Iruka seemed to give the boy a boost of confidence, and with a one-shouldered shrug, he opened his mouth to continue his narrative. "This is the really crazy part, Iruka-sensei—you know, it was probably all just a really bad joke—"

The melodic ping of the doorbell cut him off, and both sets of eyes flew to the doorway. Naruto instantly looked cagey again. Two more rings followed the first as the two sat frozen in the living room, timed with just enough space between them to toe the line between urgent and obnoxious. Iruka sent a sidelong glance at Naruto.

"Wait here, I'll see who it is." After waiting for the teenager's half-hearted nod, Iruka stepped out to greet his second unexpected guest.

Gravity-resistant silver hair peaked over the edge of the small decorative window mounted over the front door. Iruka's heart leapt. Kakashi! Just the man he needed to see—

"Kakashi-san," Iruka greeted, stern demand already apparent in his voice and not-as-amiable-as-usual face. "How did you know to come here? And what's wrong with Naruto?" But by the end of that first sentence, his stern façade had crumpled into near-frantic concern, and he was babbling on before Kakashi had a chance to do more than slightly widen his heavy-lidded stare. "Is he really sick? What can we do? It's not that serious, is it? Please tell me there's a good chance for recovery—"
Kakashi raised one eyebrow. "Naruto is sick?"

Iruka opened his mouth to retort, and then his brain caught up with him, retracing the mental steps that led to that conclusion—Naruto pale, shaking, not acting at all like his usual self; the unfinished story about being in the hospital; the hint that the boy had received startling and disturbing news—oops. He'd gotten carried away with his tendency to fear the worst again. There was no immutable evidence that his sudden worry had any basis in reality. Then what…?

Trying to regain some dignity, Iruka leveled a glare at Kakashi. "I don't know, is he?"

Kakashi looked at him with his favorite unnervingly passive gaze for a moment, then turned to pointedly take in the moped on its side on Iruka's little patch of grass.

"…No. At least, I don't believe so. Though it might explain his bizarre reaction at the hospital… he is here, then?"

Iruka crossed his arms. "He was a minute ago, but I wouldn't guarantee anything."

Kakashi sighed. "I take it he isn't doing so well?" One look at Iruka's expression answered that question. Looking tired, the silver-haired man helped himself to a seat on the porch steps. In silent agreement, Iruka settled down next to him.

"Maa… perhaps it would help if I explained. We could use the aid of someone Naruto actually trusts right now, and I'm afraid I'm no longer in that category." Iruka didn't say anything; once again his drawn face did the talking for him. Kakashi tilted his head up, saw the last bits of purple fading into never-really-dark city night sky.

"Do you remember Namikaze Naruto?"

Iruka stopped breathing. Caught himself. Started breathing again. "They found him," he said, staring. "His remains. They found him. DNA proof or whatever. A few years after he went missing. My mom cried."

"Right," muttered Kakashi. "So when WoF assigns me to a kid named Naruto, and he kinda looks like our--like the Naruto, what do you think I told myself, over and over and over?"

Iruka felt dizzy, and it wasn't hard to imagine what he might have done, if he thought he recognized somebody he knew was dead. "Did you... did you know Namikaze Naruto?"

"His dad... Namikaze Minato was my WoF mentor. I was there when--when it happened. When Naruto disappeared."

Sympathy and wonder twisted in with all the other panicked things Iruka was feeling. Naruto... are you still in there, curled up on my couch? "You've been his mentor for nearly three years," he said, urgently. "So why--I mean how--I mean, agh, what happened today? Are you telling me what I think you're telling me?"

Kakashi looked at him, grey eyes dark and flat. "He was dead," he said. "I told myself I was only seeing what I wished I could see. That grief brings its own insanity. What I wished for more than I've ever wanted anything... for Sensei and Kushina-san to have their son again... for that kid to be alive, and safe, and right there in front of me, how could it possibly be true? And nothing matched up, not the ages, or the dates, or anything... anything but the name, and the face I kept seeing but didn't believe could really be there to see."

"So--but--"
"But things happened, and there was a little too much evidence for me to just be crazy, and finally I started telling—telling people who were part of the search—and Minato-sensei came back to Konoha—and we got DNA samples, and then we just needed to figure out how to—how to test Naruto. And this is all classified, by the way, because we both know that Naruto, our Naruto regardless of whether or not he is Namikaze Naruto, our Naruto's life is never... never quite guaranteed."

Iruka nodded. He knew. His head was spinning. **Kakashi-baka-sensei used it to get me locked up in the hospital. They did all these tests, Naruto had said. Then this lady came in and she told me-**

"Tell me," ordered Iruka, barely able to keep his seat, in the twilight on the edge of the porch. "Naruto. Our Naruto. Is he...?"

Kakashi looked him in the eye. "Yes," he said.

Iruka reeled. Naruto, the child who was more alone than anyone Iruka had ever met—than Iruka himself had ever been, and he knew the meaning of loneliness—had parents. Loving parents. Parents who never stopped searching for him.

Very, very famous parents.

"Did you—did you tell him?"

Kakashi nodded, looking surprisingly miserable. "He met his father tonight. At the hospital. A family friend spoke to him first, to try to introduce the situation to him. She said he seemed eager, if stunned and somewhat disbelieving—you know how optimistic that kid is, how willing to believe—"

Iruka nodded.

"Well, he took one look at his dad, started screaming, shoved the man into a wall, ran for it, and… came here, I guess."

The recent memory of Naruto on his porch, wide-eyed and shaking, then curled up into an anguished ball in the corner of his couch, nearly unresponsive, replayed itself in Iruka's mind. Surely the news the boy had received would be terribly shocking—but traumatizing? Something wasn't adding up.

It was time to stop talking. Iruka stood, dusted himself off. "Come in," he said. "I think our Naruto is still in there."

Kushina's worst fears were confirmed when she stepped through the heavy oak door of Tsunade's office and was immediately accosted with her most dreaded sight: Minato, broken. Despair-turned-red-hot-anger was bubbling out of her mouth in curse words and accusations before the door had closed behind her.

"...this is why I made you promise not to put yourself through all of this again! You promised, damn it! And now you'll live through the loss all over again—Rin, I TOLD you not to let it start again—"

"Kushina," Tsunade cut in forcefully, "He is your son." In the brief seconds of reprieve that Tsunade's interruption won, Rin shoved the docket summarizing the test results in Kushina's face. The percentage match was circled in both orange and yellow highlighter.
"It's… he's…Naruto… my Naruto?" The last came out as a strained whisper; Kushina's vivid eyes were impossibly wide as she stared at the paper. A moment later and the documents were trembling in her fingers; Obito pushed her into the seat next to Minato, who wasn't looking at her.

"I…this… it's not possible, it's not possible!" And she burst into tears. Pushed beyond his general inhibitions, Minato shuddered, and turned around, and put his arms around her.

"It's him," he said hoarsely. "He has your angry-eyes, Kushina." He tried to chuckle; she just cried.

The others in the room pretended not to be there, uncomfortable witnessing the moment. Rin's eyes looked a bit glazed; Obito's one eye had long since overflown and was steadily leaking tears down his left cheek. Tsunade's face was unreadable.

The buzz of a vibrating cell phone charged the air; mechanically, Minato removed one arm from his estranged wife to remove the device from his pocket and snapped it open.

All eyes turned to stare, as though the words coming through the receiver might turn visible if their curiosity was focused enough. Minato listened, and became the epicenter of a ripple of relaxing stances as some of the strain melted from his features.

"Thank you, Kakashi," he said at last, and looked up to address the audience. "Naruto agreed to go with him," he supplied succinctly. "They'll meet us at the hotel." Holding a still stunned Kushina tightly by one hand, Konoha's Yellow Flash swept out the door.
"So who, exactly, is this Umino person?" Kushina wanted to know. She was parked grimly in the middle of the comfiest-looking couch in the hotel suite, all grey-eyed glares and forbidding body language-every crossable limb was demonstrating its crossable-ness so tightly that Minato wondered if they could ever be un-crossed. He knew she was being irritable because she so badly wanted not to cry.

"A resource teacher who worked with our so—with Naruto in grades five through eight," he supplied immediately, drawing on the carefully compiled facts he'd committed to memory from every tidbit of information he had managed to gather about their lost boy. "Kakashi said he's a good guy. Really looks out for Naruto."

Kushina was quiet for a bit. "So he's in resource, huh?" She murmured after the pause, sounding more distracted than harsh this time. Kushina herself was severely dyslexic. But no one ever told her that condition might be hereditary. If that was even the reason why this boy who had been her baby qualified for special education. It could be anything… she didn't know anything. *Anything*. Her baby was a perfect stranger.

"What else do we know about him?" she asked quietly. Minato blinked.

"Eh… well... no hits on the name check, clean background, has good reviews as a teacher—" he cut off hastily as Kushina lobbed a decorative couch cushion at him. "Ah! You meant Naruto. Not Iruka-san. Sorry!" He smiled awkwardly. "Well… about Naruto." He took a moment to gather himself, the sheepish grin melting into nonexistence and the frighteningly sharp edges of his business face subconsciously emerging. He turned from his spot in the corner, where he had banished himself because he was trying very hard not to pace, and moved a bit closer to his wife. "I can tell you what Kakashi told me," he said slowly, "but I'm guessing he left much of what he knows out. And what Kakashi doesn't know, only Naruto can tell. And… well, I don't think we're going to like it." Kushina said nothing and looked back at him, wide eyes solemn. Minato glanced at his phone to check the time before slipping it back into his pocket and folding his hands behind his back, drawing in a bracing breath. "He seems to have grown up as part of the Nine Tails gang—"

— that's still true, as far as we know. Whatever's left of them is too far underground to be considered a true presence. Also, they've been totally inactive—since the day Naruto disappeared. Coincidentally. Or not." The last bit was muttered, his tone dark. Kushina was still gaping at him, lips jerking with unborn words. "Also, you need to see this—" Minato plowed on, carefully fishing a palm-sized photograph from his wallet as he did so, "—Kakashi took this three and a half weeks ago, look at it carefully."

"WHAT? No! They're gone! Destroyed!"

Kushina stared at the image he pushed before her dazed gaze, taking in details without really putting them together as a whole. Unruly black hair, large bright, *bright* eyes, hockey uniform, face turned slightly to the side, focus on something other than the camera—

"My baby," whispered Kushina-

-scarred cheeks.
Three carefully carved, identical lines on each cheek, lines that would have stretched from nose to ears on the face of a small child, but marred only the rounded curves of this nearly-adult face.

Kushina's lips and fingers trembled. Minato looked away for several long seconds, and scrubbed at his face with one hand.

"Jiraiya suspects connections to Akatsuki, as well," he added after a pause, deciding to get all of the worst news over at once. "Other than that… he seems to be doing remarkably well—you know, in spite of, well, everything." He waited another moment, watching, but despite going even paler (he was glad she was already situated on the couch, as she didn't look like her legs could come close to holding her), Kushina did nothing more than continue to stare at the picture. With a sigh, he sat down beside her, reached for her unresisting free hand, the one not desperately gripping the photograph, and continued.

"There are absolutely no records of him before he registered for school, part way through what would become his 5th grade year. He had an adult posing as a guardian and had all of the required paperwork, but in the past week it's been established that all of it was forged. He, um, listed Ichiraku as his last name."

Kushina suddenly chuckled, small humor sliding thinly through the other, much darker emotions maelstorming somewhere between her head and her heart. "He named himself after a ramen stand?" And some of the tightness around her eyes receded, leaving a little more room for hope, for looking forward.

Minato's fingers tightened around hers in a brief, grateful reply to her attempt at good humor. "When he registered with the school, the birth certificate he used labeled him as being, at the time, twelve years old, when really he was just barely ten. They held him back as far as they did because he didn't know how to read and showed only the most basic of math skills. That's when Iruka-san started working with him. It was Iruka-san who got him into WoF, about two years later, which is when he met Kakashi… and Kakashi, well… Kakashi couldn't believe…it took him years..." Not his fault, Minato reminded himself fiercely. For Kakashi, Naruto was dead. Not his fault. I don't need to add my blame to all his guilt.

"WoF, huh?" Kushina repeated softly. The Will of Fire program (generally acknowledged by its slightly less cheesy acronym) existed to corral the best and brightest of the city's youth to become the future faces and leaders of Konoha—unofficial ambassadors, hand-selected representatives of projected glory. Successful alumni were placed as mentors for new young members, providing the guidance and connections needed to allow for the greatest opportunity in whatever fields a kid showed promise in—sports, arts, intellectual pursuits, wherever they could foster a rising star. Minato had been the brightest star of all.

Perhaps it was a suiting ending, that the Will of Fire would unwittingly be the desperately sought link to recovering their perfect poster boy's greatest loss—but it felt too late, and tasted a little bitter. All those needlessly wasted years….

Minato ran tight fingers through his much-abused hair, and felt Kushina's thumb run comforting over the back of his other hand. The thought crossed his mind that he had missed this too much—just having her hand in his, missed feeling that they were facing the same direction, the same challenges. But it would be beyond unfair to pin that hope on Naruto, too.

"The way Kakashi describes him, he sounds just like you," he sallied onwards, purposefully ignoring his other thoughts. "Loud, rude-

Kushina stepped on his foot.
Kakashi tried to catch a telling glimpse or two of his passenger's face in the rearview mirror—anything to gauge where the kid was at, emotionally or otherwise—but Naruto had his forehead pressed to the cold side door window, and if his hands were fisted or twisting they were not where Kakashi could see them and drive at the same time. The uncomfortable crawling tightness in his chest and stomach showed no signs of letting up.

This was supposed to be a joyous occasion. Sure, it would be a shock for Naruto, and while there had surely been a better way to reunite him with his family, they had been as careful as they could be with the constraints of time and secrecy pressing so urgently. The slightest slip-up in planning would send the press wheeling into a hay-day of blazing half-truth headlines and grainy blown-up images—Namikaze Minato had always been a favorite cover-seller. Naruto would have drowned in the ensuing media storm. And that might have been the least of the disasters.

Someone had kept Naruto from them—someone far too capable to be anything but dangerous. The Namikazes had poured near-limitless money and resources into the search for their son; every detective, every information shark, every organization both legal and illegal had been enlisted at one point or another. Anyone who could hide from that relentless onslaught had an agenda and resources that, while hypothetical, must be respected—and in this case, feared. Kakashi's sinking feeling that they had only discovered Naruto because someone wanted them to discover him was jarringly confirmed when Jiraiya bitterly muttered out the same terrifying suspicion.

So yes, they should have handled things better. But under the harsh limits of caution and confidentiality that had to be employed, he wasn't sure they could have.

And that still didn't explain Naruto's reaction.

"So... Naruto. How do you want to do this?" Kakashi couldn't quite keep the hint of guilt, the tinge of pleading from his voice. It was too important for things to go differently this time around—without the horror and accusation flashing from his student's eyes and the bewildered hurt clouding his mentor's. He wouldn't go so far as to hope for tears of joy anymore. But Naruto had (somewhat miraculously, it seemed) allowed a second chance, and Hatake Kakashi knew far better than to waste second chances.

Silence from the back seat. Cold, eerie silence. The car eased to a stop before a traffic light and Kakashi gave himself strict mental orders not to give into the desire to bang his head against the steering wheel. Rain misted through the night air and splashed across the windshield, each droplet catching and reflecting a halo of fluorescent city lights. The stoplight turned too soon, and he pressed the gas again.

"...How am I supposed to 'do this'?

The question was mumbled and barely audible over the soft rush of wind and water over the car frame, the muffled thrum of the motor and swish of rubber wheels over wet asphalt, but Kakashi heard the sincere wonder behind it. Which begged a good answer. How was one supposed to react to meeting parents one didn't know existed? And, apparently, hated? Or feared, or whatever it was Naruto had going on with Minato-sensei.
Kakashi unwound one hand from his steering wheel to scratch at the side of his head. "Ah... Well, I suppose what it comes down to it, you're just meeting a new person. You could do whatever you like to do when you meet a new person?"

Naruto shot him a very dry look through the rearview mirror. "Already did that."

Now that he mentioned it, Kakashi could think of a number of times in which Naruto had introduced himself by shouting at someone. And/or assaulting them physically. He sent a happy eye-squint back through mirror.

"Great! Then you can move right along to the next bit. Where you somehow win their lifelong love and devotion while knocking their whole world perspective onto a brighter and happier course!"

Naruto snorted and turned back to the window.

Maybe, sighed a voice from the entirely jaded depths of Kakashi's mind, the gaki just can't handle it when that lifelong love and devotion is already there, and has been all along. Hatred he takes, and just stands there and grins. Unconditional love, and he's instantly fight-or-flight.

But that wasn't fair. That love hadn't been there for Naruto. And that, Kakashi reflected, gripping the steering wheel all the more tightly, made all the difference.

IoIoi

-- Come over?

That was the entirety of Sakura's text. Sasuke chanced look through his cracked-open bedroom door to Itachi's wide-open one across the hall. Not the slightest sound filtered across the hallway to him, but he knew his brother was in there, watching. Sasuke grimaced at the little patch of light that was his cell phone screen before sighing and tapping in an answer.

-- Can't. Itachi's pissed.

He waited for a reply, but none came. Frustration mounting, he tossed the phone onto his bedspread and stalked off for a shower.

When he came out, there still wasn't a text from Sakura. But there was an awful lot of cherry-petal hair spread across his pillow.

"Get off," he ordered, pulling the towel he'd been using to dry his hair down over his face so she wouldn't see his traitorous lips twitch into a smile.

When he looked up again, she had rolled obligingly to the foot of the bed, where she sat cross-legged in a pair of her favorite sweatpants—they used to be his—and grinned up at him before smacking the gum she was chewing annoyingly.

"I just got Hinata back to Naruto's place," she offered cheerfully, eyeing his shirtless torso appreciatively. Sasuke was suddenly glad he'd only taken pajama bottoms into the bathroom with him. Sakura used to fawn over him as though he was the only thing of value in the entirety of the
world—back when, unfortunately, girls were nothing more than somewhat gross, hopefully disregidable presences. Now that he actually sometimes wanted female attention, the only female he was remotely close to treated him just like she treated Naruto—some strange meld between sibling and punching post that she alternately defended and turned to for support. Except she was more cautious with Sasuke, more hesitant and watchful—less warm, complained a bit of his personality he always tried to ignore, and she never teased him (flirted, muttered that same bit, quite jealously) quite the same way she did Naruto. He tried to convince himself that there were certain tones of voice, certain smiles she still saved only for him, but every time she threw herself into Naruto's arms for one of his inappropriately enthusiastic swirl-you-around-and-leave-you-breathless hugs, Sasuke waged a brief inner battle that demanded he either pummel the blond to a pulp or storm off to pummel something else. And he knew they rolled their eyes at each other when he nobly chose the latter and left them staring after him in their thoughtless ignorance.

So if his naked torso caught her interest, that was fine. If only he could control the blush creeping up the back of his neck to heat his ears. With his towel draped a little more snugly around his neck, he took a seat a careful three feet away from her on his bed.

"Was Naruto back yet?"

"Nah—I think he'll be spending the night with his parents."

Sasuke choked on his own spit. "What?"

Sakura smiled, pleased with achieving such a strong reaction. "His parents, Sasuke. Namikaze Minato-san and Uzumaki Kushina-san." When Sasuke's features bled to blankness and he gave no indication that he would speak again anytime soon, Sakura decided to get on to the rest of what she had to relate. "The man we saw at the hospital, outside Naruto's door? And Kushina-san, she showed up after Naruto ran off. Hinata and I talked to them. Hinata had met Namikaze-san at some sort of formal function or something when she was young and she wanted to help him. She was sure that he wanted to help Naruto."

Sasuke thought of Naruto's stricken face and doubted that.

Sakura continued. "Hinata had convinced Naruto to go to Iruka-sensei to calm down, so we were able to tell Namikaze-san where to find him." She stopped as Sasuke reeled back sharply, eyes wide with shock and accusation. How could she rat out her teammate like that? Why would she do that?

"Hey!" Sakura exclaimed defensively, holding up her hands to ward off his disbelief and anger. "Don't look at me like that! We asked a lot of questions first, made sure it was the right thing to do!"

Sasuke was standing now, and staring down disgustedly. "The right thing to do?" His fingers curling in tight, making fists. "The right thing to do? Whatever makes you think you would know the right thing to do? You sure you weren't just fangirling the Yellow Flash?" Some part of him flinched back from the inappropriate level of scorn in his tone, aching as Sakura drew away from him. But she hadn't seen Naruto's face! The idiot ran away like that for a reason! Even if Sasuke knew nothing of that reason….

"What do you know?" Sakura snapped back immediately. Her belligerence didn't mask the painful backlash of his words flashing across her eyes, though. He'd hurt her again. Damn. "They've been looking for him for twelve years, Sasuke! Can you even begin to imagine? And Naruto—you know what this means for Naruto! He has a family! A family, Sasuke! That poor kid who's never gotten anything everyone deserves in life, you know, like basic security and daily care and—and—and family! His mom, his mom was crying," she was crying a little herself, now, and her babbling
was sounding somewhat hysterical. Sasuke experienced one of the abrupt, illogical, and disorienting focus-changes to which his brain had lately been mercilessly subjecting him, watching the wetness gather and spill over in Sakura's wide green eyes. The unwelcome thought that it would be nice to—to hug her or something galloped wildly through his head, even as a part of him held onto his anger. Maybe if he just kissed her—

Kuso. This is about Naruto, he tried to remind himself. And Naruto's parents. Naruto's PARENTS.

He couldn't get past that thought. Sakura was actually crying now, something he'd rarely seen her do, and he needed to fix it, and the last rational bit of his mind registered the shadow falling across his doorway, and all the rest of his supposedly brilliant brain could do was stare blankly at these three mental words: Naruto has parents.

"Sakura-chan, are you all right?" Itachi had pushed his door open, busting in rudely while inquiring after Sakura so damn politely. Rage roared through the youngest Uchiha, consuming everything else.

"Get out! Not you, Sakura:" Sasuke flailed. The look Itachi gave him was epically unimpressed.

"Sasuke," said Itachi seriously, "if you are going to keep girls in your room, do not make them cry." And he disappeared. Or at least returned to his watchful post across the hallway. Gripping his bangs with both hands, Sasuke sat back heavily on his bed. The ticking of his cheap plastic alarm clock measured the passing silence, and Sasuke calmed himself by reflecting that this one had lasted almost two weeks. That made it the equivalent of a centenarian among its peers, which he bought in bulk to deal with his morning tempers. He was doing better. Had been.

"...I'll be going, then," Sakura said at last. Her voice was soft, conciliatory. "I'd just wanted to talk to you about how we can support Naruto. He didn't take the shock too well, yeah?"

Another two minutes passed under plastic clock-hands.

"Fine. See ya, Sasuke."

But as she turned to climb back out his window (her bicycle would be shoved behind the lilac bushes, he knew) he shot a hand out, locked long fingers round her wrist. She stopped.

"Fine," she said again, and came back to sit on his bed. He didn't look up, but he knew she'd rolled her eyes. If Naruto'd been there, he'd be rolling his right back.

Are you okay, Dobe?

ITITi

Night had set in fully, and there was nothing but the reflection of him and the room he stood in for Iruka to see as he stared blankly out his front window, forgotten coffee cooling in his right hand.

Naruto's world had changed today. Flashes of over-bright blue eyes—wide, panicked at his doorstep; threatening tears in his living room; shuttered and resolute as he climbed into Kakashi's car—flickered over his mind's eye, a slideshow on replay. "Yeah, I'm not gonna run away," the boy had whispered, after appearing to half-listen to Kakashi's strained mixture of apologies, pleas, explanations, and justifications while refusing to meet either of the adults' eyes. "I'm gonna stay and fight. I always stay and fight." And then, as though not expecting them to have heard what he'd
just said, he lifted his face and squared off with Kakashi. Nothing in his stance offered forgiveness. "I'll go with you," he said at last, and Kakashi looked away first, shoulders slumped in relief. Then they both headed for the car.

*Good luck, Naruto,* Iruka wished into the night. Heavens knew that boy could use some.

---

"Umm, hi."

Naruto glanced at the man and woman facing him before dancing his gaze away, looking anywhere but back at them. The intensity of emotion he saw there hurt his eyes like stepping into the sun after a day locked up without windows.

"I'm Naruto."

The woman burst into tears.

Naruto stared at the floor, fighting to stay calm even as he felt Kakashi poised behind him, cutting off another possible escape. He did not look at Namikaze Minato.

"I'm sorry."

The words were low, genuine, broken, and not his. Naruto felt confusion whirl up amongst all the other emotions clamoring for attention, felt it twist across his face.

"For anything—anything to make you not want—want me," Namikaze continued, explaining things. "Not want me to be your dad. For not finding you earlier. For losing—for—for everything."

Naruto clenched and unclenched his hands, chanced a glance up. Across the room, Namikaze's hands were doing the same thing. A breath shuddered through him.

"It's okay," he whispered. It wasn't, but he wanted it to be. So much. Maybe he could forget. Maybe Namikaze already had. So he lifted his too-heavy head, smiled.

"My baby," whispered the woman. She held trembling fingers to her lips. "My Naruto!" And she was smiling back at him, like sunlight bouncing over ocean waves. Her other hand reached out to wrap around the man's. Namikaze.

"Naruto," said the man, "This is your mother. Kushina."

The way he said her name made her sound beautiful, and Naruto had to agree. He didn't think he'd ever seen anything—anyone—so bright, so beautiful. His chest hurt from looking at her, so he stared back at the carpet instead. Until two soft, warm arms reached round him, and long sweet-scented crimson hair was falling all around him, and a tear-wet cheek was pressed against his. He startled and stiffened, but her arms only closed tighter.

"Don't look so sad, baka!" He didn't know if she was teasing him or pleading with him. "This is the happiest day of my life! I won't have you scowling all over it!"
With his next conscious thought, he found himself crumpled on the carpet, trembling and clinging to a woman he couldn't remember knowing. He didn't know anything that felt like this. It was strange and it was right and it was terrifying and very, very warm.

"Mom," he tried, lost somewhere in her masses of hair. If he never saw anything but flowing crimson again, he figured that would be all right.

Minato watched Kushina ease their child into a more comfortable-looking position on the couch—Naruto had fallen asleep, suddenly and silently, between sentences, as Kushina told him stories—and didn't even try to name what he was feeling. There was too much, too much of it was conflicting, all of it was overwhelming—and did any of it really matter? What mattered was Naruto, and he was here, and sleeping, and safe. Now that the boy wasn't awake to flinch or shrink in every time he caught Minato looking at him, he could and would soak in the sight of his son until forcefully compelled to do otherwise.

Naruto fell asleep like that, Rin explained soothingly, because he was exhausted, nothing more. Minato shouldn't worry about that, at the least. His son had taken a hockey puck to the head, a mental and emotional shock of equal or greater force not long after that, traveled halfway across Konoha in a desperate escape attempt, and been retrieved only to go through even more psychological upheaval in the form of meeting his mother and re-meeting his father—without panicking this time. Of course he was exhausted. It was a good thing, this sleep.

At least Minato could see him now.

The curve of the chin, the shape of the nose—they reminded him of Kushina, just as they had when Naruto was tiny. The rest, he supposed, looked an awful lot like him. Hints of gold showed close to the scalp and in the carefully-darkened eyebrows. His cheek twitched with an unexpected urge to smile. He'd never imagined raising a male teenager who colored his eyebrows. They'd look awfully incongruous against the dyed-black hair otherwise, though.

So many things he wanted—needed—to know, so many answers he didn't know the questions to. Towering over everything else, though, was the desperation to fix—change, fight, whatever was needed—whatever was behind Naruto's reactions to him.

Memories swelled forward on the flooding tide of thought and feeling: pushing the car door shut behind him as the front door to home was thrust open simultaneously, small hurried feet nearly tripping in their haste to reach him, the little sunshine-topped head tipping upwards in blissful excitement as short arms stretched and the happy chant peaked—\textit{Dad-dad-daddy-daddy-DADDY}!

Minato swallowed hard as that beloved little face was replaced with a far more recent image: those big blue eyes widening in recognition—and fear and pain—and the name he had longed for so many aching years to hear again followed by distraught denial.

A warm hand fell softly across the back of his neck and squeezed gently; Kushina leaned up against him.
"Minato-

He tore his reluctant eyes from Naruto to look down at her, searching.

"Thank you." You found him.
It was barely past three a.m. when a bleary-looking figure slipped through the emergency exit, blinking painfully under the sudden glare of fluorescent lights that kept this stairwell lit at all times.

Obito had to give him props. The kid had, once again, evaded the entirety of Minato-sensei's specially trained security detail under high alert. Oh, the favors he could call in for saving their butts like this… Grinning evilly, he adjusted his eye patch and stepped forward with an inordinately cheerful greeting.

"Good morning!"

Oh, it was a good morning indeed. With a startled shout that evolved quickly into some very creative, if discourteous, language, Naruto fell halfway down the first run of stairs and popped up looking just like Kushina just before she either tripped over her own feet or put someone else through a wall. Shrugging his hands into his pockets, Obito rolled his shoulders in a leisurely stretch before starting jauntily down the steps towards his foul-mouthed young charge.

Naruto backed away warily, no longer even the slightest bit unbalanced, and Obito mentally praised the kid's stance. He certainly looked like he could handle himself in a fight. Ignoring the narrowed blue eyes and the distrustful glare they sent sizzling his way, Obito ambled on down the staircase, listening very carefully for the way Naruto moved behind him.

He didn't have long to wait.

"Where are you going?" It was a demand, not a question, and the tone was far more accusatory than curious.

"Not sure yet," offered Obito amiably. "Wherever you're going, probably."

There was a beat of silence, Naruto appeared at Obito's side—his good side, not his blind side, which was appreciated, even if it was probably accidental—and raked his eyes over the man suspiciously.

"You work for Namikaze?" He did not make that sound like a good thing.

"Nope. Just for Uzumaki."

Naruto's eyes widened dramatically. "You work for my mom?" There was a hint of longing at the end of that question—as though it was tailed by so many more. Probably all of the things the kid was still afraid to ask. Having answered the one question Naruto'd voiced out loud, Obito didn't bother to reply, just kept on trudging down the stairs. They passed the door leading out to the floor below Minato's suite: Level 16, it read. Obito frowned in dismay. Sixteen flights of stairs to go? His knees would kill him for this!

Not quite suppressing a long-suffering sigh, Obito flipped open his cell, thumb poised to begin composing a text—

—and whipped the little phone out of the way in the nick of time as Naruto sent a swift kick at the pertinent wrist from his vantage point two steps above. He caught the follow-up punch in his free hand, and found himself facing the surreal vision of Kushina's bold, angry, wide-eyed defiance sparking through Minato's blue eyes.
"You may have caught me, smartass, but there's no way I'm letting you call for backup," Naruto growled. Obito snorted.

"Fine, twerp," he answered levelly, channeling a little Kakashi with a maddening heavy-lidded glare. "Let's not send the text that will prevent the mobilization of every police corps and security team in Konoha the second your dad figures out you've jumped ship. Which would be in three… two…"

Naruto weighed his options for a long second, then lifted his hands in submission and backed away hastily, looking chagrinned.

"…one," counted off Obito, expertly tapping out a few swift words and hitting the send button, privately hoping that he wouldn't actually prove to be prescient in this case. A tense silence fell as they stood dumbly in the stairwell, listening for sirens or some similar dramatic outburst.

Nothing happened, and it didn't take either of them long to get bored. "Looks like we made it in time!" Obito proclaimed cheerfully, his one eye squinting happily and unwittingly weirding out his young companion, who was just beginning to fidget. Naruto already had Kakashi-related issues. He really didn't want to add an impersonator to that list. "So… how did you get out of there?" pressed Obito, careful but casual. "I might actually be impressed."

Naruto made a horrible face at him before turning his back and continuing on down the stairs. Obito followed dutifully.

"Fine, fine, don't reveal your ninja secrets. But seriously, I'm shocked. How did you get Konoha's Hero to take his eyes off you? " He'd keep you in a fingerprint-accessible-only safe room surrounded by state-of-the-art laser fields and trained attack emus if he thought for a moment he could get away with it, Obito concluded the thought silently. But best not to dwell on the more… zealous traits of Sensei's character when his kid already seemed unduly wary of him.

Naruto trotted down a few more stairs before answering. "Even the Yellow Flash has to pee eventually," he mumbled, perking up a bit at the end. "Yellow Flash… pee…heh…"

"It's been done before," Obito cut in dryly. "Trust me."

"How did Namikaze get so respected with such a stupid nickname?"

"Kid," returned Obito easily, "You may not like him, but the fact of the matter is this: your dad's made of Awesome."

He expected some sort of attempt at a snarky retort, but what he thought Naruto mumbled wasn't that at all. "Eh? Come again?"

"'S not that I don't like him," repeated Naruto, still mumbling. "Just didn't want him to turn out to be my dad."

Obito's eye widened. "It'd be great if you could make that make sense to me, Naruto."

But Naruto just huffed and quickened his pace. Two more flights were descended in silence. Then:

"…I don't suppose you'll just let me lose you?" Naruto asked, sounding charmingly hopefully.

"Oh, you could totally ditch me," Obito replied affably, "but then you'd end up spending the rest of the day handcuffed to a table leg or something. And that's just what your mom would do." Naruto sighed resignedly, and Obito glanced at the placard on the door they were rounding the corner by:
12, it said. Twelve floors to go, and his knee was already throbbing.

"Yo, Naruto. Since you're already caught and all—" he paused as a pissed blue eye looked back at him, "—what I was gonna say is, why not just take the elevator?"

There was another pause as Naruto slowed to a standstill. "Oh yeah," the brat admitted sheepishly, rubbing the back of his head. "Guess we could do that. Then I might not be so late…"

"Late for what?"

They headed through the Level 11 door and padded down the plush corridor to the elevators. Naruto seemed to internally debate something, ending with a shrug.

"Work. Gotta pay the bills somehow, right?"

"…Right," agreed Obito, somewhat belatedly. The kid wasn't even fifteen and he was getting up at three a.m. to go to work? "What sort of work?"

Naruto mashed the elevator call button and grinned up at him. Now that he'd resigned himself to being shadowed, he didn't seem too terribly peeved about having Obito for company. "You'll see!"

oiOi

"You drive a bus."

Naruto grinned.

"You—you drive a bus. You drive a bus. You drive a bus?"

The brat's grin was looking just a tad bit manic, and was joined by a gleeful chuckle. Obito had a bad feeling about this. At least Kakashi wasn't around to arch an eyebrow at his oh-so-articulate reaction to this new development.

When he'd followed Naruto's directions to what appeared to be a bus base (the kid'd pointed out that if he was going to be a pain in the rear and follow him around all day, he might as well get them where they were going by car)—there was a smallish building that seemed to house offices and some sort of lounge for drivers, with a dozen or so huge buses (coaches, Naruto corrected) parked in what could only be described as a freakin' huge garage—he'd wondered if Naruto was, like, a bus drivers' lounge janitor, or maybe a junior security guard or something. To his mounting horror, the not-quite-fifteen-year-old had sauntered through several authorized-personnel-only type doors, swiping a security card each time and jauntily greeting the two other (much, much older) workers they passed, retrieved a uniform, and in no time at all was climbing into the driver's seat of a ginormous bendy bus (articulated coach, the brat corrected again) looking far too young to possibly belong there.

Although the admittedly dashing uniform cap did help.

"Yep!" The chortles following that affirmative answer did little to ease Obito's growing alarm.

"How is this even legal?" He demanded, not at all rhetorically. Knowing that the kid zipped around the city on a shared moped was one thing. Seeing that he was apparently a fully legitimate
employee of one of Konoha’s very respected public transportation providers was throwing poor Obito for a very different kind of loop.

"You owe 13.5 yen in fare," replied Naruto impishly, pulling a little lever that set the hydraulic pumps huffing. "Then it will be legal."

When Obito sputtered, Naruto relented just a bit.

"Eh, relax, Uchiha! I let people ride for free all the time. We'll let you get away with it just this once." With the engines revved and roaring to life, the leviathan of a vehicle pulled smoothly out of the garage, Naruto whistling carelessly as he maneuvered his coach effortlessly through the suddenly too-small looking exit. Still spluttering half-formed negations, Obito grabbed a handle bar and held on for dear life.

ToToT

Minato read the text again. And again. He could read it multiple times per second, in fact.

I got him Trust me

Sent from Obito's phone at 3:07 a.m. that morning. It was now a quarter to five. Kushina appeared at his elbow, brandishing a tall glass of water, two sleeping pills and her There Is No Compromise face. Minato was immediately on the defensive.

"Kushina…” he muttered warningly, backing away.

"Either you take care of yourself, or I take care of you. You know how it goes."

"Look, this—this is not a situation where I can just humor you—"

" Humor me?" everything about Kushina immediately became more dangerous.

"Kushina."

"No."

They faced off in silence for several long moments, the tension mounting so high that it was all Minato could do not to twitch. Kushina, of course, already was. One foot was tapping, the lines in her furrowed brow kept intensifying, and the hand clutching the glass of water was threatening to shatter the delicate vessel it held. Then, suddenly, everything about her softened.

"Minato—Minato, I do understand. You've given everything—literally everything—to get your son back, and now that you've finally, finally gotten within arm's distance, he keeps slipping just out of reach, and you're afraid that if you drop your hand even just for a second he'll disappear forever. And I'm sure there's some sort of power play going on here that makes everything that much more dangerous. I get it! I do. But the way you usually do things just isn't going to work—"

"Obito and I know these kids, remember? We've spent nine years helping people get out of the kind of circumstances Naruto must've been in. So you have to listen to me. The harder you try to hold him, the farther he's gonna run—"

Minato was only half listening. Hotel security should be getting back to him with the surveillance tapes any minute now. He'd taken his eyes off of his son for one minute—closer to seventy seconds, maybe, but still—one minute, and it was like Naruto had never even been in the room, like the hours he'd spent simply soaking in the sight of his son (his sweet son peacefully asleep)
were just part of some grand illusion, and Obito just says "trust me" and leaves it at that? The cushions on the sofa were still warm when he rushed over there, and he'd wasted precious minutes searching every corner of the suite because there were guards at the door and they were alert and hadn't seen, hadn't even heard anything —

There was only the window open a crack, but they were on the seventeenth floor.

"You're not even listening, are you."

Kushina’s voice was matter of fact and right in his ear. Minato blinked, surprised at the warm weight leaning against him and the cascade of crimson obscuring everything below his chin.

"Please sleep," she murmured into his chest, half-defeated already and radiating concern and petition that was almost impossible to resist.

But Minato didn't respond. Like all the times before that fractured everything between them until the gulf could no longer be spanned, Minato couldn't do what she asked of him.

He was waiting for Naruto.

Hinata felt a small smile tug at her lips and glad relief well up to tingle all the way to her fingertips as Naruto's coach pulled up to the bus stop right on schedule, gorgeous grinning driver and all. This had been her signal that all was right with the world for nearly a year. There had only ever been one other time when she needed to see him as badly as she needed to at that moment.

Her father, when he still played a direct role in her life, had strongly disapproved of her habit of taking public transportation at every opportunity. Hyuuga did not ride public. They rode chauffeured cars with tinted windows that used the bus lanes to illegally pass other traffic if needed, which was as close to a bus as any Hyuuga would ever deign to be. But from the day Naruto dashed into the ice arena, running late and completely flustered with a Konoha Metro driver's ID still clipped to his belt, Hinata was hooked. Public Transportation became her second greatest passion.

It wasn't long before she knew all the routes by heart. It took a lot of hours of riding the wrong buses and standing shyly at the wrong stops before she could put together Naruto's schedule, as he was just part-time and alternated two different routes, both of which ran loops as far from the cheery WoF campus and affluent Hyuuga- and Uchicha-infested neighborhoods as the city's boundaries would allow. When Neji discovered where she kept disappearing to, he tried to extract a promise that she would never set foot on a public transport vehicle again in exchange for his cooperation in keeping her bus-driver-stalking habits from her father. "How can you be so foolish, Hinata-sama?" he'd asked, tone exasperated but not as harsh as the accompanying words. "Don't you know how dangerous it is for a young woman to be out alone? Particularly on that side of town…"

But it wasn't on any of her near-daily ventures into the rougher sides of Konoha that she'd been hurt. She had been at home. Home, in the exquisite and extensive gardens, watchful clan members no more than a few minutes' walk away. And she hadn't been alone.

"Hinata-chaaaaan!"
With the hydraulic hiss she had so come to love, the bus doors pushed all the way open; feeling her cheeks (and heart) warm in familiar response to the enormous smile and squinted blue eyes turned to her, Hinata climbed into the bus.

Kakashi cancelled hockey practice. After, of course, everyone had arrived, geared up, and dutifully started warm-ups in expectation of his usual belated arrival.

He also cancelled it just for his mentee team.

"I'm sure you cute kids have lots of fun things to work on!" He told the present members of teams Asuma, Ebisu, and Kurenai, eyes squinted blithely. Sasuke smirked and waited for Naruto to thumb his nose and crow something that included the jibe "…suckers!", but his louder teammate just narrowed his eyes at their mentor suspiciously, saying nothing. The events of the previous day springing to the forefront of all thought, Sasuke, too, trained his oh-so-disinterested gaze on Kakashi, analyzing anew.

Muttering under his breath, Naruto was the first to head off the rink and to the locker rooms. Sakura was next, casting worried glances over her shoulder all the way. Sasuke took an extra minute or two to frown steadily at Kakashi, hands clasped over the tip of his hockey stick and eyes shadowed by the lip of his helmet. Kiba was yelling about lazy bastards and unfairness and such, but no one bothered to listen to him.

Kakashi pulled out his favorite luridly colored paperback. He turned three pages while Sasuke watched him, hoping to make the man at least a little uncomfortable under his accusatory scrutiny.

"Hmmm, Sasuke, did you impress Itachi-kun with your brass knuckles?"

Glowering to cover what was almost a flinch, Number 34 whirled and slunk off the ice.

Naruto was pulling off his shin guards when Sasuke dropped onto the bench beside him. The locker room was strangely quiet with just the two of them, making the absence of Naruto's usual post-practice exuberance particularly significant. Sasuke worked his way out of his equipment in his usual silence, following the meticulous pattern he always did. While the rest of the team was happy to wear guards and pads sopped in enough stale sweat to send a wave of locker-room stench wafting over the spectator stands every time they burst onto the rink, Sasuke took (silent) personal gratification in knowing he never added to the offensive aroma himself.

Naruto called him a pansy (and paid for it with a fat lip or swollen eye every time). Sakura called him OCD.

Sasuke finished packing his equipment bag and kicked his teammate's foot, asking a mute question
with a single raised eyebrow when the other boy turned to retaliate. Naruto turned away again quickly, snapping his locker shut and yanking his duffel over his shoulder. They headed for the door.

"I just wanted something to go normally, 's all," Naruto mumbled finally, yanking the metal door open. Sakura was waiting, unnaturally quick in changing as always. It was part of her "watch me out-hockey any boy" thing, Sasuke figured. She focused large green eyes on Naruto, catching the end of his semi-coherent sentence and furrowing her forehead in concern.

"How was work?" She asked anxiously. "Did you call in sick today?"

Naruto shook his head, scuffing down the hall. "Nah, I made it to work. With," he paused to send Sasuke a dirty look, "an Uchiha shadow. He rode my entire route and wouldn't let me so much as piss in peace 'til he handed me over to Kakashi when we got here."

Sasuke passed Naruto's dirty look on to Sakura. He still hadn't forgiven her for ratting out to Namikaze, nulling a successful escape. Sakura had the grace to flush a little.

"So… were you with your parents all night?" There was a slightly wistful turn to her tone, as though she was just barely resisting going into full out happily-ever-after mode. They were paused at the end of the tunnel leading away from the rink now, postponing the reunion with their WoF mentor as long as possible. They'd already gone over the whole 'Naruto has parents' bomb during warm up—if getting Naruto to answer their persistent inquiries after his state of mind and being with a blank-faced, nearly toneless "my parents found me" in between pass-and-shoot runs could pass for that much. To Sasuke's surprise, this latest question actually pulled Naruto out of his slump a little. He looked up with a strange sort of half-smile pulling at one cheek, too many emotions trying to find a place on the scarred, open-book face to even begin to read.

"Heh, that's kinda cool," he mumbled, softly. "My parents…"

Sakura smiled back at him, encouraging and relieved. Sasuke let the tension coiling behind his shoulder blades loosen a little.

Together, Team Seven stepped out to see what Kakashi had in store for them this time.

vxIxv

"Did you know he drives a bus for a living?" Obito couldn't quite keep his ire from coloring his question.

Kakashi met his gaze head-on. "Not officially, no."

"He's not even fifteen yet! Do you know how many people could take a fall for this? Not to mention he could be kicked out of WoF for working at all—"

"He used to cage fight for a living."

That shut Obito up.

"Sensei doesn't actually know that." Kakashi added warningly, after a moment.
Obito groaned. "Yet. He doesn't know that yet."

Kakashi’s shoulders braced in silent agreement. "The bright side is that, for all intents and purposes, Naruto didn't know he was doing anything illegal. All his paperwork lists him being over eighteen. He didn't have any reason to think otherwise."

"Who the hell would believe that scrawny little twerp is eighteen?"

"People who remember the Nine-tails generally don't need convincing. No one wants to look at a kid with Kyuubi marked all over his face and just see an innocent little kid."

A flash of pain flickered over Obito's face. "So Konoha still remembers, huh?"

"The older generation does. They don't talk about it, but they haven't forgotten."

"Damn. Poor kid."

"It's kept him alive," put in Kakashi, but he didn't disagree.

They fell into silence, listening to the indistinct murmur of voices coming from the mouth of the rink tunnel. It seemed Team Seven was conferring before returning to their leader.

"Nice group of kids you got there, Kashi," teased Obito, sending a sideways look at the taller man. "Lessee, brass knuckles, pink hair, a cussing vocabulary to put any potty-mouth rapper to shame… Kushina'll be shoving a bar of soap in his mouth every other time he opens it—"

Kakashi let out a small, world-weary sigh. Obito laughed. The three teenagers in question disengaged from the sheltering shadows of the tunnel and wandered towards their teacher, standing closer together than usual, but at least Sasuke was the only one glaring. Obito assumed that, being Fugaku's kid, the poor brat must not know how to do anything else.

Kakashi squinted cheerily. "Congratulations, Team Seven! You've just won an invitation to brunch with Konoha's Yellow Flash!"

ToIoT

The food was wondrous, as measured by abundance, aroma, and presentation. Naruto's mouth was watering before he'd had more than a glimpse of the buffet tables set out in one of the hotel's lavish private dining rooms. Beside him, Sakura's tummy rumbled, and he turned just in time to see her cheeks blossom as rosily as her hair, reddening further at his cheeky smile.

"I didn't have time for breakfast this morning!" she hissed at him under her breath, grumbling further as she heard a grunt that passed for a chuckle from the teammate on her other side. Naruto's wicked smile widened further. He was so glad Sakura-chan was here.

The bastard, too. This whole 'you have crazy-protective parents who don't want to let you out of their sight' reveal was more than overwhelming. Maybe he could understand how they felt. If he had lost his kid, and then finally found him again, he'd probably be terrified of making the same mistake again, too. What they didn't get was that he wasn't just a kid. In so many ways. Would they still look at him that way—like he was the rising sun and they'd forgotten that night could end—when they found out who he really was? A bitter thrill of rippling cold shuddered through him at
that thought, and he instinctively moved closer to his teammates. Sasuke knew. Sakura mostly knew. They were still here.

Namikaze knew, whispered a traitorous voice from the darkest corners of his head. He didn't want you.

HE DOES NOW! Naruto shouted back, face no doubt screwing up in response to the mental shout. Sasuke elbowed his arm.

"Dobe," he said quietly, looking pointedly towards the group of people moving into view. The room was designed for privacy; even when the door to the quiet hallway was open, those seated at the tables were around a corner and behind beautifully painted silk screens, safely out of sight.

There they were again, Kushina and Namikaze, his mom and… dad. His mom still looked glowingly beautiful. He was afraid he might have dreamed part of that, but the way her smile sent warmth and welcome rushing through his chest, he knew it was all real. Cautiously, he smiled back, forcing his eyes to include the man at her side. He was grateful that Sasuke was still next to him, scowl as unchanging as ever.

"Well!" proclaimed Kushina, eyes squinting shut with the force of her smile. "Let's eat,- ttebane! Hurry hurry, it's gonna get cold!"

"Oh," gushed Sakura, feeling more than a little giddy at being a part of what she still viewed as a real-life fairy-tale. "She really is your mom, Naruto!"

A deep chuckle sounded, drawing the gaze of the three teens to Namikaze Minato, who threw an arm around Kushina's shoulders. "Lead the way, honey," he offered genially, purposefully keeping his gaze from following their son too closely. Trying not to be too overtly grateful for this, Naruto relaxed just enough for his stomach to take the opportunity to growl loudly. Sakura giggled. Kushina started piling up a plate.

"I'll show you how it's done, kids. This food made be pretty, but it's far too delicious to just look at. And we're expected to eat it all….

Namikaze turned his back and, following his wife's example, started putting what seemed to be a mostly random assortment of foods on his plate. Naruto wondered if the man was paying any attention to what he was doing, and if he was feeling the same confusing mixture of hunger and nerves twisting in his belly. He waited for Sakura to take a plate before helping himself, reassured by Sasuke's stiff silence as the Uchiha fell in behind him. At least he wasn't the only one who didn't act as though Namikaze was what made the stars sparkle.

"Why are we here?" the Uchiha asked, once they all had taken a seat at a beautifully dressed table and Naruto was done snickering over the fact that half of Sasuke's plate was piled with nothing but marinated tomatoes. Namikaze raised a steady gaze to look the boy over.

"Rin's idea," he explained slowly. "My assistant. She thought Naruto might be a little more comfortable if the numbers were more in his favor."

Naruto stared at him, shocked by this blunt honesty. And a little chagrined that this Rin person was so right about him. He felt much safer shut in a room with his parents with his two teammates sitting supportively on either side of him, alert and arrayed just like their starting hockey line up. It was far better than when he'd been stuck in the hotel suite with his parents, their assistants, Kakashi-sensei, and a whole security team guarding what they thought was every exit. Well, the security team was probably still there, but they hadn't proved to be much of an obstacle so far.
Sakura kept looking back and forth between him and his parents. When it became clear that Sasuke didn't have anything else to say, she spoke up, a little hesitantly.

"Ano… Naruto… is your natural hair color red, like Kushina-san's?"

Naruto froze, then stuffed food in his mouth and turned to her with bulging cheeks and a winning, wide-lipped grin that made her recoil with a shrill, "ewww, Naruto!"

Chewing cheerfully, he returned his attention to his plate, though he could feel Sasuke's sharp gaze lazering into him from his other side. Now they'd both be trying to get the answer out of him. There was an awkward pause, which he blithely filled with another oversized bite.

"It's like mine," Namikaze put in suddenly, like he hadn't quite realized he was going to say it until the words were already out. "He looks like me."

"He came out that way," added Kushina, voice soft and smile sweet but eyes sad as she watched her son stuffing his face. "We used to call him Mini-Nato. Minato and Mini-to. They were inseparable."

The lump of food Naruto was working on was suddenly much harder to swallow.

"Hn."

Naruto glanced up, catching Sasuke's too-familiar smirk.

"Figures. Blondie."

Naruto growled, gulping down his mouthful. "What do you mean by that, teme?"

"You know what they say about blonds…"

Sakura giggled. "You're right, Sasuke-kun," she grinned. "I should have guessed that—no amount of hair dye could ever cover your true blondness—"

"Hey!" cut in Namikaze, looking outraged on his son's behalf. "Say that again with a hockey puck between us, and we'll see what you have to say about blonds!"

"Oh, I have," cut in Kushina smoothly. She grinned wickedly. "That particular match ended 5-0 in my favor, I believe…"

Namikaze was blushing furiously. There must be more to this story. Naruto wondered if he really wanted to know.

"I demand a rematch," said Namikaze, and something fast and fierce flickered over his famous features. For a moment he looked exactly like those giant posters of the Yellow Flash that used to hang in the ice arena. But before Naruto was quite sure if he was serious or not, a freakishly familiar goofy grin was spreading across the blond's face. "How 'bout tonight? Unless you're chicken…"

"Chicken? You better not be talking to me, Mina-kun."

Namikaze grinned back at his wife, then turned those sharp blue eyes on Team Seven. "I'm talking to all of you. B Rink, tonight, the blonds against the not-quite-so-golden."

"You're the only blond, Dad," mumbled Naruto, not even realizing what he'd said until he looked up and noticed that Namikaze, Kushina, and Sakura were all frozen, stricken and staring. Kushina
turned wide, wide eyes on her son, a tentative smile on her slightly trembling lips. Had he really meant to say Dad?

"Tonight," repeated Namikaze, a small, fully genuine smile just lifting the corners of his lips. "It's the underneath that counts. You and me, Naruto, we'll show them what undefeatable means."

The warmth curling in Naruto's gut momentarily muffled the fear that shivered there. He shot a sideways glance at Sasuke, saw the challenge already setting across the Uchiha's haughty expression. A peek at his other side revealed Sakura's encouraging smile.

"Deal," agreed Naruto.

ITITI
Hinata re-read the text with quivering fingers and a roll of nausea that wasn't even caused by her... condition. Naruto was bringing his parents home? To this tiny, dingy apartment? And they would be here in twenty minutes? And she would be here too?

Not that it wasn't clean. If anything, it was obsessively so. Poor Naruto. He'd been so weirded out by her incessant wiping of surfaces and re-organizing of all available items. She'd wanted to stop, really, she had—she felt bad enough about intruding on Naruto's home—but she just couldn't help it. For some reason, she couldn't catch a wink of sleep until she'd cleaned the whole place top-to-bottom—again. It was yet another side of her personality she'd never imagined existed until recent weeks.

Tea, Hinata decided, after opening and closing all the cupboard doors (not difficult; there were only three cupboards) and staring at their hidden contents. She had enough onigiri to go around, too, so long as Naruto only ate enough for three people instead of his usual six-or-seven massive helpings. It was something of a game she had going: how much food could she make and still not have any leftovers the next day? So far, the only dishes she had managed to make more of than Naruto would blissfully eat in one gluttonous sitting were those featuring vegetables. Particularly of the green, leafy, highly-nutritious variety.

They would have enough un-chipped teacups if she only served and didn't partake herself, which suited Hinata perfectly. In her current state of nervousness, she'd take one sip of tea and end up helplessly hiccupping for the rest of the visit anyway. Who could imagine she would be serving tea to Konoha's Yellow Flash? Could she really face such a thing? Just approaching him in the hospital the night before had been almost unbearably nerve-wracking. And what if he could tell that she was... and he would be angry at her for completely messing up his son's life... how could she explain why she was living with Naruto anyway? But—this was Minato-sama. She would do everything she could for Minato-sama!

Hinata was five years old and quietly crying her eyes out after mortifying herself, failing her father, and shaming her family when she first crossed paths with Namikaze Minato. It was the ribbon-cutting celebration for the opening of a brand new, grander-than-ever Hyuuga hotel right in the heart of the city, on land the Hyuuga had been trying to wrest from the Uchiha for decades. Everything about the event was grand: right down to the notion that the adorable kindergarten-attending heiress would make the perfect press tool when she posed with her father and cut the ribbon. What no one was expecting was that the tiny girl would begin trembling uncontrollably from fear and anxiety before losing control and, when her nearly-inaudible pleas to be excused were brusquely ignored as she was pushed into place, posed with her shaking fingers gripping a giant pair of scissors, and ordered through clenched teeth to "lift her chin and smile" by her father, wet her pants.

Needless to say, it was terrible day for Hinata. A horrible, awful, miserable day that took a giant step towards absolutely catastrophic when she felt the sudden rush of hot liquid soaking into her tights before dribbling to the pavement beneath her feet. A wash of absolute anguish and complete mortification drenched her every thought and nerve just as quickly, and her father stiffened dramatically behind her as all attending froze in sudden shock and horror. And then someone started laughing.

It was most likely one of the reporters, Hinata decided in later reviews of the wretched memory, as
no one in the Hyuuga party would come close to daring such a rude loss of composure before Hiashi himself. As it was, thin, relentless fingers closed around her upper arms, and she was dragged from her father's side by one of his assistants and hustled out of sight still shaking, sobbing, and dripping. All she wanted was her mother, and that made everything even worse. She made no move to defend or assist as whoever was handling her started stripping off her ruined clothes, spewing a constant spitting stream of harshly upbraiding words she heard but didn't begin to understand. Her misery was complete; there was scarcely room for anything else in her existence at that moment. Until HE appeared.

First he was just a voice, a voice speaking more words she didn't try to understand. But she stilled and listened all the same; the tone was warm and soft and deep and so very reassuring. The harsh fingers and stressed-out spitting of the other grown-up disappeared, and the voice was still there, and then there was a steady hand on her flushed head, smoothing her hair while another hand wiped tears and snot from her face with a soft and shiny handkerchief, and at last she peaked teary eyes from behind rubbing fists to focus on the two most beautiful eyes she had ever seen.

"Hi," said the owner of the mesmerizing eyes. "Starting to feel better?"

"Your eyes are pretty," whispered Hinata, too stunned to stutter.

"Thank you." The man stood, shrugging out of his suit jacket. "Why don't you take this and put it on instead of your wet clothes? The ladies' room is right over that way. I can stand guard so no one will come in until you're done."

Hinata's hands were closing reflexively over the offered jacket before she realized what was happening. It was just like her father's nicest suit coat. The tiny girl immediately tried to give it back.

"I might make it d-d-dirty-"

"That's fine. That's what clothes are for, right?"

Hinata blinked in surprise at this statement, then stared at this strange man in astonishment, silent in her perusal. The thought crossed her mind that his hair reminded her of a bright new dandelion that had just opened up in the morning sun; she loved dandelions. Not knowing what else to do, she hugged the jacket to her and stepped obediently into the washroom to get cleaned up, feeling much steadier than she had just moments before. Though only five years old and very timid, she was a very self-sufficient little girl; with no one there to watch and make her self-conscious, it was no trouble for her to find a dry bit of counter to safely place the coat on, then to undress and clamber up next to one of the sinks and wash herself thoroughly with soap and water and dry with paper towels. Just getting clean made her feel much better, though the tears came again when she looked at her ruined dress. But she couldn't disappoint the man with the dandelion hair and blue-sky eyes who had been so kind to her, so she shrugged awkwardly into the very large jacket, pulled the flaps around her like a yukata, and peeped timidly round the heavy washroom door, where she was spotted immediately and greeted with a huge, infectious smile.

"How about that! You made even my old coat look like an elegant kimono! Just needs one more thing-" and he took off his pale purple tie and wrapped it expertly round her waist as a colorful sash, tucking in the ends and leaning back in his kneeling position to check his work before raising warm eyes to hers. "You look beautiful." He chuckled when she raised her hands to cover her blushing cheeks and the long, long sleeves of the suit coat flapped down in front of them, and was carefully rolling them up so her fingertips could peek through when her father appeared. Hinata immediately started trembling again and very nearly ducked behind the kind stranger to hide.
"Hina—Prime Minister!" exclaimed her father, and took nearly an entire second to stare in surprise before bowing in respect.

Setting up for serving tea to the former Prime Minister of Hi no Kuni in Naruto's little apartment ten years later, Hinata remembered suit coats and sad eyes and dandelion hair, fighting to find a balanced composure for the confrontation that was sure to come between her, the boy she loved, and the man she admired most.

ITITI

"So you gotta be nice to Hinata," ordered Naruto sternly, leading the way up the unadorned stairwell to his apartment floor. "She bursts into tears really easy and I'm never inviting you over again if you make her cry."

Kushina and Minato exchanged yet another look behind his back, but nodded quickly in agreement when he turned suspicious eyes over his shoulder to make sure they understood this latest statement. They were determined not to do, say, or even obviously think anything that might disrupt the current flow of events. Having agreed to respect Naruto's self-sufficient independence (at least for now) and hope for him to welcome them into his strange new life at his own pace, they were overjoyed when he offered to take them home with him after their brunch at the hotel. He didn't seem particularly thrilled with the idea, and had spent most of the time since grudgingly proposing it issuing directives about how they couldn't be seen in his neighborhood, couldn't take a "flashy" car to get to this neighborhood, and now about how they had to be nice to Hinata—who was another WoF kid and, apparently, lived with Naruto. As parents, even estranged ones, they really had no idea what to think. Kakashi had explained that Naruto had lived alone as long as he had known him; he'd even been to the teen's apartment a few times, and explained that aside from being as messy as might be expected of a kid living alone, it had seemed livable enough. If he knew of this Hinata character's presence, he'd had some motive not to mention it. Though purposefully misleading his old sensei was not something Kakashi was prone to doing. Obito, on the other hand...

"Here we are," announced Naruto, pausing at the first door on the fourth floor corridor and fiddling with the keys he produced from a hidden jacket pocket. He looked suddenly quite nervous, turning big anxious eyes to his parents. "Uhhh... it's not much, but... It's my home, dattebayo! Doesn't look fancy or anything but it's perfect for me, 'n now Hinata... So please...uh...don't diss it or get disgusted or something... 'cause I know you guys are rich an' all..." he trailed off uncertainly.

"We're just happy to be here with you, Naruto," said Kushina, after a moment. She smiled one of those bursting smiles that generally made the receiver feel all warm and fuzzy inside while losing the ability to think clearly. Minato watched, fascinated, as Naruto proved to be just as susceptible to its charms as he always was, turning immediately to unlock the door with a bashful blush coloring his cheeks. His parents waited with bated breath as it slowly swung open to reveal the most intimate glimpse of their son's life they had chanced yet.

"I'm home," Naruto call softly, toeing off his shoes as he held the door open for his parents to come in after him. Minato caught the subtle hints of contrasting fear and anticipation in that simple phrase, and watched his son's face light up with relief and pleasure when a soft reply came floating back from the doorway at the end of the little entry-way corridor.

"Welcome home, Naruto-kun!"

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Obito watched Kakashi watching Rin and bit his cheek to keep from shortling. Rin, of course, was
paying neither of them the slightest bit of attention, rather working away diligently at getting a rink reserved for Sensei's proposed hockey game that evening. It was a wonder she could be so completely oblivious to so luminous and obvious a pair of bambi eyes—oh, oh the irony! Obito didn't bother to smother the grin spreading across his face. But then Kakashi's gaze flickered ever so briefly to Obito and he turned away from Rin immediately, looking chagrined and guilty—at least that's how he looked to Obito's practiced eye. Now it was a sigh rather than gleeful laughter Obito was suppressing. Seriously, the number of issues that man managed to hide behind that mask of his. If he could yank 'em out and stack 'em up, he'd have a tower that would break all sorts of records. Indubitably.

Time to take action.

"Did I tell you guys about my super smart, super amazing, super gorgeous girlfriend yet?"

Even Rin looked up from tapping away at her tiny keypad at that bold and gleeful announcement. "Kushina-san did mention something about an awful lot of correspondence between you and Kazahana-hime—is there something more I should be teasing you about?" Obito momentarily entertained second thoughts about his grand announcement when treated to the wicked gleam in her sweet brown eyes, but ah well—too late now!

"Koyuki-chan never stood a chance against my charms," he explained, allowing a huge grin to eat up half of his face and squint up his eye in delight. When he could see again, he checked how this news was being received.

Rin looked like she was just on the verge of actually squealing out of some strange combination of glee and excitement. Well that was good. Obito chanced a sideways look at Kakashi to gauge their other teammate's reaction.

Kakashi was looking right back at him, and didn't appear to have even tried to conceal the shock widening his usual lazy stare.

"It's about time! Oh, Obito! To think she would fall for you. I'm so happy for you!"

Obito was torn between annoyance and pleasure over the different bits of Rin's congratulatory statement. "Why wouldn't she—oh, whatever. Thanks, Rin!"

They turned expectantly to Kakashi.

"Well?"

"You don't look like you usually do when you're joking."

"Yeesh, always the bastard! Maybe that's 'cause I'm not joking."

Kakashi waited.

"No, seriously. I'm dating Kazahana Koyuki. AKA Fujikaze Yukie? You know, the famous actress? …ring a bell?"

Rin was also looking at Kakashi strangely. When he continued to stare rather blankly at the Uchiha, she ventured to inquire after his health.

"I'm fine, Rin," he assured her quickly. But, to Obito: "You're dating someone." The grey gaze flickered automatically to Rin and back again. "Someone who is not Rin."
Rin slapped a palm to her forehead. "Honestly! Of course he's not dating me! What would give you an idea like that?"

Kakashi muttered something incoherent. Obito and Rin exchanged a look.

"Did he accuse us of using pet names?" Obito ventured, and Rin giggled.

"What do you mean, Honeybunch?"

"I swear that's what he was saying, Pumpkin, but between the mask and the mumbling—"

"Cut it out, you two."

"Sure thing, Poppykins!" Rin promised sweetly.

"Anything for you, Angelpie," Obito pledged.

They swallowed their snickers as Kakashi headed decidedly towards the door.

"Ah, just like the good old days," Obito sighed, between chuckles. "Hang on, Scarecrow, there's something I've been meaning to ask you—since we're on the subject of girlfriends and all—"

Kakashi sent a lazily baleful glance over his shoulder, but paused with his hand on the door handle. He was surprised to see Obito's faced cast into sudden sobriety.

"What's the story with Sensei's son and Hyuuga Hinata?"

"Nii-san."

Itachi turned abruptly from the array of computer screens set up across his massive desk, long, slim fingers retreating from the keypads: Sasuke would have his complete attention.

"Otouto. You should be completing schoolwork at this hour."

Not that he hadn't known for a good half-hour that Sasuke was doing nothing of the sort. Had the teen's GPS trail not shown a direct course to this very office, Sasuke would already be in considerable trouble. As it was, Itachi was mostly worried that this was still the case: that Sasuke was in trouble, had finally concluded that he'd better come clean about it, and Itachi's primary concern would be discovering how much of the story Sasuke decided to leave out this time.

Sasuke was scowling at him. "You know damn well that I'm ahead of schedule in all of my classes."

"Nothing less is acceptable."

As soon as the words left his mouth, Itachi experienced the slightest sliver of remorse for them: that sounded exactly like Fugaku. Softening somewhat, he set about re-routing the direction and tone of the conversation.

"What brings you here, Sasuke?"

The younger of the two shifted uncertainly. He was still on the threshold of the room; one of the few brave enough to go that far, really. Reaching out with one foot, Itachi snagged the leg of one of his visitor chairs, scraping it closer to his desk in invitation; Sasuke's shoulders lowered slightly,
and he came all the way into the room, shutting the door softly behind him.

Once he was seated, however, all progress ground to a halt. Itachi released a soundless sigh as he watched his baby brother brood away at the carpet.

"Might this, perhaps, have something to do with Naruto being in the hospital last night?"

Sasuke frowned. "He's out now."

"I would hypothesize that to be a good thing."

"Yeah, but…"

Itachi waited. His patience was rewarded.

"They say he's their son. The Naruto that went missing all those years ago. The Yellow Flash's son."

Itachi sat back, surprised in spite of himself. "You refer to Namikaze Minato?"

Sasuke nodded.

"He has claimed Naruto—our Naruto—as the child he lost twelve years ago?"

Another nod. Itachi noted, with a distant corner of his overly observant mind, that his foolish otouto looked quite miserable. The majority of his thought pathways were humming with the possible significance of this new puzzle piece, quickly recalling and categorizing all possibly correlating data into workable schemata. Outwardly, he turned calm eyes to his little brother.

"And what part of this development is most concerning to you, Otouto?"

Ah yes, he had hit the nail on the head. This wasn't about the general shock such a revelation would doubtless instigate. No, there was some particular detail his brother was troubling over.

Sasuke seemed to struggle to know what to say. "When—when Naruto saw Namikaze for the first time—he wasn't happy."

Itachi sat up straighter. "What was he, Sasuke?"

Wide, dark eyes met his.

"Scared," said Sasuke.

Hyuuga Hinata. Her son was sharing an apartment with *Hyuuga Hinata*.


How had they missed that little detail? How had *anyone* missed it? The Hyuuga, like all prominent and powerful people, were hunted and hounded by the press just as Minato always had been. It was another public spotlight nightmare just waiting to happen—scratch that. One that should have
already happened.

Though she would earnestly thank any and all attendant kami that it had not.

Still, she could just see the headlines in her mind's eye: "Shame of the Hyuuga: Heiress Succumbs to Street Rat's Charms" or, perhaps: "Hyuuga Princess Abducted: Forced to Live in Slums—"

It was with some effort that she apprehended her open staring and turned her eyes away from the perfectly proper, spectacularly out of place traditional tea ceremony she was witnessing.

Minato was faring far better. Ever the diplomat, he looked perfectly at ease settled at Naruto's kotatsu, complimenting Hinata on how beautifully she was growing up.

Apparently, they knew each other.

Naruto, on the other hand, looked to be even more uncomfortable and fidgety than she. Kushina felt her lips twitch towards a smile at that. Poor baby. He'd never been any good at behaving in any situation that so much as hinted at formality—

"How long have you been staying with Naruto, Hinata-kun?" Kushina perked up immediately at Minato's first direct question, watching both teens to see what answers they might give—both in words and entirely unwittingly through non-spoken reactions.

"A-about two months," Hinata stuttered, blushing profusely and directing her gaze immediately to her fiddling fingers. Naruto looked up sharply, one hand reaching automatically for Hinata and a hint of challenge in the way he watched Minato. "I—I— I'm terribly sorry—I mean, I humbly apologize—for—for intruding so intimately on the life of your son—" the girl's voice had dwindled to barely a whisper, but she seemed absolutely determined to continue, and with a small amount of horror Kushina saw that she was about to prostrate herself in a bow. Fortunately, Minato intervened.

"Whatever are you apologizing for! Please, don't humble yourself so—we are the ones who owe gratitude here!" He paused to take in Naruto's wide-eyed gaze, and to allow Hinata time to find the courage to raise her own eyes. "Allow us to give you our thanks instead—I would have to be blind not to see how much of our son's happiness must be credited to you."

There was an awkward silence as Hinata far outdid any right Kushina had ever had to the nickname 'tomato', and Naruto's mouth opened and closed like a landed fish. Kushina figured that must be how she looked when the automatic reaction to speak happened before she had any idea what to say.

"So—Naruto—" Minato was forging ahead, bless him! "What do you usually do at this time of day?"

Naruto made a face. "Schoolwork."

"You take home study courses through WoF?"

Naruto nodded warily.

"I see… so that's the schedule. Hockey practice all morning, schoolwork in the afternoon, games or individual practice in the evening… pretty much how it was when your mother and I went through, too."

Hinata was still staring down at her fingers; to Kushina, she looked like she had more to say. But
Naruto was all too happy about the subject change.

"Where do you go before hockey practice?"

Oops, one question too many. Naruto was pushing away from the table. "Doesn't matter."

"Don't be rude, Naruto!" Kushina interjected sharply, joining the conversation for the first time. Naruto stuck his bottom lip out, more than ready to retort.

"Na-Naruto-kun," Hinata cut in quietly, "It is the duty of parents to inquire after their ch-children—please, don't be upset—"

"Work," Naruto muttered grudgingly, after a pause. "I go to work first thing. I guess that Obito guy will tell you about it anyway."

Kushina was stuck somewhere between pride and that never-ending anguish that haunted everything having to do with her son. He was fourteen years old. He shouldn't be working to support himself. On the other hand, she knew exactly how unusual the life he had created was in comparison to where he had come from. In all the years she had spent working with street kids, she had very, very rarely come across this sort of individual success. Her eyes teared up; she couldn't help it.

"Come here, you," she said softly, reaching warm arms around her boy. He stared at her in surprise. "Oh Naruto. Don't you know that you're amazing?"

Minato was smiling too. "We're proud of you, son. Look at this place. You're doing just fine."

It was true; the apartment was small, run-down, and the furnishings nothing to boast over. But it was clean, warm, even inviting; there were at least a dozen flourishing plants, set wherever there was space, there was a fridge and a stove and, from what she could see through the cracked open door, a perfectly functional washroom. It was at least as nice as the tiny studio she had lived in through college. And the postage-stamp apartment she and Minato first shared wouldn't be much of a step up in luxury. In the end, it was a far cry from the deprived conditions she had feared; plus, the onigiri were really good.

"Did you make these?" she directed the question to Hinata, if only because she couldn't imagine when Naruto would even have time to cook.

"H-hai," Hinata whispered, staring at her lap again. Naruto disentangled himself from his mother's embrace, ear-splitting grin back in place.

"Aren't they amazing? Hinata's a brilliant cook! She would make an amazing wife!"

Kushina almost choked on her bite of onigiri, Hinata looked like she was about to faint, and Minato burst into a sudden fit of coughing that sounded suspiciously like uncontrollable giggles.

Naruto looked around in confusion. "What?"

They were late to the rink. When Kushina peaked into the bedroom—which, she was somewhat
relieved—if equally confused—to see held only one single-size bed—Naruto was discovered to be slumped over his desk, snoring slightly and drooling all over the math problems he was supposed to be completing. Minato moved him to the bed, holding on a little longer than necessary before tenderly tucking in the covers. He looked even younger when he was asleep.

Kushina insisted on washing the tea things while Hinata dried and returned everything to their proper places.

"You may ask whatever you w-w-wish, Kushina-sama," Hinata whispered after a few attempts at insignificant conversation. "You m-must have many ques-questions."

"Hmmm… okay!" Kushina smiled, relieved at this opening for bluntness. "Do you like living with Naruto, Hinata-chan?"

Her small companion glanced up, surprised. "Y-yes! I—I have never been so happy." It was a confession.

"Does your family know where you are?"

Hinata averted her eyes, again. Someone needed to teach that girl to look others in the eye. "N-not exactly. B-but they d-do not concern themselves w-with m-me anymore."

Kushina stared in shock. "You mean—you were disowned?"

Hinata barely managed a nod through the sense of shame that overwhelmed her. Surely they would ask her to stop associating with their son after learning—

"Hiashi, you giant prick," Kushina hissed under her breath, then, loudly to Hinata: "Well good for you! Nothing more suffocating than a whole clan of Hyuuga basta—I mean, uh, I'm sorry, I shouldn't say that, but—"

"Narut-t-to-kun saved me," continued Hinata, uncertain what to make of Kushina's unexpected reaction but determined to carry through with her plan to be completely open and honest with Naruto's parents. "I—wh-when I left, I d-didn't know where I could go—Naruto-kun asked m-me to st-stay with him—" she jumped as a warm arm wrapped around her.

"And he's a lucky little twerp, isn't he?" questioned Kushina with much fondness. "Eating your delicious cooking, hopefully learning some sort of manners—"

Hinata blushed and blinked back the tears that welled up at the long-lost feel of caring maternal contact. Not really conscious of what she was doing, she nestled further into Kushina's hold, half-hiding her face in a sweet-smelling sleeve. If Kushina was surprised, she kept it to herself, and let the child cling to her. She knew pain and loneliness when she saw it. After some minutes, Hinata seemed to remember herself and drew away somewhat, shrinking into herself at the same time.

"Kushina-sama," came the timid little voice, still with that strange note of resigned resolve. "There is something I need to tell you—and M-m-minato-sama t-too—"

"Go ahead, Hinata-kun," offered a much deeper voice. Hinata squeaked in fright and leaped into the far corner of the kitchen, thoroughly startled by his presence. He rubbed the back of his head, smiling sheepishly.

"Eheh… sorry! I thought you knew I was here."

Poor Hinata blushed even more profoundly, trembling and apologizing profusely. The level of awkwardness in the tiny room was rising exponentially.
"Okay!" announced Kushina forcefully. "Enough of this. We're going to all sit down, calm down, and say whatever needs to be said without further ado. Mmmmkay?"

"Say what?" came a new voice, and they all turned to find Naruto standing in the open bedroom doorway, scrubbing a still-tired face with one hand. In the pause that followed, he looked slowly from his parents, who were looking somewhere between anxious and expectant, to Hinata, who was already kneeling obediently at the kotatsu, trembling hands fisted in her lap, his expression growing increasingly suspicious.

"Are you guys being nice? 'Cause I told you to be nice, remember?"

"Hinata-kun just said there was something she would like to tell us," Minato hastened to explain. Naruto stared at them all a little longer, then ambled over to Hinata. "So what'd you wanna tell 'em about, Hina-chan? About the baby?"

Minato sped across the ice, scraping comfortingly around tight corners and gliding easily over the stretches in between. He'd always enjoyed the brief minutes of warm-up before a game: the release of pent-up energy as he circled the rink, soaking in the buzzing anticipation of the crowd; the adrenaline building steadily, ready to course through his veins as he got into the game; the clearing of every thought, every emotion, until there was nothing but ice and speed and that sweet-spinning puck slamming the goal into the baseboards.

Yes, fate was definitely laughing at him today.

He had never anticipated a match as highly as he anticipated this one: the first game he would ever play with his son, one he dreamed of from those first fluttering kicks he felt with his cheek pressed against Kushina's slowly swelling belly, through the darkest moments of all those despairing years, to burst back into glorious flame when he heard Naruto agree to his offer and call him by name just a few hours earlier—

And now all he could think about was that he was going to be a grandfather. A \textbf{grandfather}. He could just hear whatever kami favored irony laughing at him.

\textbf{Congratulations, Minato! Your wish has been granted; your miracle realized! You're a father again!} The father of a fourteen-year-old father.

Someone slashed (\textit{I}) him across both shins; he whipped his head around to see Kushina's eyes flash warningly at him as she whizzed by.

Right. Keep my head in the game.

\textit{But Naruto…!}

And little Hinata, her career was ruined—she had been a figure skater for WoF—and now she was disowned—yes, Naruto's life was hard and lacking guidance, but a mistake of this magnitude? Kushina had warned him that this sort of thing happened all the time—but to \textit{his} son—his young, young son—
Who was, at this moment, skating as far away from him as was possible while staying within the confines of the rink.

"I wonder if you can still live up to the legends, Namikaze-san," said a bold, cold voice, and Minato turned to see Uchiha Sasuke staring him down smugly.

Minato almost laughed. What a little punk. "Guess we'll just have to see, eh, Uchiha-chan?"

Angry red tinting his cheeks at the slight to his name, Sasuke shot towards the nearest goal and smacked a loose puck into it with a little more violence than strictly necessary.

A brief whistle blast sounded. "Yo…. let's say we get this party started!" Kakashi was drifting towards center ice, a whistle dangling from one hand and a puck in the other. Minato noted Kushina helping Obito clear the extra pucks off the ice as the others drifted to the face-off spot.

"So… Team Seven…" Kakashi looked over Sasuke, Sakura, and Naruto, each of whom were looking a little flushed—if for difference reasons. Sasuke was still offended, Sakura was somewhere between star-struck and her usual exhilarating descent into game-rage, and Naruto… Kakashi really had no idea what Naruto was thinking. Which was quite disturbing in and of itself.

"…Consider this today's training, since you sluffed practice this morning. Yes, Naruto, I know I told you to sluff, but missed training is missed training!" He inserted a happy eye smile before turning abruptly serious. "You're playing with the Bloody Habanero and the Yellow Flash. If you don't learn something deeply significant from this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, you're all idiots. I fully expect to see your absolute best out there."

"Hey, this is supposed to be about fun, Kakashi-kun," interrupted Minato.

"In that case, Sensei, try to leave these two cute brats—" he indicated Sasuke and Sakura by pointing his whistle at them—"in one piece. Mostly."

"Hey, hey! What about me?" demanded Naruto.

"You're on Sensei's team, Naruto," Kakashi explained patiently. "Nothing will happen to you. And now—" he paused as everyone fell into formation, Naruto and Minato, or Team Blond, on one side; Sasuke, Sakura, and Kushina, subtly dubbed Team Brain, ranged against them on the other. Naruto and Sasuke stepped into the circle for the face-off, sticks ready to claim the puck. "We will play three periods of six minutes each. Two minutes between periods. Flying goalie. Ready?"

"You're going down, Sasuke-teme," Naruto vowed, a feral grin splitting his features.

The answering smirk was no less menacing. "Dream on, Usuratonkachi."

Kakashi brought the whistle to his lips, extended the puck over the center, and let out a shrill blast the moment he let it slip from his fingers.

Sasuke won the initial face-off, slipping the puck immediately to Sakura, who slipped it firmly against the heel of her stick and barreled down the ice with all the force of a charging bull—shocking both Minato and Kushina, who were entirely unprepared for such head-on force from a figure so slight and a personality so, well, giggly. Naruto, however, was not surprised in the least.
"Sorry, Sakura-chan!" He sang out blithely, snagging the puck before it could get halfway to his goal and reversing its path across the ice. Kushina was on him almost immediately, tag-teaming with Sasuke—and then Minato had somehow slipped into place just as Sasuke left a split-second opening, and Naruto shot it through to his father's waiting stick, where Minato swerved effortlessly around Sakura and slid across the ice in less time than should be humanly possible before lifting the puck onto the toe of his stick and lobbing it almost lazily into the undefended goal.

"YEAAAAHH!" roared Naruto, and the game was off.

Team Blond scored six points in the first five minutes, though with less ease than they had taken that first point. It took less than two minutes of play for Sasuke and Sakura to figure out that Kushina was the only one with even a chance of fending off Minato once he took off on their side of the ice; their strategy changed accordingly. By the last minute of the first period, Sakura and Sasuke were successfully neutralizing Naruto while moving the puck down the ice as Kushina fended off Minato, until Sasuke got an opening to send the puck sizzling over to Sakura, who ducked around Naruto just in time to slap it into Team Blond's goal. Kushina cheered in her husband's face. Forty seconds later, they were set up to take a shot at the goal again when the buzzer sounded, ending the first period with a deeply scowling Sasuke.

Obito passed out water bottles while the teams talked strategy for the next period; something that hadn't really happened before the first. Sasuke was out for vengeance, Sakura was still smarting from losing the puck in those first seconds, and Kushina was simply cackling with the thrill of real competition, and kept referring to Minato (quite fondly) as "That Flake".

Minato was giving Naruto tips on getting past Kushina and analyzing Sasuke and Sakura's attacks; Naruto was flushed with the thrill of their so-far victory and kept thumbing his nose at Sasuke any time he could catch the other boy's eye.

They had a fair audience: Rin and Obito, of course; along with Itachi, who had followed Sasuke to the rink and was watching everything with a look that was creepy in both intensity and intelligence; and Hinata, who decided against being left home alone again, though the ride to the rink was just as awkward as she had dreaded it to be.

It wasn't far into the second period that plays started to get dirty, and Kakashi's whistle got busy.

"Hooking! (2) Naruto, 20 seconds!"

"Checking! Sasuke, into the box!"

"Cross-checking! Control yourself, Uchiha, you just got out of there!"

"Slashing—that's right, Haruno, I saw that. Forget the puppy eyes."

"Slashing—Naruto, do you intend to spend anytime on the ice?"

"Kushina-san! Not you too! Hooking! Into the box!"

By the time the Period 2 ended, the score was 9-4 in Team Blond's favor, though Minato spent half of that time as a one-man team while Naruto sulked in the box. Kakashi called only the most blatant penalties; he'd run out of players in seconds if he didn't use discretion. The game was quickly dissolving into all-out lawless street hockey—home base for Team Seven, incidentally. It was with no small amount of relief that Kakashi listened to the electronic buzzer sounding an end to Period 2.

Things were quieter for this break; Kakashi took the opportunity to approach Minato.
"You're going too easy on them, Sensei. They won't believe a word of my Yellow Flash stories after this."

Minato's eyes flicked towards Naruto.

"If that's what you're worried about, don't," Kakashi added dryly. "There's nothing that kid respects more than the flashiest tricks you can possibly pull. He's all about showing off."

And so the third period began.

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"So that's why they call him the Yellow Flash," Naruto murmured, still looking a little shell-shocked.

Sakura was breathing too hard to answer, but the way her eyes still seemed on the verge of popping right out her head signified her agreement.

Even Sasuke looked a little dazed, but he motioned towards the scoreboard.

"You're not taking responsibility for that, dobe," he warned. The score was 39 to 5.

Naruto shook his head earnestly. "No worries, Bastard," he mumbled, "No one would believe me…"

Sakura found her voice at last. "Your mom's nothing to sneeze at, either."

"And that's how real hockey is played," announced Kakashi a little too gleefully, popping up behind the three stunned teenagers as if he'd been there all along. "Hit the showers, all three of you. Frankly, you stink."

Naruto was dressed and toweling off his hair when Minato emerged from the shower room. Sasuke was already gone, having sloped off after Itachi looking almost as exhausted as Naruto felt. Naruto was mulling over his reflection, thinking that it was time for a new dose of hair dye, when his father interrupted his musings.

"Naruto. I know you won't like this, but… Kushina and I simply aren't willing to send you home alone. Or Hinata, for that matter…"

Naruto let out a long-suffering sigh. "I knew it..." But when he pushed the towel back to show his face, Minato was graced with a whimsical grin, and his heart leapt. "So…Dad… Your place or mine?"
(1) 'Slashing' is a hockey term for hitting someone with a hockey stick. It has nothing to do with any sort of cut or laceration.

(2) 'Hooking' – using your stick to snag or block another player

'Checking' (officially, 'checking from behind') – running into another player from behind when they don't know you're there

'Cross-checking' – checking with both hands on the stick
Something was bothering Uchiha Itachi. Being a person who felt that the best reaction to every situation (from stepping over scattered bits of smashed alarm clock to wake his violently anti-morning brother to staring down the slim barrel of his handgun at the somewhat less violent criminals he hunted) was apathetic, unruffled dignity, admitting—if only to himself—to being bothered was alarmingly significant.

Generally speaking, he would have already uncovered everything there was to know about the situation, solved all the puzzles, doled out retribution, and continued on in his quiet, unbothered way. Not counting all of the deep inner angsting and self-loathing and blaming, but that came of being Uchiha, and he was therefore helpless to stop it. Like the fangirls that chased him for it.

But these were answers he was almost positive he did not want to find. His family was functioning—not all that well, but Sasuke spoke to him on most days, and not just to declare hatred or demand answers; Mother was cooking again. Things were a bit frosty with the rest of the clan, but to put things bluntly, it made dealing with them slightly more bearable. Fugaku… Fugaku would be free again, soon, and everyone was so hopeful. He’d seen the light in Sasuke’s eyes. The carefully categorized collections of perfect grade reports and scholarship awards and hockey trophies, organized and re-organized in whatever way his baby brother imagined would catch their father's attention best.

He should be smart. He should let their new life continue to grow, not dig everything up again looking for the grisly evidence he didn't want to find. The evidence he would need to answer the questions following one Namikaze Naruto as closely and relentlessly as the kid's own shadow.

Even more upsetting was this: Itachi trusted Naruto. Oh, the kid fought and lied and blustered on in a way to provide ever new and expanding definitions for the word "fool" in Itachi's personal lexicon and got involved in all the wrong ways with all the wrong families and had a hand in far too many illegal activities that he wasn’t all that great at keeping secret and all too often dragged Itachi’s own foolish brother into these same illegal activities—but Naruto loved Sasuke, more than he loved ramen or hockey or life, and Itachi trusted him because Itachi loved Sasuke, too.

He had wondered, of course. He hadn't been blind to the shade of the eyes or the scars on the cheeks of the kid he had first hunted, then thrown everything on the line to protect. He connected the name—as if there could be two Naturos!—and Kyuubi's rough signature to the little lost prince who disappeared the day of the Nine-Tail's last massacre. And he felt Madara's putrid stench in all of it. Only two facts held him back: the silent-but-involved Hatake Kakashi, and Naruto's own defiant declaration of denial: "Namikaze's kid? I got nothing to do with Namikaze. But I'll fight for that kid—that little lost baby—in his memory, maybe."

The little liar. Now Itachi knew. He knew what Fugaku was up to the day Naruto disappeared. He knew who the illustrious Uchiha clan really answered to. And he could make a very good guess at where all the dots connected.

Sasuke would hate it. And Itachi. His brother was going to hate him again.

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"I'm not going to quit my job," said Naruto, and he said it with conviction and finality.

And so much for starting off with solving one of the 'easy' problems, Minato thought despairingly,
repressing the groan he wanted to respond with. "Naruto, I'm sorry, but I don't think it's actually much of a choice," he explained reasonably. "You're too young to hold a Commercial License. You can't keep your job. It's not legal."

His son was, of course, completely unphased by this logic. "Never stopped me before."

"Look, Son—" Minato tried not to react to the way Naruto flinched—"Naruto—you don't have to worry about money anymore. I can set up your own bank account if you want, you can use it in whatever way makes you happy. Keep most of your independence. Just so long as you're, well, legal. And safe. Please."

"I don't see a problem with me driving a bus," returned Naruto, unmoved. "It's completely legal. I got the license and everything. It's a perfectly good job."

By all that is good, swore Minato to himself, I have been attempting to parent a teenager for—he glanced at his watch—fifty-eight and a quarter hours, and I already want to hand in my resignation and let someone more qualified do what I'm miserably failing at. And I'm supposed to be a genius. "There's nothing wrong with driving a bus once you're old enough," he began again, treading carefully. "It's a very good job, and you've supported yourself very well with it. But now you don't need to."

"Admit it, you're ashamed."

"Of you? Never—never—" Minato had to stop himself, embarrassed by the panic that crept into his voice. For a moment the only sound was the hum of the ventilation system and the agitated tapping of the teenager's foot against the carpeted floor. Like Kushina, Naruto was never still.

Naruto mumbled something. Minato hoped he'd heard it wrong. "What was that?"

"I don't need money," enunciated Naruto, which wasn't what he'd said the first time.

"Not anymore," promised Minato.

"I don't need your money," clarified Naruto, and with that he pushed himself away from the table and out of the room. Minato closed his eyes.

Kushina entered, many long, carefully counted breaths later.

"How'd it go?" she asked, bouncing on the balls of her feet anxiously.

Minato pushed himself off his chair, stared blankly out the window for a moment, and headed out through a different door than the one Naruto had disappeared through.

"Your turn," he said, shoulders rigid, right before the door fell shut behind him.

Kakashi barely restrained a long-suffering sigh. He really needed to convince that kid that bursting into his office unannounced every time life displeased him only succeeded in making both of them grumpier and moodier than their inherent dispositions already inclined them to be. Especially since Sasuke rarely told him anything. He'd make a complaint in the form of a commanding statement to change whatever it was he found upsetting, or stand and glare in self-righteous anger without saying anything at all, or if it was a really special day he might break something—an entire collection of commemorative paper-weights had gone the way of the rubbish bin that way. If it wasn't for the fact that Itachi had once been desperate enough to beg, Kakashi would have called
quilts on any attempt to guide the youngest Uchiha mere weeks into his mentorship. As if he was up to guiding anyone anywhere worthwhile—just ask Minato-sensei.

Cue the happy eye squint. "And what's troubling you today, Sasuke?"

Sasuke just looked at him. Really hard. Like he was trying to figure out all the answers without resorting to burying enough pride to ask the questions. Kakashi pulled out his book. Gave the kid time.

"You changed the starting lineup for tonight's game."

Aha. The accusation. "Yep."

"Naruto's not on it."

Kakashi turned a page.

"He's not answering his phone."

Was that… just a tiny hint of panic creeping into the pointedly stoic voice?

Hands slammed down onto his desk. "Where did they take him?"


"…Only because he never remembers to charge it. They didn't take him anywhere? Those Namikaze people?"

"His parents, Sasuke." He met the kid's angry eyes, wondered at the worry he saw there. "They won't hurt him. Or take him away."

"Then why isn't he on the lineup?"

Kakashi didn't bother to answer; that really wasn't any of the Uchiha's business. There was most likely a devoutly murderous stare aimed his way; too bad there happened to be some brilliantly written erotica blocking its path.

Another head poked around the doorjamb, accompanied by a polite knock on the already opened door. "Kaka-sensei? Why's—oh, hi, Sasuke-kun," said Sakura, and invited herself into the room.

"Are you here to ask Kakashi-sensei why Naruto's not on the starting lineup?"

Sasuke grunted affirmation, pleased to have backup.

"I mean—he's okay, isn't he? He didn't answer his phone so I couldn't ask him directly—"

Kakashi turned a page and let out a perverted chuckle. Sakura reddened.

"Stop reading that degrading trash in front of us, pervert-sensei! WHAT WILL NARUTO'S PARENTS THINK OF YOU, EH? Speaking of Naruto's parents—we guessed that was why he was excused from practice this morning, but the game—why can't he play tonight?"

Wisely deciding to pick his battles, Kakashi let the book disappear, and looked up to face his students.

"That's the thing, isn't it? Naruto has parents now. They have their own say in things."
"You mean they don't want him on the ice tonight?" cut in Sasuke sharply.

"Maa, they've got a lot to sort out, the three of them. And that's between the three of them. Now get out. Both of you."

"He doesn't like them," announced Sasuke quietly, and it was somewhere between a threat and an accusation. Sakura looked between her sensei and her teammate worrily. "He shouldn't be forced to go with them when they appear out of nowhere after all these years. How hard could they have been looking for him?"

"Be careful saying big things when you know nothing," warned Kakashi, keeping his voice light but his meaning cold and clear as new ice.

Sasuke's fists clenched as he visibly reigned in anger; Sakura put a tentative hand on his arm. When he didn't knock it off, she tugged towards the door. Kakashi kept his gaze coolly, at last he stepped back and let Sakura lead him out. With one last pearl of Sasuke-wisdom.

"I know Naruto."

Hinata watched longingly as Tenten and Neji swept by, perfectly united in movement and expression as they turned through the steps of Gai-sensei's new choreography. The music swelled upwards and Tenten twirled gracefully into Neji's strong hold, muscle and grace and timing coming together in a perfect precision of movement that lifted Tenten high above her partner's head, flying over the rink on invisible wings. The scrape of blades and look of intense concentration on Neji's face as he worked to keep his partner safely aloft had Hinata biting her lip, aching and longing.

She missed the ice. Oh, but she missed the ice! She may not be a rising star, like Hanabi, who medaled every event she entered, even being favored to beat out Hinata for a spot on the national team in two years—but she loved the ice, loved the slip and scrape of sharp metal over a pristinely frozen surface, loved the swell of her music and the speed and the freedom. She did not love the pressure of competition or the way she felt naked and showcased in her pretty costumes or the disappointed look her father never tried to hide when she came in 4th, or 5th, or 6th. She always slipped and stumbled and fell when the lights were blinding and the crowds judging, but that could all be forgotten in the exaltation of a perfect spin and flawless landing in the quiet expanse of empty ice. There were those moments when she felt that nothing could hold her back—not friction, not gravity, certainly not Huyuuga Hiashi. The same feeling being around Naruto gave her, sometimes.

"EXCELLENT!" Tenten and Neji's exuberant coach cheered, leaning over the sideboards and pumping both fists. Tears streamed down his face. "You have achieved a new zenith on the eternal ascension of the mountain of YOUTH! My heart bursts with joy, like lovely new flowers popping open in the springtime! Neji, your timing has improved! Tenten, your increased core strength allows you to hold that Most Difficult Pose with ever greater elegance and confidence! YOSH, my students! You have achieved all we must do for today—you must excel to even greater heights tomorrow!"

Hinata hid a smile behind a hand. She loved listening to Gai-sensei—in very small, controlled doses. Poor Neji.

Her cousin had seen her in the stands, of course; he headed her way immediately, pausing briefly to fit blade guards to the bottom of his skates. Tenten held back to speak with their sensei, giving them space. She was always so—so aware and smart like that.
"Hinata-sama, what has gone wrong?" Neji queried immediately, looking her up and down as if he expected evidence of some terrible catastrophe to manifest itself immediately.

"O-oh, nothing, Nii-nii-san," Hinata managed, poking her fingers together in sudden nervousness. "It's just, things have… changed… for-for—for me…"

Her older cousin's face darkened into sudden ire. "It's the father, isn't it? Stop keeping your foolish secrets, Hinata-sama, and let me give him what he deserves—"

"No! No, nothing like that!" blurted Hinata, shocked out of her stutter. "It's just—just I might need a new place to live, and—"

Neji's face cleared, though he still radiated worry to his cousin's well-trained eye. "Ah. Well, I do have several back-up plans in place, I believe with the right calls, I can have you packed and moved by late this afternoon. To which address shall I send a car?"

Oh, Neji. "Nii-san, you are always so pre-p-p-pared," managed Hinata haltingly, letting all her weak-kneed gratitude and admiration show in a most un-Hyuuga like way, and blushing accordingly. "I don't think it will be that sudden, but I'm n-not sure…"

"So there is something going on with Naruto," muttered Neji, almost to himself.

Hinata blanched. "How—how?"

"Do not believe me to be so unobservant, Hinata-sama. If his constant concern for your location and wellbeing did not give it away, your increased personal happiness most certainly did." He almost smiled as his sweet cousin blushed even more heavily, but it was chased away as a dark thought came back to the forefront of his mind. "Unless it is his responsibility—in which case his response has some merit, but there is still much punishment that must be meted out—"

"NEJI!"

He sighed. "Yes, Hinata-sama. As we have discussed. He is lucky that I hold him in such high regard, or I would not be held back, even by your pleas."

"Naruto has done nothing wrong," Hinata vowed, gaze burning with that determination only one person could inspire there.

Neji studied her face; whatever he saw there, he chose to keep his silence.

"I… I'll let you kn-know," promised Hinata. "N-neji-nii-san… thank you."

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"Uh, uhhmm, Mom, I—"

"I got one question for you, kid."

Dyed-dark hair fell forward to hide suspiciously rubbed-looking eyes, fists clenched, feet twitched in the direction of the door. Kushina didn't budge, staring down the teenager before her with folded arms and a formidable scowl. It was that or burst into tears herself, and she had this hunch that a mess of sobbing mother wasn't going to ease Naruto's panic any.

He turned away from her in the guise of staring out the hotel window, but his hands weren't over his ears and he wasn't making a run for it, so Kushina decided he was politely listening for her
question. She gave it bluntly.

"What do you want?"

She caught a glimpse of startled blue eyes before he flinched away from her again.

"…Want?"

"Want. And I mean that in a sincere, I-really-want-to-know, I-care-and-I-can't-guess-myself kind of way, not any sort of challenge."

There was a long silence. They both shifted around uneasily; Kushina scouted out the room, and decided on the desk and chair as a sort of temporary home base. She sat on the desk and nudged the chair around a bit with her feet.

"And, Naru-chan, if you're anything like me, you probably don't even know what it is that you want," she managed to get past a sudden and unwelcome lump in her throat, once the silence couldn't be left unchallenged any longer.

He eased up a little, and flopped back onto the bed, staring glassy-eyed at the ceiling.

"…I know what I want,"

Kushina waited.

"The only thing I can ever remember wanting… and I thought I got it, you know? When I found out about Hina-chan and the baby—and she needed me—all of a sudden I got this—this family—"

He gulped in air, pushed onward.

"—and we were doing so good, so good -tebayo! I got everything all worked out! They were safe and we got everything we need and, and hockey was going awesome and driving was working out okay, Boss likes me so I was pretty much set for a raise next quarter and Sasuke an' Sakura-chan got our backs—"

His voice was growing in volume, the tone harried and frantic. Minato cracked open the door to check on them, alarmed.

"And then you came along and it was like all my craziest, stupidest dreams coming true at once except they can't all happen at the same time, not at the same time! They're gonna cancel each other out and what am I going to do about Hina-chan and Baby-chan, huh? And—and it's not safe! I'm not safe, you're not safe, Hinata's not safe—he hates, he hates you!"

They stared, wide-eyed, as Naruto sat bolt upright on the bed, looking a little wild and increasingly desperate as his fingers dug into the pillows and his words became harder and harder to follow.

Then he stopped, gasping.

"What am I saying, what am I saying…” their son, their found, broken, glued-himself-together son mumbled to himself, hands clutching huge handfuls of hair.

Kushina wanted to make promises. Her word was her bond, and she wanted to throw it out as a lifeline, something for all of them to hold on to. Everything will be okay, Naruto. You're safe, baby. Mommy and Daddy are here. We won't let anything happen to you. Everything will be okay.

But she couldn't. If she and Minato had learned anything, anything, from their twelve year trip
through living hell, it was that they couldn't—no matter how much they were willing to give, to
sacrifice, to pay—they couldn't guarantee any of those promises.

No one could.

"Naruto," said Minato, and though his voice was quiet, Kushina recognized instantly that he was
back in command; she was glad. He hadn't nearly been himself since the boy he'd have given his
life to hold pushed him into a wall and ran for it the moment they met. "Naruto… maybe I don't
have the right to speak to you, look at you as a father. I… maybe I lost that right for good. Forever.
So maybe I don't have the right to talk to you about things like jobs and money and staying safe.
But I sure as hell am not going to stop."

Naruto looked up, wary and startled and still struggling with the aftermath of his outburst.

"'Cause that's my role as a father. And even if I don't deserve it, and have no right to it, no one is
going to keep me from doing everything I can to be the best damn dad I can be, that I lost twelve
damn years of being, and no matter how many times I fail, I'm not just going to give up. So you
can help us if you want to, tell me what I'm doing wrong if you want to, tell me who hates me
(there're a lot of people who do, take your pick—) if you want to, but until you do, your mother and
I are just gonna make the best choices we can, and those choices are going to involve you."

Naruto stared. Kushina wiped her eyes, cheered.

Minato just looked grim. "I am open to negotiation. As long as the press can be kept at bay, we can
allow you a little more time to resolve things in your current life and get ready for a new one—but
that's a matter of days, Naruto. You seem to understand very well that there are people we can't
hide from. Some of those people are members of the press. And once this gets out—once
Namikaze Naruto, alive and well and reunited with his family—" Minato paused, stared his son
down—"gets out, you can kiss whatever you wanted to keep of your past life goodbye, because
nothing will be the same again." Minato took a breath, braced. "And that's okay. 'Cause I believe in
you, Kushina believes in you, your little Hina-chan loves you, and we are going to make this family
work. All of it."

Naruto gulped.

"Listen to your father, dattebane," exclaimed Kushina.

They watched, anxious, as their son looked up from under his badly disarrayed fringe. "Damn,
Dad," he mumbled, voice cracking just a little. Minato let out a breath.

"I'm going to hug you now," Kushina warned.

For a few brief moments, that was all she did and all she thought: the feel of this nearly-grown boy
in the protective circle of her arms, the way he still trembled a little and tried to wipe away the
traitorous trails of snot and tears before his parents could see them, the scent of sweat and shampoo
in his hair and the way the space just above and to the right of her heart warmed and throbbed with
the knowledge that this was her baby, hers, and his heart was beating and his skin was warm and
he wasn't the discarded bundle of too-tiny bones her nightmares had never stopped haunting her
with. He never stopped growing and she never stopped loving and maybe, someday, she could stop
grieving.

But then the moment passed and the three of them tried to move past the awkward intensity of it all
with suggestions of calling Rin to get lunch figured out and checking up on security with Obito and
making sure Naruto wasn't later than Kakashi for pre-game warm up that evening, and the cold
knot of reality and dread settled back in the pit of her belly, because whatever or whomever it was Naruto feared, Kushina couldn't lie well enough even to herself to dismiss it. So this is how a mouse feels. Or a fly in a web. Ugh, spiders…

Kushina always kept her promises. She wouldn't make promises she couldn't keep.
Baby Naruto to be Laid to Rest at Last?—forensic examiners confirmed that remains found in an abandoned construction project near the Namikaze summer home matched the DNA of the tragically disappeared toddler, missing for three years as of last October. An anonymous tip led to excavation of the site...

Itachi was cross-referencing archived police reports, typing in dates and key words even as he finished skimming the article. Remains could mean so many things—

--ah. Teeth. Milk teeth knocked from a child who couldn’t be more than three years old, perfectly matching Naruto’s dental record. No immediately identifiable red flags on any of the reports, and if Itachi didn’t pick up on them there weren’t there. No tampering with this paperwork, then. Two incisors and a molar, damaged by fire, another sliver that had been part of a fourth tooth… yes, that evidence was brutal enough. And whatever they’d burned in that barrel had certainly had the shape of a toddler.

Contemporary reports from alternate news sources all said the same—this was being viewed as conclusive evidence, it was all a horrible tragedy, the family asked for privacy. Namikaze’s early resignation as the country’s most popular PM in history was touched on in some of the longer articles. There were retellings of the whole, harrowing nightmare-come-reality, clips from the public pleas Minato and Kushina had made to the unknown kidnapper, remarks on the apparent senselessness of the act. There had never been a ransom note or any other kind of message from the perpetrator, who remained at large. So unsettling for such a high-profile case.

Namikaze Naruto was alive.

Tapered fingers pinched at a furrowed brow, pressing back the warning pains of an impending migraine. He didn’t get them often, but when he did, pretending to function normally became excruciatingly difficult. Moving through the next few months of articles, he watched as the public’s attention was directed from the tragedy of Baby Naruto to the scandal of Minato and Kushina’s split—a public fight at their son’s memorial service! Kushina caught on camera throwing furniture through their Penthouse windows! Minato declaring that Naruto was not dead—mad from grief, the public commentators snarked with sympathy so fake the words should have changed color on the screen—.

And, juxtaposed in his mind, images of the Naruto he came to know. Memories rose unbidden, cresting with the first stages of the migraine. Sasuke’s missing again. Their mother’s voice is too hoarse to be cold as she stares out the window, empty eyes tracking sheeting raindrops. She says nothing else to him, doesn’t look at him, keeps thin arms clamped tight around her waste, as though applying pressure to raw wounds in danger of bleeding out. Itachi puts his shoes back on—
one shoe, he hasn’t had the chance to take the other off yet. His mother whispers as he turns back into the rain, half-caught words about bloody and beaten, and he knows she still sees Sasuke.

The streets in this part of town are always dipped in a grimy kind of shadow, the buildings not as tall as those in more affluent sectors but wedged so tightly together that there is no room for daylight. He stops at a safe house, trades in clothing that might identify him, holsters a taser. He scours the streets in concentric patterns centered on the spot Sasuke was found last time, semi-conscious and bleeding sluggishly from arm, forehead and nose, trembling and grinning ferociously at nothing at all...until he recognized Itachi.

Last time Itachi was in this neighborhood he was accosted by—“Hey, hot-ass, come talk with me a minute”— ah yes, a man just like that one, big, burly, and drunk. Tase him, keep walking. Now he has less time to search for Sasuke. News spreads quick in this neighborhood, quicker still when it’s the work of the Gatekeeper, that benighted kyuubi-child who wrecks every setup Itachi masterminds. Faster than a rat running from an exterminator, and brilliant, too, though the day the higher-ups clear Itachi for field work is the day that kid’s off the streets for good—and half Konoha’s gangs with him, once they crack him—Sasuke, otouto, where are you?

The rain clears, but Itachi is no closer, and solemnly regretting the lack of weapons more lethal than a taser. He is desperate and out-of-depth. Maybe Sasuke didn’t come here, this time. Maybe he picked a fight he couldn’t handle, this time. Maybe one of the monstrosities who call themselves men and pay to watch half-savage children cage-fight paid enough to make Sasuke do more than fight, this time. Maybe this time big brother will be too late.

Too late, too late, and he’s running now, sweeping the pavement with frantic stares and pounding feet, ragged unborn screams cut off on a bitten tongue, Sasuke, Sasuke, Sasuke—

“They said you’d be here,” says a voice, a too-young voice, and Itachi whips around to meet blue eyes, and black hair, and—and—

“Otouto” Itachi breathes, reaching for his brother with both arms, dragging him from where he lolls doll-like against a form even smaller than Sasuke’s, unconscious and ghost-pale, cut a dozen times over and—

“Fought against Haku, that idiot,” breathes the other boy, sucking in air, shaking his arms free of Itachi’s burden. “Knife fight. Told him he ain’t trained for knife-fights, but he’s so proud and stupid, you know? Wanted the money—”

Itachi is calling 2-1-1, Konoha’s emergency line, barking out orders with all his trained
proficiency, while within him heart, lungs, and guts melt and swirl together in an agonizing, wrenching fear and his other arm clutches his brother so tight there should be marks but the skin is already too pale and—

“‘S a good think Haku’s so soft, you know, or this dumbass would be so dead,” mutters the other boy. “If he’s really your brother, you should lock him up or somethin’. You’re a cop, you got bars ta put him behind, right? I don’t wanna see him ever again… bastard…” dimly, Itachi realizes it’s tears the kid's smearing from his eyes. “Anyway…those knives aren’t exactly clean, you know? So tell the docs—” sirens peel, screaming closer and closer. Itachi stares towards them, wills them closer, faster, forces himself into a calm in which he can count breaths and heartbeats, a crude measurement of Sasuke’s vitals. When he glances back again, the kid’s gone.

As Sasuke’s heartbeat stabilizes, loud and clear through the ambulance monitor with oxygen puffing up his nose every other second, Itachi realizes why he knew that face. The face on the kid who brought him Sasuke. The images they had weren’t clear, three-quarters rather than full-face or profile, but he knew those eyes, those scarred cheeks.

He’d met the Gatekeeper.

“I brought up the line-up with Kakashi,” Sasuke offered, watching Naruto stare up at the narrow ceiling of the rink-side tunnel, expression strained and fingers tapping at the wall behind him. They were supposed to be suiting up—well, Sasuke was, anyway, as he was still on the starting lineup. “He said it was up to your parents.” There was a slight hesitation before that last word, but Naruto didn’t flinch away from it. Unsettled blue eyes tracked slowly down from the ceiling, reluctantly meeting Sasuke’s cautiously blank gaze.

“…Yeah,” said the dobe at last. “You know, Bastard… when they find out…”

He trailed off, and Sasuke’s gaze sharpened, challenging. “Find out what?”

Naruto hesitated. “Eh…Hina-chan’s baby,” he finished lamely.
“Idiot. That happened yesterday.”

“…Right.”

Sasuke waited, but Naruto was in a rare close-lipped mood, and while those happened rarely, they happened thoroughly. He had a pretty good idea what Naruto’s concerns were, anyway, and no idea whatsoever of what to do about it. Point out that he wasn’t all that different, and his family still accepted him? Except that Sasuke held his own, crippling fear, that one day his father would find out everything, and... and...

And he’d never be acknowledged, accepted, as a son. Never.

“Namikaze’s not going to stop you from playing,” Sasuke said, suddenly. “He’s crazy intense when he’s watching you skate. Must be important to him.”

Naruto looked up, startled, and Sasuke grimaced in return. He hated this emotional crap.

“I hacked Kush—my mom’s email,” said Naruto in a rush. “Used it to get Kakashi to keep me off the line-up tonight.”

Sasuke stared.

“I made my parents promise not to come tonight, said I needed more time to ‘adjust’ and crap and didn’t want anyone to wonder when Konoha’s biggest celebrities show up suddenly at a non-tournament game—”

“Why?” demanded Sasuke, unease spiking in his gut. Naruto never missed a game. Never. Unless...

“Gotta go under for... coupla hours, I’ll make it quick,” came the confession, and Sasuke nearly hit the idiot for confirming his worst fears. “Just an ID thing—someone’s a rat or a plainclothes, covering his ass real well so they want me to come sniff him out—”

“No.”
“Aw, come on, Bastard. You gotta cover for me.”

“No,” hissed Sasuke again, fists clenching. “You told me you could tell them no, these days.”

Naruto looked thoroughly miserable. “I can, it’s just… I think they’re on to me, you know? And I need to scope out how much they know—”

“If you’re referring to your new-found connection to your parents coming out, you won’t be able to stop it. There’s nothing you can do but stay out of reach, which Namikaze will certainly help you do—”

“Fine,” snapped Naruto, flushed with sudden, scorching anger that startled Sasuke into an instinctive fighting stance. “Don’t cover. Don’t do anything, Sasuke.”

Sasuke grabbed angrily at the shorter boy’s sleeve, roughly cutting off his exit. “Idiot. I’ll go with you.”

Naruto shrugged him off angrily. “Now who’s the idiot? Look, I got about forty seconds to split—Rin’s locked in the bathroom with a bunch of baby pigs and Kakashi-baka an’ that Obito dude are trying to rescue her, but—”

Pigs? Thought Sasuke, filing that disturbing question for a less urgent moment—“Itachi’s on duty tonight,” he warned. “And you know you don’t have any hours. Sensei’ll be after you in ten minutes or less, and showing with a tail isn’t going to help you. Unless you’re suicidal.” He peered intently at Naruto, half-way sarcastic, half-way concerned that that last bit actually was the case.

“I know,” mumbled Naruto, alarming his friend further with the lack of bravado. “But if old Nine-tails’s got something to tell me about my parents, I’m going to be there to hear it.”

Naruto couldn’t even keep his gaze long enough for a proper stare-off. “Come on, Sasuke, at least give me the keys,” he gritted out angrily, thrusting out a demanding palm. Slowly, reluctantly, Sasuke reached towards his pocket, calculating. The moment Naruto let himself relax in relief, stepping closer to accept the ignition key to their shared motorbike, Sasuke lunged.
Naruto was stronger, but Sasuke was almost always faster. Using weight and surprise to every possible advantage, he wrestled the other teen to the floor, grappling into a fully-committed jiu-jutsu throat lock, straining the muscles in his right arm to keep vital air-ways blocked off long enough to rob Naruto of consciousness while his legs and left arm fought to keep his position of dominance. If Naruto got out of this, he’d send Sasuke straight to the ER, he could feel the waves of panicked rage radiating and a desperate Naruto was a deadly Naruto—

“NO,” he gasped, loosing control of the hold—he just needed a few more seconds, he could feel the other boy’s hold on consciousness slipping—“NO, Naruto, I’m not enabling this shit—you’re not going—HOLD STILL, DAMN YOU!” And just as his center of balance was thrown from under him, and horrible wheezing breaths sounded from Naruto’s throat, and hot knowing hands were grabbing at his own throat, arms like steel wrapped round them both, tearing them apart and pinning him face down just like Itachi did, like all special-op cops were trained to. Dimly Sasuke caught the periphery of Kakashi’s most dangerous heavy-lidded gaze and wondered who it was, holding him, if Kakashi was over there, before his gaze spun dizzily over to where Naruto was spitting and fighting and howling like a cornered cat until he too was wrestled into submission and forced against the wall, where he went silent and rigid, visibly shaking, chin falling to shoulder to let jagged bangs hide a furious face. For a moment there was nothing but ragged panting to fill the corridor, and then Sasuke strained his head up as far as he could from his humiliating pose on the dirty floor, and got a good look at the adult restraining Naruto.

Namikaze Minato.

“Hello, boys,” Namikaze addressed him, gaze and voice cold enough to freeze even Sasuke’s well-trained gut, “You have some explaining to do.”


vVoVv

Sakura went to find her teammates, neither of whom were going to make it onto the starting lineup at this point, and found a bawling Hinata instead.

Friends don’t leave friends crying alone in darkened, deserted bleachers overlooking shut-down figure skating rinks. Momentarily giving up on her wayward boys, Sakura went to see what she could do.

“Sa-sakura-ch…chan,” stuttered Hinata, startled and doing the best to mop up her face while not appearing to do so.
“Here,” offered Sakura bluntly, shoving her hockey jersey-covered arm in Hinata’s face. “I’m going to wash it after the match anyways. I have to after every game. You wouldn’t believe how bad those boys stink.”

Hinata giggled soggily, pushing the arm away in embarrassment. “I—I have a handkerchief,” she whispered, sheepishly showing off a dainty bit of cloth crushed in one fist. “It ju-just… stopped soaking up tears…”

Hinata was always crying these days, Sakura reflected. Apparently it was part of being pregnant. Sakura shuddered.

“I found another place to live,” Hinata whispered. She must truly be desperate for an understanding ear, Sakura reflected, to just begin talking without the usual ritual of cajoling, begging, and occasional blackmailing needed to get the ex-Hyuuga to spill her secrets. But wait—had she meant move out?

“EH?”

Hinata nodded despondently. “I can move in any time, I just need to… t—t—t—”

“Tell Naruto?” finished Sakura flatly.

Hinata nodded.

“Why.” It was a demand, not a question.

Hinata cringed, just a bit. But she sounded determined. “Everything will ch…change, Sakura-chan. Naruto-kun will move in with his… his… p-parents, a-and, once everyth-thing g-gets out, start a comp…pletely new life…”

Sakura’s mind spun, tilting around Hinata’s very good points.

“And… the last thing he nee…d…s, will be a pregnant girlfriend,” continued Hinata, voice lower than a whisper. Sakura had to strain to understand. “I… I know that world… the press is…”
horrible, and, and Naruto-kun has a lot of pro-problems to d-deal with, he doesn’t need me too—”

Yes, more good points, thought Sakura, catching the edges of Hinata’s misery. But—

“But—Hina-chan—he DOES need you!” she burst out, unable to wait any longer for Hinata to force more reasons past her limping tongue. “Can’t you see how much happier he’s been, since he’s had you?! You mean everything to him, he never stops talking about you, he works so hard to take care of you and the baby, and he enjoys it so much, and besides—BESIDES, if he went and knocked you up, he’s gotta deal with it, right? Right. I’ll kill him if he doesn’t.” And she looked very capable of doing just that, in that moment.

“He didn’t,” said Hinata.

“Didn’t what?”

“Didn’t… didn’t… it’s not…”

Sakura’s stomach started to curl with dread.

“It’s not his baby,” whimpered Hinata. And started to cry again.
Hyuuga Hinata knew she was dirty, tainted, possibly even evil. She was a bad, unclean person, and if she didn’t go to hell in the afterlife, she was certainly living it now. But she still felt shocked and oddly detached as she watched her hand make its first criminal action: shoplifting.

Two pregnancy tests found their way into her shirt. She shifted them around, making sure they would be hidden by her bulky sweater, then stuffed a handful of bills—twice what the items were worth, though that did not ease her conscience—in their spot, stacking a few boxes in front to make it more likely that the money would be found by a store employee rather than a customer.

She picked out a pack of tampons to cover her lingering presence in that part of the store, feeling vaguely thrilled by the action, as she’d never been allowed to use a tampon—but that would make no difference now, would it? She grabbed a chocolate bar she was too sick to eat from the rack by the check-out register and paid for both, half-wishing the dour-faced employee ringing up her purchases would see the strange lumping of her sweater and catch her before she could complete her robbery. It didn’t matter that she’d left the money. An honest person would be paying right here, at the counter, and while she may have discovered the brashness necessary to openly purchase a box of tampons, she could never, ever imagine laying a pregnancy test on the counter. She was supposed to be Hyuuga Hinata. A virgin. An obedient daughter. A good girl.

She had no idea who she was.

You want this, he’d told her, breath hot and moist against her neck. Such a good girl. It’s always the good girls who want it the most. You’re not going to tell me to stop. You’re not going to make a sound. Such a good girl.

Sometimes, when she heard his voice in her memories, she wanted to be a dead girl.

She didn’t want it. She wanted to die. To scream. To run. To fall in front of a train. To push him in front of a train. She did exactly as he said. She didn’t move. She didn’t fight. Her bottom lip bruised, split and bled, crushed between her teeth, holding back the cries of pain ripping and flailing like a small, wounded wild animal, trapped behind her ribcage, destroying her insides. She remembered the blood trailing slow, so slow down her chin, the bestial fervor it excited when he saw it, the monster fully unleashed from the man. For a moment, she had hoped—calm and clear in the swirling dark—hoped that he would take her life as well as her body.

Hyuuga Hinata had always failed. This was the last, the ultimate, the unreparable failure. No amount of money or PR could help or change the outcome. And if the bit of chemically-treated plastic in the thin cardboard box digging uncomfortably into her side told her what she already knew it would, it would not be only her own, failed life she would be responsible for. There would
be another, tiny and fragile and unknowing, innocence out of darkness, new, dependent helplessness created from her own weakness, her own helplessness.

If you are there, vowed Hinata, if you are there, I promise—I promise—I don’t know what to promise—everything… I promise everything….

Hyuuga Hinata would not fail.

Naruto was shaking uncontrollably, his posture so stiff and stressed in his father’s hold that Minato worried he was hurting him. But he didn’t dare let go, or even ease his grip. It probably had more to do with survival instinct—his son had just been choked almost to unconsciousness—but the feral ferocity with which Naruto had just fought both him and the kid reported to be his best friend startled and terrified him. Added to the disappointment of being so deliberately lied to, what Minato had just witnessed destroyed the last, over-stretched shreds of hesitant trust Kushina swore were the key to rebuilding a relationship with Naruto.

He’d known, as the years passed, that even if—when, he would automatically correct—when they found Naruto, he wouldn’t be the sweet, smart, affectionate, rebellious toddler he remembered. Every day without his son was a day of fatherhood lost, another thread in the weaving of a relationship cut.

He’d known Naruto wouldn’t remember him, wouldn’t even remember himself. His son would be a stranger—a beloved stranger.

But he would be Naruto, even if he knew himself by a different name. The same Naruto they’d covered in kisses from his first minute of life, soothed to sleep through teething-disrupted nights, caught as he fell triumphantly from first steps into proud, loving arms. Naruto who painted the new white couch with blue bubblegum-flavored toothpaste and flooded the living room carpet with the garden hose. Naruto who was brave and bold as he ran his lilting toddler run, trying so hard to keep up with all the bigger kids at the playground, and so tender and vulnerable when he cuddled up on his daddy’s lap, half-asleep and utterly content just to be held. Naruto who believed his mother’s warm kisses and his father’s strong hands could heal all hurts and absolve all wrongs. Half Minato, half Kushina, all Naruto. And that would be enough.

Now Naruto was in his arms—unwillingly, untrusting, but there—and it just… it wasn’t enough.

Why couldn’t it be enough?

“Go ahead and use my office,” offered Kakashi, unlocking a thick wooden door and ushering them all inside—Obito manhandling his unruly relative, Naruto straining in Minato’s grip. Sasuke slouched into one of the hard plastic chairs facing the scuffed desk, and Obito let him. Naruto made for the neighboring chair, but Minato didn’t budge.

“I’m not letting go,” he said quietly, ignoring the pain briefly tightening his chest. Naruto made a sound in his throat, low and angry, but held himself still.

Kakashi looked the scene over grimly, holding Naruto’s gaze unflinchingly when the blue eyes shot him a look of bitter defiance. “Take as long as you need, Sensei. I need to go get the team on the ice. Obito, don’t break anything. Sasuke, don’t let Obito let you break anything. Ja!” With a
happy eye-squint Minato knew to have nothing at all to do with his true feelings, Kakashi left them, the swelling noise of the pre-game crowd cutting off abruptly as he pulled the door shut behind him.

“Well,” began Minato, after a few minutes of sullen silence, “let’s get back to where we left off. Uchiha-kun, why did you attack Naruto?”

The look the kid gave him was priceless. He may be barely fifteen years old, but he had his family’s death glare fully mastered. Had the mood been a little lighter, Minato might have chuckled. As it was, it was clear that Sasuke was not going to answer his question, and there was nothing anyone could do to convince him otherwise. Uchiha pride was on the line.

Obito had apparently come to the same conclusion. “You know, I think we should ask Naruto,” he suggested cheerfully. “Why was Sasuke attempting your murder, gaki?” When Naruto looked stubbornly away, Obito tsked. “Does this happen often? Hormonal Uchiha can be quite murderous, you know…but usually it’s the female ones and it’s you’re fault for not supplying enough chocolate—say, Sasuke, is it your time of the month? You’re gorgeous enough to be a girl—” an exasperated look from Minato cut him off, but it seemed Obito had succeeded in easing the stifling emotional pressure in the room.

“Yes,” scoffed Naruto, lifting his head for the first time. “It’s cause the bastard’s so in love with me. Can’t keep your hands off me, can you, Sasuke?”

To Minato’s surprise, Sasuke grunted, a tinge of amusement easing some of the tension in his shoulders. “Don’t confuse reality with your dreams, usuratonkachi. I can’t be held responsible for your helpless infatuations.”

“’Cause I’m the gay one,” snorted Naruto, and Minato noted how the defensive lines of his posture relaxed, if only fractionally. Interesting. The boys’ alliance appeared to be intact, slowly-darkening bruise marring Naruto’s neck notwithstanding.

“Either of you can take the initiative,” he said tiredly, readjusting his hold on his son to something still restrictive, but less uncomfortable. “We know Naruto hacked into his mom’s email, blew off the game, and lied to several different adults. We know you two were fighting in a way that can not be passed off as a casual scuffle, and whether or not these two things are related, we’re going to find out what’s behind them. However long that takes. My schedule’s wide open, boys.”

Both teens fell instantly back to stubborn silence.

“We’re going to be here all night,” mourned Obito, moving to rifle through the untidy desk. “Where does Kakashi keep his coffee? I need, like, three strong cups of the stuff. Preferably with a little Irish cream to ease the pain of your angsty teenage company…and don’t think I’m not going to tattle to Aunt Mikoto and/or Itachi, dearest little gangsta-wannabe-cousin-of-mine.”

As Sasuke’s fists clenched in response to this latest threat, Minato’s phone buzzed. Carefully easing one hand free of its grip on his son, hyper-alert for any sign of Naruto taking advantage of this change, he answered and lifted it to his ear.

It was Kushina.

“He’s here,” he promised. “We’re in Kakashi’s office. Yeah—2nd floor, behind B rink.” She announced her imminent arrival and hung up.

“Well, kids,” Minato addressed the two surly teenagers, equably meeting two hostile stares. “I
hope you feel like ‘fessing up. Sometimes people say I’m scary. I won’t give an opinion on that, but I have no qualms whatsoever in promising that Uzumaki Kushina is far, far scarier. So you can do this the hard way, and explain things to me, or the really, really hard way, and explain things to my wife. Smart people choose the former.”

Obito looked a little pale. “Do what he says,” he urged, sounding alarmingly sincere. “Uh, Sensei, can I leave before she gets here…?”

“Stay,” commanded Minato, hiding a smile as Naruto actually cringed.

“Stay,” commanded Minato, hiding a smile as Naruto actually cringed.

vIVlv

“What do you mean, it’s not Naruto’s baby?” whispered Sakura, dimly aware of the bell signaling the end of the warm-up period chiming in the other arena and realizing that she was going to miss the game and be in huge trouble for it, but too shocked to do anything other than stare at Hinata. “He said—he told Sasuke and me that it was his—I smacked him really hard for it and he said he was too stupid to remember a condom and, and—”

“I—I know,” sobbed Hinata. “He told everyone it was his. He would’ve told my family too if I’d let-t-t him.”

Sakura felt the blood draining from her face. “Hina-chan—he doesn’t really think—you didn’t tell him it’s his, did you?”

“No!” cried Hinata. “I w-would never d…do that! Besides, we never—we never—we weren’t even to-together! B-but he f-found out and could, could tell I need…ded help, and it w-was h-his idea to say he was the ba-baby’s father, and I could l-live with him, and—and—and I wanted it to be t-t-true—”

“Yeah,” said Sakura, tugging a hand free of its blocky hockey glove to run sweaty fingers through her hair, then aborting the movement when she remembered she’d already tied it back for the game. “Yeah, of course, I’m sorry, Hina-chan. I shouldn’t have guessed that.” She reached out tentatively for the other girl, but Hinata was curled into herself so tightly and protectively that what was intended to be some sort of hug ended up as an awkward pat on the back. Not for the first time, Sakura wished she was Ino. Ino had this instinct, this warm confidence, this ability to say the right words in the right way. Sakura felt distant and awkward, though her sympathy was profound.

“…That is just like Naruto, isn’t it?” mused Sakura, ending an awkward silence. “To just decide to be a dad to somebody else’s baby. His heart’s freaking huge like that. And you know… before he told me that he screwed up and got you pregnant, I wasn’t even sure he knew what sex was.” Hinata sniffled and wiped her eyes, laughing a tiny breath of a laugh, and Sakura revealed in a quick rush of relief. Not the completely wrong thing to say then. The relief flickered out just as quickly as it came, however, as a horrifying thought pulled itself together in her analytical mind, and as the bits of evidence flew into place with their usual speed, Sakura looked at her friend with dread.

“Hinata… the father… if it wasn’t…”

Hinata flinched violently. The darkness of the empty figure skating rink seemed to expand somehow, the shadows twisting into something more menacing.

Sakura could hardly find her voice. “You were raped.”
“It—it was my fault,” whispered Hinata.

Sakura’s voice was flat and challenging. “You wanted to have sex with whoever got you pregnant?”

“No—no—but I… I didn’t fight,” choked Hinata, barely coherent. “Didn’t scream—didn’t—didn’t say no, or stop, or—”

Sakura lurched in her seat, and Hinata recoiled, but while rage was boiling through her, the girl before her was last person Sakura wanted to suffer from it. “No, Hinata,” said Sakura, voice thick with passion, “you were raped. It doesn’t change because you didn’t scream.”

Hinata lifted her head, stared at her. Sakura’s anger blazed fiercer at the self-loathing she saw there.

“Hinata-chan… of course you didn’t scream. Of course you didn’t say no. How could you? You’ve been conditioned your whole damn life to submit to male authority, haven’t you? To be a proper lady, meek and submissive and silent, to do as you told? You were attacked. By a predator. You were attacked, and your brain went into survival mode—shut down, reverted to your most basic behaviors—you were raped. Blame the monster who did it, blame our stupid, misogynistic society, blame your emotionally abusive family, but don’t you dare—Hinata, look at me—don’t you DARE blame yourself. You hear me?!” Sakura was standing, fists clenched, righteous anger billowing about her like a holy aura. Hinata just stared, face white, eyes wide, mouth slightly open. Completely unprepared for Sakura’s proclamation.

“Oh, Hinata-chan,” breathed Sakura, and melted from holy anger into a desperate hug. Later, she would berate herself for being so physically aggressive with a rape victim, but at the time Hinata didn’t seem to mind. She let Sakura cling to her, passionate and protective, and gazed, amazed, at the tears soaking her shoulder, her sleeve—somebody else’s tears, shed for her. Hinata’s tears.

Naruto wanted to crawl into a hole somewhere with thick walls, fluffy blankets and plenty of ramen and not come out for a long, long time. Or at least until his… his father stopped looking at him with that not-quite-hidden anguished, weary, heartbroken look, and Sasuke stopped shooting him those betrayed-slash-concerned glares like accusations, and that Obito dude stopped bracing for his mom’s, Kushina’s, arrival like it was doomsday, and—and if Namikaze… Dad… would just let him go….

You betrayed me first! He bellowed in his head, but guilt and doubt clogged his throat and nothing came out of his mouth. The memories were fuzzy and twisted with years of kyuubi’s words, leaving Naruto so completely uncertain that he didn’t know whom to trust anymore—trust yourself, he had decided, years and years ago. Believe in yourself. ‘Cause if he didn’t, no one would. But—but—had he been wrong the first time, or the rest of the time? It was why he’d decided to go out there tonight, disappear into the underworld he’d grown up in: to try to fit this new, dazzling, overwhelming puzzle piece into the mysteries of his own existence and identity.

I don’t know who I am.

The adrenaline was still pounding through him, his neck throbbing from Sasuke’s attack and the
shivering that always accompanied panic or strong emotion shaking him from head to foot. If Namikaze let go of him now, he wasn’t even sure he could stand.

He wasn’t really angry at Sasuke though. He knew why he’d stopped him—he would have done the same—had done the same, more than once, when their positions were reversed.

They were the same.

But Sasuke had always had a family. Had always known where he belonged. It was kind of… the ruins of a family, broken into pieces and hollowed out and raw around the edges, but the bonds were still there.

“Why did you walk away?” The words burst from his mouth on their own, ragged, tormented, and Naruto gulped, wishing them back immediately. But from the way everyone stilled and stared, they’d heard him loud and clear. Even Sasuke looked startled, confused.

“…What do you mean, Naruto?” asked Namikaze, shifting his hold on Naruto without breaking contact, turning him until intense, focused blue eyes were staring intently into his.

“Why—” Naruto was appalled to find tears choking his voice, and the trembling was getting worse, but he couldn’t stop—“—Why’d you walk away? Dad? Why?”

Namikaze’s face was white. “Walk away?” he asked slowly, voice very low. “When did I ever walk away from you, Naruto?”

“At the game!” yelled Naruto, gripping his father’s wrists as the man held onto Naruto’s upper arms, not sure if he wanted to throw the hands off and stagger away—or hold on tighter than he had to anything in his life. Sasuke stood from his chair, hands open. Naruto took courage from this and forged on, though the room seemed to be spinning and his eyes couldn’t stay still, tracking and analyzing everything in the small, untidy office the way he tracked the crowd when he was in the cage. “There was—the game—that game—you were raising money to help lost children, in honor of your son—”

“You,” said Namikaze, his grip tightening painfully. “You’re my son, Naruto.”

“No—no—that’s why I was there, ‘cause…cause that’s what I thought, that it was me, that you were looking for me! And I wouldn’t forget—he tried so hard to make me forget, but I wouldn’t—”

It was getting hard to breathe.

“So I—I would always try to run away, to find you, you know? I couldn’t remember my mother.” His cheeks burned with shame, admitting this. “I mean—I did remember—her voice—her smell—but, but I couldn’t remember her face.” He couldn’t see at all, now, just misty colors swimming in the blur that should have been sensei’s office, and he let go of the wrists he’d been holding, crushing the heels of his hands over hot, wet eyes. His hands were shaking. “So he—he said if I was so sure, he would take me to see you, if I was really, really good. And… and it took so many days of being good, but… but we went. And you were there.”

“Naruto,” said his father, sounding like he’d been punched in the gut, and all the breath was knocked out of him.

“I screamed for you,” gasped Naruto, fingers tangling in his hair, palms covering his eyes. “I yelled and yelled. You were right there. I banged on the glass so hard I thought it would break. I wanted it to.”
“How... how could I not see you?”

“You could. You could see me. You were looking right at me.”

“No, NO, Naruto. If I had seen you—”

“YOU SAW ME!” screamed Naruto, and knocked the hands away, staring through streaming eyes. “You saw—you saw what I’d become—you saw—saw...” one finger came up, gouged the scars on his cheeks.

Kyuubi’s mark.

Obito was standing. Sasuke was standing. Namikaze was staring down at him, but Naruto couldn’t look at him long enough to read his expression. There was not enough oxygen in the air. His heart and lungs were pumping, heaving, but it wasn’t helping. His legs stopped working.

Can’t—can’t breathe—

“Naruto.” It was Sasuke, voice tense, commanding, Sasuke’s arms supporting him, directing him, trying to get him to sit down or something. “Calm down—”

But Naruto pushed away—blind, lost, wild—reached for his father.

“I’m sorry,” he gasped, choking and crying and not sure if the words made it past his wheezing breaths. It was getting hard to see. “I’m sorry—I’m sorry—don’t—don’t—”

Then—black.

nuTun

“Kaka-sensei—I’m really sorry—”

“No one on our team is functioning today, Sakura. Here, you’re forgiven.”

“...Are we losing?”

“To Takigakure. Yes.”

A Takigakure player whizzed past Konohamaru and slid the puck into Konoha’s goal.

“Shit. Er, shoot. Sorry Sensei.”

“Wanna get out there?”

“You mean—but I missed warm-ups, and came in late and—”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about, Sakura. You’ve always been an exemplary team member.”

“Uh... sure, Kaka-sensei. Switch me in.”

If there was one thing Sakura felt ready to do, it was to make every last male on the face of the
planet—or just those in Takigakure jerseys dreaming of owning her home ice, they’d do in a pinch—realize exactly how much respect every female deserved.

A lot could be accomplished towards this goal by grinding every last chauvinist snout into the boards, Sakura decided.

“Go get ‘em, Sixteen,” murmured Kakashi, whistling a perspiring Shino off the ice. A shiver went down his spine as he caught the look in Sakura’s eyes as she clambered over the boards. There was pure murder promised in the green eyes under that visor.

Hatake Kakashi had no idea what to think of his team these days.

At least one thing hasn’t changed, he mused, watching Sakura send a burly Takigakure defender flying into his own goalie before neatly dropping the puck into the undefended net.

They know how to play hockey.

It’s not possible, Minato told himself, pacing restlessly from the door, to the window, back to the door, a tiny distance in Kakashi’s cramped office. Even with the dark hair, I would have recognized him. And even if I somehow didn’t recognize him, I would not have walked away from a screaming child. I never have.

Think. There was something he was missing, some detail he wasn’t analyzing right. There had to be an explanation. A fake memory planted by suggestion? There is this mysterious “he” Naruto mentions.

Naruto was still out cold, laid carefully on the thinly-carpeted floor, Sasuke hovering and Obito whispering instructions given to him over the phone by Senju Tsunade. Naruto’s clothing had been loosened, his feet propped up, his breathing and heart rate monitored. Minato had been the one to dial Tsunade, his first decisive action in the initial panic, but when she answered he found himself unable to speak and handed the phone over to Obito. Now the best thing he could do was stay out of the way.

You saw me! At the game.

What game? There had been so many games. Golf? Hockey? Football?

You were raising money to help lost children.

He did a lot of that kind of event. Anything he could think of to keep Naruto’s pictures circulating, to keep the public aware and looking.

I wouldn’t forget. Why—why’d you walk away?

He hadn’t. He hadn’t.

“This happened once before,” said Sasuke, addressing Obito in a hushed voice. “He—he started hyperventilating—and then he just collapsed. Itachi said it sounded like a panic attack.”
I screamed for you!

“He’s breathing steadily now. I think he’ll be fine after a good rest,” Obito reassured.

“I banged on the glass so hard I thought it would break. I yelled and yelled—”

“Dobe,” whispered Sasuke. It sounded less like an insult and more like an endearment.

“You saw me—YOU SAW ME!”

He would remember those eyes anywhere. He would have had a strong reaction to any child marked with Naruto’s scars—but not the kind of reaction Naruto seemed to expect.

Kyuubi. But it’s not just kyuubi. I’m sure of it—

YOU SAW ME!

Naruto coughed, rolled to the side, curled into fetal position.

“Wake up, dobe.”

Why—why’d you walk away?

At the game. I couldn’t remember her face.

You saw me!

He tried so hard to make me forget.

I screamed for you! I banged on the glass so hard I thought it would break. I hoped it would.

It took so many days of being good.

His son’s words swirled in his head, recalled exactly, but he was missing something. The answer was there—he could sense it—

I hoped it would.

The glass.

I thought it would break.

I banged on the glass.

At the game. At the game.

An image rose in Minato’s eidetic memory, ice—packed bleachers—sweeping spotlights—screaming fans—reflective glass—

You were looking right at me.

“I remember,” breathed Minato.

“Dad,” whispered Naruto. “Don’t leave—Dad—”

“You’ll come with me,” promised Minato. “Obito—call Kushina—”
“Don’t go—Dad—” whimpered Naruto. He sounded delirious.

“—Ask her to bring the car to the back doors instead of coming in here, we’ll meet her there—Sasuke, help me lift him—”

“Don’t wanna fight,” muttered Naruto.

“We’re not at the ring.” Sasuke told him, darting an anxious sideways glance at Minato. With Naruto’s arms slung over their respective shoulders, they hauled him to his feet.

“Hate that bastard,” mumbled Naruto.

“Where are we going?” wondered Obito, propping the door open for them, the message to Kushina already confirmed.

Minato met his gaze squarely, real hope rising him for the first time in twelve long, long years. “The capital,” he said, keeping a careful eye on Naruto as he stumbled along between them. “Millenium Stadium. Sasuke, you can let Obito take your place and head back to the rink. Thank you.”

The younger Uchiha didn’t budge, fingers white-knuckled as he gripped his best friend’s sleeve.

“You’re taking Naruto to the capital? Why?”

They were at the door; Minato could see Kushina’s headlights sweeping up to greet them.

The three of them got Naruto through the door and into the car without too much trouble; he seemed exhausted and confused, but Obito vouched that Tsunade had said to expect as much for the first few minutes after his return to consciousness. Once settled in the back seat, he slipped immediately into a soundless sleep.

“They’ll bring him back, Sasuke,” Obito promised his cousin, looking at the hunched form beside him with heartfelt pity.

Sasuke wasn’t mollified. “What’s at Millenium Stadium?”

“Answers,” said Minato, and faced Kushina.

“Okay, Minato,” she whispered, and guided the car onto the road.

A/N: having formatting problems as I transfer chapters to AO3. Don't have time to fix them. Many apologies!
Sasuke watched the tail lights marking Naruto's distance from him fade around the turn at the end of the parking lot and decided not to acknowledge the way the darkness pressed that much heavier into every part of him.

They'll bring him back, Obito promised. He'd barely been aware of the man's existence until two days ago, but apparently they were still related. Sasuke twitched out from under the man's comforting arm and put some space between them, taking refuge in the shadows.

There'd always been things he didn't know about Naruto. Everyone thought the idiot told everyone everything—Naruto was, after all, always, always talking—and he made such a show with those oh-so-expressive eyes and brow and mouth of his that the people he interacted with believed they knew exactly how the hyperactive knucklehead felt, all the time.

Sasuke wasn't fooled. Unless he wanted to, Naruto expressed less of what was going on behind that animated mask of his than anyone Sasuke knew. Including himself.

_You shouldn't be here,_ were the first words Naruto ever said to him, and Sasuke hadn't believed him.

He should have. He really should have—should have listened to the short kid with the scarred face and a knife in each hand. Sasuke didn't believe anyone at that part of his life: not himself, not his family, not his teachers, certainly not another lost boy acting tough in the scummiest arteries feeding Konoha's underbelly.

The difference between himself and Naruto, back then, was that Naruto wasn't acting. Not like Sasuke. While Sasuke walked himself into every kind of fatally stupid situation a half-cracked mess of thirteen-year-old could get himself into, Naruto showed up like a curse (or a lucky charm) and pulled him out—over and over and over again. Each time Sasuke hated the idiot more for it.

Until he noticed that Naruto was clinging to him. Was trying to be like him. That as thoroughly and royally screwed up as Sasuke may be, he was the closest thing to a “normal” kid Naruto had ever seen; the closest thing to “friend” Naruto had ever known.

So when Sasuke got out of the hospital that last time, with Itachi pacing his every footstep and Mother keeping all his shirts damp with her tears, he finally acknowledged the extra shadow radiating worry and curiosity that showed up around the edges of his spaces from time to time, and suggested that they try out a new game. Maybe without knives this time. Maybe something like a hockey stick would do instead. Maybe something that was just about kids and speed and challenge and fun without the (pretty much inevitable) death part.

Naruto was older than him (or was he? Hadn't the Namikaze baby been younger? Another thing to check—) but Sasuke found himself falling into roles he pretended not to recognize as Itachi's: big brother, advisor, protector. He was the one to teach Naruto about grade school and sneakers and comic books; the first to introduce tomato sandwiches and mowing lawns and drenching hot-day sprinkler fights. He'd let Naruto into his world inch-by-inch until the gravity of its epicenter depended on his presence, and that was dangerous.

There'd always been things he didn't know about Naruto. It never mattered—not enough to strain what was between them, not enough to make Naruto hide away behind face-splitting grins and squinted eyes. Naruto can take care of himself, Sasuke told himself. In his ignorance, he forgot
that there could be a someone with greater claim to Naruto's brightness than he.

If you fail to return him, he promised the empty dark where the car had long since disappeared, if you keep him when he doesn't want to be kept, he'll fight. You will underestimate him, because no one is ever prepared for the way that idiot owns it, and I'll slip through the cracks and snatch him back.

If he was yours, he's not anymore.

...unless he wants to be.

Hunched under the weight of the dark, Sasuke turned quickly and shoved his way back through the heavy glass door and down narrow hallways until the crowds were loud enough and the artificial lights bright enough that he could pretend not to see his own thoughts.

xXmXx

Slumped sideways across the back seat of Kushina's rental car, Naruto dreamed. Unable to break through his will during waking hours, Naruto's memories lurked until unconsciousness claimed him, gathering vivid potency.

It began with pain and cold marble.

“Now,” came the command, voice soft, promising further punishment should any word spoken be less than perfectly heeded, “Go do as you're told and nothing else. If I see you again looking like this I'll smack you till there's nothing left of your disobedient backside. Yugito! Get him out of here and get the job done.”

Choking on the last of the tears he had so desperately tried to hold back, Naruto jerked out of the man's loosened grasp and tried to swiftly yank his trousers back up, another yelp escaping as the material scraped over swollen flesh. Defiance and humiliation burned through him hotter even than the pain from the belt-whipping and it was hard to get the button of his trousers through the buttonhole with the way his fingers kept clenching into fists. Tears blurred his eyes, but they didn't blind him to the booted feet striding toward him or the hand reaching to grab him and he knew better than to avoid but still his feet were backing him toward the wall, anger and fear swirling his thoughts into get-away-get-away-get-away and a bigger, much scarier hand clamped down over the nape of his neck and lifted and shook and his stomach heaved and he wondered how much worse things could possibly get even if he just puked right here right now—

“Five more,” came the grim sentence, and the boy's pants were yanked down to make place for lashing leather and he couldn't even try to stop the screams, this time.

When it was over, and he was stood back up on trembling legs, his eyes had dried up. He could feel the snot running steadily over his upper lip but his voice was gone and he could see better without the tears blurring his vision so he raised his head and stared at the man who hit him, and his secret rolled round and round his head even though the words felt kind of hollow against the heat of hurt and shame. When Yugito reached for him again, he stayed perfectly still, like a plush toy animal with nothing but cotton inside. No pain, no hate, just fluffy, white, stupid cotton...
“You see, Naruto?” rumbled the Fox, wrapping the belt slowly around one hand. “There is always a choice, and a consequence. You're a big boy, six years old. Old enough to choose what, exactly, you want to avoid.” Yugito's other hand curled around him, and she urged him towards the door as the man's voice rumbled one last command: “Bring him back when he's presentable; make sure he gets a hot dinner.”

Naruto's sneakers squeaked as they shuffled over marble tiles, the hot hands gripping his shoulders pushing him through each awful step. “Step it up,” urged Yugito. “Now that you've calmed down, we can get this over with quickly, and then you can have some dinner, got it?”

They were at the doorway. Naruto tried to remember if he had ever hurt this much. He was pretty sure he had, but he always forgot how truly horrible some things were the moment he stopped feeling them. It was stupid and good at the same time, being able to forget.

“No.” he didn't know he'd said it until the whisper reached his own ears, and his whole body twinged fiercely in warning. Yugito stilled, let him go, stepped back. Slowly, so slowly, Naruto turned to face the Fox, fingers curling into fists, determination sparking a tiny, flickering flame in his belly. His eyes rolled up slowly, fear creeping down each limb until it tingled in his palms and across the soles of both feet, twisting everything inside him—but he kept his eyes moving up, up, up until they stared straight into the raw challenge in the gaze aimed sharply down at him.

There was a long, breathless pause, in which the thought of puking came back full force.

“Are you saying no to me, Naruto? Is that the choice you want to make?”

He almost stopped, right there. Almost chose the smart thing. Almost cried and said he was sorry, he didn't mean to, he wouldn't do it again. But the promise was still rattling around in his mind, over and over and over.

“I don't want black hair.” He dropped his gaze to the floor, unable to look any longer at the red-grey hair and cold grey eyes watching him, or the belt coiled like a nightmare-snake in strong hands. But his tongue kept making the words and his lungs kept pushing them out. “My dad's coming to find me,” he breathed, and as the secret rushed out into the room he felt his belief in those simple words grow—it was pounding in his heart, harder truer faster. “My dad's coming to find me. He's gonna find me. I don't want black hair. I want him to recognize me right away. He's coming to find me—he's coming to find me—he's comi—"

And then he couldn't do anything but gasp and scream and try to squeeze some breath in-between the rain of overwhelming force and pain lashing over every part of him—arms, legs, wrists, neck, calves, palms. He collapsed onto cold stone and tried to curl into the smallest ball possible, but strong hands just pulled him up and shook him out again and the belt never stopped finding the spots that hurt the most. There was a breath where everything stopped and through the ringing in his ears and the trembling of each aching limb he knew what was going to happen next. He couldn't stop the urge to struggle against the hands lifting and repositioning him and baring his bruised buttocks again, but his arms and legs were so tiny, so weak with pain, that it made no difference.

The order came with the sure snarl of a dog with its jaw clenched around the throat of its prey. “Start counting.”

“One,” choked Naruto. Daddy will come. Daddy will come. Daddy please...

“I didn't hear you.” The belt struck. Naruto stuffed a fist in his mouth and bit back the scream curling helpless in his throat. I can do this. Daddy will come. The fist left his mouth ringed with
small red tooth-marks; oxygen and courage rushed in.

The belt hit again.

“One,” counted Naruto again, loud enough and clear enough that there was a grunt of acknowledgement before the next strike.

“Two...”

Thwap.

“nnnghh... THREE...”

Thwap.

“F-four—”

“Naruto.”

There were hands on him and the belt and it hurt and his face was pressing into something hot and kind of damp and—“Five,” he gasped—

“Hey—it’s okay—Naruto—”

Naruto flinched violently and the hand disappeared.

He was shaking.

He was in a car. Going where?

His hands were big. *I can fight back now, you damn old Fox. Just try—*

His hair was black.

“...Naruto? Are you awake? Look at me—Naruto—”

He had to move quickly, unexpectedly, but between the automatic tightening of the seatbelt he didn't know he was wearing and the trembling of his muscles, each action was slower than it should be. Still, he had one hand pressing the catch to release the belt buckle and the other slipping the switchblade from his waistband in the same breath it took him to count the people (two adults one-driving-one-guarding) in the car and recognize that they were going too fast to risk trying the door and jumping for it immediately. It was as he was getting his feet under him, crouching fight-ready in the cramped backseat space, that he caught a startling glimpse of his reflection in the rearview mirror: bloodshot blue eyes, mussed-up black hair, red patterned imprint of the material his cheek has been pressed against marring half his face.

His not-six-anymore face.

“We better pull over—Kushina,” came that same urgent voice, and with a shudder Naruto came fully awake.

His father was staring worriedly at him. His mom was driving, switching between checking the side-mirrors as she switched lanes and the rear-view mirror as she checked Naruto. Too-quick seconds beat by as the car swooped to a stop on the shoulder of the road, eerie yellow streetlamp-glow flooding the windows, and Naruto shrank back against the upholstered seat-back, lifting an arm to hide his face, breathing heavily.
The engine cut.

‘Naruto?’ it was Kushina this time. *I like your voice,* thought Naruto, and wanted to hit himself for the stupidity of it.

*Breathe in—two, three, four... Breathe out—two, three, four..., In—out—*

“I’m okay,” he managed, breath mostly under control. Slowly, unwillingly, he forced the arm shielding his face to fall.

What happened to me? Don’t think I was in a fight, but my body’s all messed up—wha—there was something with Sasuke—Sasuke was gonna knock me out—and then—and then—

“Do you feel sick? Naruto? Need some fresh air?” His father was speaking.

Yes. “No.” **In, out. In. At least I didn’t pull the knife on them. Out. I can’t lose control like this.** His fingers still trembled as he tucked the blade back into his waistband and slipped his cellphone out of his pocket to replace it, hoping the way Namikaze’s eyes tracked the movement was his paranoid imagination.

“We can do this another time,” said Namikaze, nearly concealing the intense emotional strain tugging his voice into sharp edges. Nearly. “Let’s forget Millennium Stadium and call it a night. You need some rest. Let’s find a hotel...”

Naruto couldn’t recall why they were driving to Millennium Stadium, but it was urgent. “No—really—I’m fine. And I was just sleeping. No more sleeping.” If he blinked a little too rapidly, swiped a hand across one cheek, surely they wouldn’t notice. “I’m... gonna call a friend. On the road again! Let’s go!” he urged cheerily, and grinned, though by the taught silence that followed, no one was buying into the mood shift. Kushina’s hand hovered over the ignition key, some sort of silent conversation flickering between her and Minato. When she turned to pin her backseat passenger with her cool grey gaze, Naruto squirmed uncomfortably, fighting to keep his phony smile steady.

“You will tell us what ‘five’ means when we talk about these things,” she promised grimly, and, supremely unfazed by the sudden tightening of Naruto’s jawline or the defiance flashing in his eyes, faced forward and floored the gas pedal.

Minato turned to the windshield with a quiet sigh as the little sedan swerved into the flow of traffic, accelerated well past the speed limit, and dangerously cut off another driver before leaving the other cars in the dust.

Naruto gulped and re-fastened his seatbelt.

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The hiss and pop of a thousand lights flickering to life cut the silence echoing round the empty cavern of Millennium Stadium; Minato felt each reverberation trickle down his spine as drops of ice water. His fingers itched to reach and hold his son (a wrist, a shoulder, the hem of his hoodie; anything to keep him tangible) so he kept his hands in his jacket pockets, where they clenched into painful fists. If he was right—and when it came to issues of fact, detail or memory, he always was
—this would be the place where a second chance could finally, finally begin.

“It was nine years ago,” he said. “Closer to eight and a half, to be more precise. A fundraiser anniversary rematch of the World Cup game between Konoha and Iwa. I was listed as a guest player and would have opened the game as part of the starting lineup, but I left before it even started.”

Naruto twitched and hunched further into his hoodie, muscles visibly taut through the thick folds of cloth. He seemed hesitant, or wary, and offered no encouragement for Minato to continue his story, but he kept close as they trecked a path through the bleachers. A door slammed and both heads snapped round to view the source of the sound; apparently satisfied with the lighting, Kushina swung out of the control booth and started briskly toward them. Minato paused to watch her, the sensation of cold fingers crawling up his spine intensifying.

“...I'd been receiving anonymous texts for twenty-four hours,” Minato continued, swallowing against the potent grip of mixed anxiety and anticipation swelling a painful lump in this throat. “In patterned intervals of minutes. Threats. Made me really jumpy.”

Naruto's eyes cut sideways to watch him.

“Things like, 'I keep what is mine,' and warnings to stop looking for you—that's how I interpreted them, anyway.” Minato swallowed thickly. He had tried to stay calm, to collect this potential source of information and allow it to be analyzed from every angle. But what he thought he understood was terrifying in the way waking from a nightmare, knowing it is a nightmare, and still being unable to shake the unreasoning, mind-devouring fear from paralyzed limbs is terrifying. The pattern of minutes between each message could have meant so many things—it went seven, ten, ten, seven, ten, ten, seven, ten, ten, seven....


“Who was the 'I'?” Naruto's voice was startlingly quiet and rough around the edges and nearly swallowed in the hugeness of the room. “From the text messages. Who was 'I'?”

“...We were unable to confirm who wrote the messages,” hedged Minato, watching Naruto as closely as Naruto was watching him. “But the number was one that had belonged to Kushina's deceased grandfather. His land-line number—that was before mobile phones, so coincidence was a possibility.”

Naruto just looked confused. “My mom's... grandfather? Like my great-grandfather?”

Minato nodded. “He'd been dead for more than a decade. At least we believed he was. Now...” his eyes traced the scars etched cruelly across his's son's smooth skin. “...Now I'm not so sure.”

“You still haven't explained how we're going to find answers here,” interrupted a new voice, and both men jerked guiltily towards Kushina, who was striding towards them with a scowl. “Or which answers we're looking for. Or why you needed all the lights on. Do you have any idea how big the electricity bill for this place is? I don't, because when a number has that many zeros I make Obito handle it. Think of global warming!”

Minato couldn't help it; he smiled at her. She never was one for dramatic warm-ups to a conflict or revelation, and offered a welcome counterpoint to the mounting tension. “Right,” he said. “I'll cut right to it. We need to take a look in the VIP box.”

“Any particular VIP box?” she queried, pushing past them and taking the lead with a rather snappy
pace. “Or is the nearest one fine?”

“Any of them will be fine,” Minato replied. He could remember exactly which of the four he had stared at that day, but this wasn't about the exactness of his recall. The jingle of a great many keys mingled with their footsteps as Kushina searched through the key-ring she'd taken charge of, finding the appropriate key for the VIP box nearest them. By the time he and Naruto caught up with her, she had the door open and was giving herself a tour of the place. It was a small, expensively furnished room balanced at the edge of the second-floor balcony, floor-to-ceiling glass offering a million-yen view of shining ice reflecting several thousand lights.

For a moment the three stood in silence, Naruto and Minato shuffling in awkwardly while Kushina milled about, encountered a remote and started using it to try to turn the array of TV screens on. In seconds Naruto was reflecting her fidgeting in his own restless limbs.

“What now?”

“Just wondering if any of this seems... at all familiar, at all like what you remember from—from what you told me tonight,” began Minato, and Kushina looked up sharply. “If you and I are remembering the same thing, you would have been in a room like this one when I—when you—when you saw me.”

“I don't remember—” began Naruto, but then stopped, staring fixedly at the glass. Under no conscious command, his feet moved forward, pulling him by small, hesitant steps until he was pressed against the glass wall, breath fogging the clear surface.

“If you had been standing in front of the glass—the perspective would have been a little different, because you would have been so—so small—” the words cracked, and Minato stopped to breathe. “Just—just wait,” he managed, and nearly ran for the door. He took the stairs to the lower level three and a four at a time, vaulting down into the tunnel leading from changing rooms to the rink and over the boards onto the ice with enough speed to send him skidding over the surface on the tractionless soles of his expensive street shoes, nothing but innate balance and long experience keeping him standing.

The shapes of the arena whirled around him in a double vision: one the empty greys and blues of abandoned bleachers ringing round blinding whites of untouched ice and silence; the other a remembered mess of roaring crowds and faces undulating with waving flags and pumping fists. There had been music blaring and his name reverberating through the loudspeaker as he sailed to center ice.

He had been a mess of nerves, the rabid beast of consuming fear barely suppressed in the hollows of his gut. Instinct, fueled by the sinister texts and what he read between their lines, had made him desperate and unreasonable for hours before arriving at the arena, and his need to protect Kushina had backfired spectacularly, leading to their worst fight to date. Had the text messages not directed him to this game—and any hope of unraveling the plot behind them—he never would have set foot in Millenium Stadium.

Now he swirled to a stop in on empty ice, turning slowly to stare at his own reflection.

iuUui
Was it here? I remember the glass—and a dark room—but—but if it was here, and he remembers, why—why—Naruto's breath fogged the glass, and a stepped away, tugging nervously at his bangs. Kushina came to stand beside him.

“You were here, Naruto? When?” her voice was soft and urgent.

“...Maybe,” said Naruto, glancing at her and looking just as quickly away. “I was eight...”

Kushina sucked in air sharply, and bit her lip. Through the window, Minato could be seen, clearing the boards with ease and sliding, uncontrolled, over the ice.

“I could see him,” whispered Naruto, “and I tried to make him look at me, there were lots of people so I wasn't sure he would hear me but he did—and he came sprinting closer and was staring right at me—”

Down on the rink, Minato turned slowly, looked up at them. Naruto barely registered the warmth and wetness sliding down his cheeks.

“I was so happy.” The hand gripping his hair pulled painfully, and Naruto withdrew it quickly, turning away from the glass the memory of joy and relief swelling so painfully he still couldn't breathe around it.

Kushina rested a small, warm, impossibly gentle palm on his arm. “Did you try to get to him? Did someone stop you?”

“No,” said Naruto, and his breath shuddered. “He saw me and his face changed... just like they said it would. They were right.”

“Right about what, Naruto?”

“That if he saw me with—with my scars—” his fists clenched, he made them open; allowed his eyes to press closed. “--Even if he was my dad, he wouldn't want me. No one would.”

The palm on his arm became a grip, but it didn't hurt, and every finger was warm. “That's what they told you?”

“Everytime I insisted that Namikaze Minato was my father.” He opened his eyes, faced his mother full-on. “They were right.”

Kushina looked back at him steadily, grey eyes wide and clear and every line of her face telling some story: anger, pride, compassion, empathy. Sorrow.

“He didn't see you,” she said.

Naruto jerked his head sideways, looking pointedly at where Minato was still watching them, as if he could read every word through the glass.

“It's one-way glass, Naruto,” she said softly. “Window on one side, mirror on the other. All he can see is his own reflection.”

Unbelieving, Naruto stared at her, then took long fast steps out of the room and down the aisle to where regular bleachers lined up at the edge of the balcony. The front of the VIP boxes wasn't clearly visible—the reflective quality could be due to the angle—so he gripped the railing and leaned out over the ice, twisting his head to the side so he could measure the glass from the other side.
It was a mirror. A mirror showing nothing but bleachers and wall and ice and empty space made for too many people.

A hand fisted in the back of his jacket and he leaned back, pulling away instinctively.

“It wasn't your face that he saw that day, Naruto,” said Kushina, allowing him to step away, dropping the hand that had held him. Minato was still standing on the ice, alone, waiting. “It was mine.”

“It was Kyuubi.”

Sasuke stilled, the hand holding his phone seizing, straining to hear over the sound of rushing water Naruto was using to mask their conversation. “What do you mean?”

“It wasn't—wasn't Dad's fault, that he couldn't find me,” gasped Naruto, and Sasuke knew that the boy must be pacing, aching, lost. “It was that effing Fox. He made me think—made us both think—Dad thought he'd killed Mom—”

“Dobe. Sentences. Use complete sentences.”

Naruto slowed down a bit at the familiar rebuke. “Ahgh. Okay. You know my scars.”

Sasuke didn't say anything. Of course he knew those scars.

“So that's what Kyuubi used to do to the people he killed. You know.”

Sasuke did know. Naruto was the only person to have ever been found alive with marks like that. The only one whose wounds had time to turn to scars. They were the signature of a serial murderer.

“He made me think that Dad would see them like everyone else. You know, be scared and shit. Hate me. Run away from me.”

“Hn,” agreed Sasuke. Very few people could look at Naruto without recalling gruesome images of mutilated corpses.

“Then he set Dad up.”

Naruto was using the word 'Dad' very freely, Sasuke noted.

“Sent him text messages. Threatened Mom. Made him desperate to keep her from—from disappearing. Like me.”

Sasuke waited.

“Then he let me see him, but he couldn't see me—all he could see was mom—a reflection of a picture or a projection or something—Mom—with scars like—like mine—”
“How could he not see you?”

“That kind of glass in crime shows, like a mirror on one side, you know? And Dad totally freaked, and that's when he ran—I thought it was because of me—”

_It wasn't because of you, dobe. I could have told you that._ But Sasuke said nothing.

“—he just had to get to Mom, and she was fine, it was all a set up. But I bought it—for all these years, I thought... I thought...”

“Naruto. Are you crying?”


“Good.”

More not-very-muffled-sniffling.

“You believe everything they say?”

“Yeah. I believe it.”

Of all the things Sasuke would blithely deny, Naruto's uncanny ability to detect truth was not one of them. “I see.”

“Right?” asked Naruto.

“Hn. Are you staying there tonight?”

“Um... yeah... I'm not really sure, Dad's calling for takeout right now... Thai food, he said...”

Sasuke groaned and it turned into a yawn. “Why'd you call me at 2:00 am, idiot.”

“Yah, whatever, you weren't sleeping.”

He hadn't been.

“Hey, Sasuke...thank you.” The words were far too quiet for ones spoken by Naruto, even over the phone.

“Dobe.”

“Yeah?”

“Come back.”

“Of course I'll come back, dumbass. It's just a long drive and it's already been a long night, plus it's not my car, y'know? I need to check on Hina-chan. And we have practice tomorrow anyway. I have to come back.”

Eased by the latent anxiety edging those words, Sasuke grunted an affirmative. But the next promise turned that bit of relief to a roaring wave of warning.

“And I've got a Fox to kill.”

“You're not killing anyone.” Sasuke was sitting up in bed now, feet searching for slippers. If he had to take the moped to the capital in the freezing dead of night, Naruto would have hell to pay.
“Naruto. I'm serious. Itachi did not put his career on the line for you to end up in jail for murder.”

He hoped for an irritable knock-down, or maybe an oafish claim that he'd been joking. He got silence.

“Naruto,” he growled. He was at the door now.

“He broke my family.”

Itachi's bedroom light snapped on; Sasuke could see it under the crack of the door. “And you think he's not using you now just like he did back then?” he demanded, exasperated. But mostly scared. The coat closet's door squealed in protest as he wrenched it wide, grabbing for his thickest winter coat shoved in the very back. “You said he sent a message today. You said he knows something about your parents. Do you somehow imagine that he didn't leave room for all of this? That he somehow didn't consider you believing your dad's story or something? That you wouldn't come looking for revenge? Look, you complete and utter idiot, I know about broken family—” he had to stop, catch his breath, and come up with something to do about Itachi, who was standing between him and the front door, looking murderous.

“Of course I've thought of that,” said Naruto tightly. “But. I can't. This time, I just can't.”

“The hell—can't what—” Itachi was advancing towards him now, and Sasuke was feeling more than a little nervous.

“I should have killed him before.”

“You telling me you tried?” Sasuke wished he was hearing this wrong.

Naruto laughed, a tired, frustrated, I-have-no-other-way-to-deal-with-life laugh. “No. If I'd gone through with it, I would have succeeded.”

“I let myself walk away,” Naruto was saying. “'Cause I love him. Do you have any idea how messed up that is? I love him. Like... like a father. Or something. Hah. I'm so messed up, Sasuke, and it's all because of him, and I can't stop this time, I have to—have to do something before he finishes whatever this is he's started—it will never end—”

Sasuke crouched on the cold entryway tiles, and didn't mind too much when the 'you've disturbed my peace, you will pay' slant to Itachi's eyebrow lowered slightly into 'okay, now I'm worried about you, the world will pay'. “Yeah, Naruto,” Sasuke managed, after a moment. “It's screwed up. All of it.”

“I don't wanna be like him,” Naruto whispered. The rush of water—must be a shower, it was too loud for a tap—swallowed the words, but Sasuke caught the shape of them. “It's not—Sasuke, it's not—it's not revenge. Though I want that too. I want it bad.”

Sasuke listened.

“I think he put us together so he can take us apart again.”

Horror rushed down Sasuke's spine, lodged an ache in his chest.

“I... I got too independent. This is just another consequence.”
“Naruto... is there something he wants from you?”

The line was quiet.

“...I gotta go. Gotta get in the shower before they come in to fish me out.”

There were so many things Sasuke thought he should say, wanted to say, that no words would form.

“Just... pay attention. Don't go near the Gates. Stay close to Itachi. Or let him stay close to you. ...Please.”

“Worry about yourself, dead last.”

Dial tone filled his ear. Sasuke wasn't sure if his last words had been heard, or not.

He didn't think it would make a difference either way.

Curled between cold sheets, Hinata hugged a frog-shaped hot water bottle and stared at Naruto's plants. *I am so happy for you, Naruto-kun. The thoughts grew from her heart like a prayer. Please be well. Please be safe. There is so much joy waiting for you. I want to teach my child to be like you. You are everything bright and strong, warm and good...* her baby kicked, and she placed a hand over the spot, smiling through her tears.

*Naruto-kun... you saved us both... Thank you...*

Tomorrow she would leave this apartment to settle in the home Neji-niisan arranged. The loneliness had already set in her bones, and for a moment she selfishly wished that Naruto could have been with her for one more night, that their life together could have lasted through one more morning.

But now Naruto would be free. With Minato and Kushina watching over him and providing for him, his life would be his own for the first time: he could study anything he wanted, travel anywhere he wanted, be with anyone he wanted...

*Be happy, Naruto-kun. Please, please be happy, and even if I can see it only from a distance, your smile will always be sunshine to me.*
Chapter 10

The first time he stepped into the cage, he was so blinded by the chaos of crowding, shouting voices swirling upwards in clouds of cigar and cigarette smoke to the combined beams of a dozen hack-rigged spotlights that he didn't even see his opponent until he was looking up from the dirty floor mats, lungs jarred empty and ears ringing from that first kick to the jaw. The other boy was dancing away, grinning and jeering, and it was the eyes that were open too wide, showing too much white, that finally caught Naruto's panicked, skittering gaze, and locked him onto his purpose.

Fight.

The odds for the match had been 14:1 in the other kid's favor. Those few, lucky bastards who set their bets on the fresh meat, the Fox's brat, went home rich that night.

_is it... like that?_ Naruto wondered, watching the spaces between the capital and Konoha blur by the rear passenger window. The glass was cold against his forehead, the morning light washed pale through thick clouds hanging low, and he was glad no one in the car was forcing conversation.

_It's just a fight like any other, yeah? Focus. Just focus._

His eyes fell shut, and a half-sleep crept up on him. It had been a long time since he'd felt this tired. Like his soul was tired. There was something empty, empty and hungry, in the place where all the self-loathing and desperate defiance tangled into Namikaze's rejection used to be. All these things he understood about the world were yanked up and now there was a great gaping hole and all the ugly roots were showing.

_Namikaze Minato is... my dad. The dad who was gonna find me. And he did. He found me._

_(Too late.)_

It should all be gone, that bitterness, shouldn't it? What was wrong with him? He knew the truth now, the truth was enough—must be enough—

But only a lie had let in hope, after the lights and the ice and the window-that-wasn't. A lie built on emotion without logic, because even Naruto couldn't fight logic. The lie went like this: if Namikaze Minato didn't want him, it was because Namikaze Minato wasn't really his dad. He wasn't _that_ Naruto. The lost Naruto. He was the Fox's Naruto, just like all the Nine-tails always told him. His _real_ dad was out there, somewhere, searching for him. Or his real dad was dead. Yeah, he was probably dead.

_It is Namikaze Naruto._

It sounded silly, the kind of ridiculous boast a lonely kid on a playground might shout to make his classmates actually look at him.

“Naruto? You doing okay?”

Concerned grey eyes met his through the rear-view mirror, and Naruto tried to smile. Namikaze was driving this time; Kushina was crocheting some sort of horned penguin horror in the front passenger seat, feet braced against the dash board, toes in toe-socks tapping in time to whatever it was Minato had turned the volume down on. If he wasn't so tired, so empty and anxious, Naruto might have laughed in delight over how familiarly jittery she was, how her body never held still.
Just like me.

Isn't this, like, the happiest day of my life?

“I'm okay. Mom.”

Kushina's feet dropped abruptly to the floor mats. Her shoulders tensed. Her voice came low and wondering. “It's so, so strange, hearing that.”

Something cold and cowardly knotted inside, and Naruto felt his cheeks flush, embarrassed. Kushina was twisting around in her seat, wiggling out of her seatbelt to maneuver freely and see him clearly, and all he could do was drop his head, avoiding her scrutiny childishly. Strong fingers caught his chin, forced it upward.

“Aish, kiddo, you and your faces... I mean strange in the BEST WAY POSSIBLE, got it? In the ‘all your prayers just came so true you can't believe it's really happening’ way. THAT strange. NOT whatever 'oh no everyone's gonna reject me' horrible twisted 'strange' your poor brain is trying to interpret for you. Got it?”

There was a badly-restrained snort from the driver's seat.

“So much therapy in store for this family,” grumbled Kushina, wriggling back into her seatbelt until she was sitting properly.

Naruto was still. He wondered if he would ever, could ever, get used to this.

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We're on the way up, Minato thought. He looked at Kushina, and the glimpse of their son captured by the rear-view mirror, and back to the highway stretching ahead. All of us. On the way up.

Finally.

It would be hard. Naruto didn't trust them, and they couldn't trust Naruto. Everything was tangled and uncertain and every shadow seemed sentient. But at least there was light, now. Light, Naruto, warm and breathing and sulking in the back seat.

What did I expect? That was a hard question to answer. It wasn't that he'd envisioned some utopic happily-ever-after and couldn't deal with the disillusionment. It was that finding Naruto was the happily-ever-after. Twelve years, twelve years of hopeless searching, false leads, dead ends, broken dreams, lost chances. Twelve years of believing that there was an end, that Naruto would come home, because believing anything else made every kind of future unbearable. If all the success and influence and power he'd built before the nightmare began did nothing to bring the nightmare to an end, it was all meaningless anyway.

He didn't mourn the loss of career. He'd kept enough threads running to ensure that there would always be funds for Naruto—for the search for Naruto, and for the misty happily-ever-after-dream
when Naruto would be home. Financial security was not a problem. While every part of his social life and disintegrated to a degree, he had needed help—there could never be too many eyes looking for what they'd lost—and he'd forced himself to maintain every connection that might find a clue another might miss. To this end, his place in society continued to be significant. While no longer the upstart prodigy a generation ahead of his time, he was still smart, still respected, still favored. In perfect position to give an heir everything—absolutely everything.

And none of that actually mattered. None of that had kept Naruto from disappearing. None of that had brought him back. None of that would mend the rifts in their family, heal the broken marriage, erase the cold reality that parents and child were complete strangers, or break the influence of whoever it was their son so feared.

But Naruto is home.

...They just had to figure out where, and what, home was, exactly.

When Hyuuga Neji arrived at Naruto's apartment, his cousin was packed and prepared to depart, precisely as arranged. The slightly swollen appearance of the tissue around her eyes, the subtle downturn of her shoulders, and the longing glances cast guiltily over the place she was leaving were all observations he'd dreaded, but anticipated. The disruptive presence of Naruto's teammates, on the other hand, was as unwelcome as it was unexpected.

“I get what you're doing, Hina, and why—no, I do—but you said you'd tell Naruto—at least wait until he gets back—” that was the obscenely-haired one, Haruno. Uchiha, true to his truly lamentable family character, said nothing. He also filled the front doorway with a slouch and expression so eloquent, it would take a person far, far less perceptive than a Hyuuga to mistake the message as anything other than 'thou shalt not pass'.

Neji was not impressed.

“If you are ready, Hinata-sama?” he invited, having announced his presence with a polite throat-clearing.

Wide, pale eyes jumped to his. “Neji-nii-san!”

Haruno, too, looked up in surprise. Uchiha's eyes cut his, but he offered no other greeting.

As expected of an Uchiha. No matter how fallen, they forever fail humility, courtesy, every form of gentility not granted through lineage alone....

“I'm ready, Nii-san,” murmured Hinata, and gripped the handle of her compact suitcase. Haruno frowned, but let it turn into a sympathetic grimace as Hinata's shoulders hunched, and moved aside as the latter stepped to the door. Uchiha didn't move.

“If...if you c-could let me p...pass, Sasuke-san,” whispered Hinata.
Uchiha didn't move. Neji stepped forward threateningly.

In an unusual display of courage, Hinata looked up at the scowling boy in the doorway. “Sasuke-san, I understand you... Thank you, for watching over N...n...na—” she couldn't do it, couldn't say his name. Neji cringed. Inwardly, of course. On the surface, he had positioned himself within easy reach of Uchiha, and would move the foolish teenager by force if it came to it.

“Wait for him.”

“If you would kindly not obstruct the passageway, Uchiha—” Neji kept his voice bland, the warning read perfectly in the cold slant of his eyes.

“Wait for him,” said Uchiha, again, and Hinata was staring up at the obstinate boy, bottom lip quivering traitorously.

“I agree with Sasuke,” said Haruno. Neji could feel a headache forming, just behind his eyes. This should be a simple procedure, and he had scheduled limited time—

“Naruto will be devastated if he comes back and finds his apartment empty,” Haruno continued. “He's had some big shocks lately, and he hasn't been handling things all that well, you know? I know it's hard for you, but for Naruto's sake—”

There were tears condensing on Hinata's lower eyelashes now, and protective rage flared hot in Neji's chest. For Naruto's sake? Could they not see that she was leaving, now, for Naruto's sake? Were the deepest longing and fear not plainly evident in her unguarded gaze? Was the sacrificial determination not stated baldly in the unconscious clenching of her jaw? Must they see her, humiliated, weeping at the feet of the object of her most ardent affection—

“Oh, hey, Neji,” said Naruto. “And Sasuke? Sakura-chan—Hina-chan—what is this, you guys throw parties in my place when I'm not here or something?”

“Naruto,” acknowledged Neji, a bit stiffly, glancing apprehensively towards Hinata to monitor her reaction to this... uncertain development. Behind Naruto, two disconcertingly familiar adults were emerging from the poorly lit stairwell.

“The Uchiha kid, again,” complained the tall, blond, very famous man, and Neji felt his spine snap straighter as he whirled to attention.

“Hey, who's making Hina-chan cry?!?” demanded Naruto, muscling past both Neji and Uchiha to put himself between Hinata and everyone; it seemed they had all been judged potential threats. “Is your family trying to get involved now, Neji? 'Cause I've got a few things to say to them! Don't worry, Hina-chan, we'll deal with this! We've made it through everything else successfully, yeah? Sasuke-bastard, move—”

Namikaze Minato, WoF wunderkind, legendary politician, former Prime Minister, and diplomat extraordinaire, was standing in Naruto's grimy, underlit apartment hallway. His estranged wife, who had her own abundant claims to fame, hopped in place next to him. Neither Haruno nor Uchiha seemed in any way surprised by their presence. Or Hinata, for that matter, though it was difficult to judge with how effectively she was disappearing into her bulky winter coat.

For one of very few times in his lifetime, Hyuuga Neji found himself at a loss for words.

“Let's move the fun and games inside, shall we?” ordered Uzumaki-san, and Neji found himself crowded, quite literally, into the apartment he'd come to move Hinata out of. Team 7 was arrayed automatically into what he recognized as one of several signature defensive formations (quite the
brazen brawlers, those three), with Hinata somehow in the middle and he and their famous guests on the offensive side. Namikaze Minato, the Namikaze Minato, closed the door softly behind them.

“Neji,” said Naruto, with a hint of questioning tempered by that odd haltingly-respectful nod he so rarely offered, and stared at him with wary, calculating blue eyes.

Blue eyes. Blue eyes that were very, very like another pair of blue eyes in the room.

Hinata was crying. Silently, so silently, but the glint of morning sun slanting through Naruto's window glistened tiny reflections on her cheeks. Naruto's gaze darted between them, and he tightened the arm he'd slung around Hinata's shoulders, then settled back on Neji with that same, challenging stare.

“I came at Hinata-sama's request,” Neji said, stiffly. There was too much he didn't understand here. Naruto's arm flexed again; Hinata quivered, but Neji attributed the movement to her suppressed sobs, and did not move to separate her from Naruto's hold.

“Hina... Hina-chan?” whispered Naruto, looking at the suitcase handle still clenched tightly in her right hand. Haruno watched him sympathetically, top teeth worrying bottom lip. Hinata took in a shuddering breath, let go of her suitcase, and used both hands to brush the tears from her face. She kept them there, hiding, breathing, for a moment, and when she looked up, her eyes held only determination.

“Let's... let's t-talk for a mo...moment, Narut-t-to-kun,” she whispered, and under the pressure of five intense, worried stares, they stepped through their audience and into Naruto's tiny bedroom. The silence that followed the soft snap of the bedroom door closing was one of the most awkward Neji could recall experiencing.

They weren't gone long. Barely long enough for Haruno startle and gasp, send tellingly frantic looks from the two adults in the room to Neji and back again, and mumble a quickly suppressed, “Oh! He doesn't know—” before Uchiha's pointed glare and Namikaze-sama's shifting stance shut her up. She looked back at her teammate defiantly, but didn't seem inclined to continue with her account of what Neji didn't know.

Uzumaki-san held no such reservations. “We're Naruto's parents,” she said, baldly, and leveled Neji with a look even his uncle would be hard pressed not to recoil from.

And, as Neji's world was cracking apart and chaotically rebuilding and his body stood in mute shock, his sweet cousin and her... boyfriend? ally? impregnator? protector? emerged from the other room.

Hinata looked... set. Poised. Determined. It had been a while since he'd seen her shoulders unbowed.

Naruto looked devastated.

They were holding hands.

“I'm ready, Nii-san,” was all she said, and let her fingers untangle from the hand she loved most.

“See ya, then, Hina-chan,” mumbled Naruto. His lips parted again, formed words. No sound crested them.

Neji made his gaze slowly sweep the room, trying to learn everything, everything in that strange array of faces. Beside him, Hinata opened the door.
“Then...we will be leaving first,” Neji managed, and with a slight bow, followed his confusing
cousin from the room. He took the suitcase from her, carried it carefully down four flights of stairs,
one hand free and ready to reach out, to hold her up when she collapsed.

She didn't. As they settled into his car, fastened their seat belts, and pulled away from the place
that must have been home to her for the past three months, Hinata was still. Still, dry-eyed, and
silent.

No-Longer-Hyuuga Hinata, Neji witnessed, was done crying.

Sakura didn't like what she saw in Naruto's face. From the way Sasuke was shifting, fingers
flexing, clenching and stretching open again, he didn't like it any more than she did. For the first
time since she started believing in this happily-ever-after, she found herself wishing the two adults
in the room could not be there. That they could all go back to the way the world was spinning a
week ago, when the blankness hollowing Naruto's eyes was a shadow breezily brushed away by in
simple moments of warmth and companionship with the family he'd built himself, and made her a
part of. When it was all about Team Seven and Iruka-sensei and Hina-chan and the other ice arena
kids standing between one lonely lost boy with promise as big as the sky and all the dark he
climbed from.

It was unexpectedly painful, peering in from the outside of that boy's inner circle. That center place
belonged to new hearts—to a mother and father. But judging from the tense, uncertain eye-
conversation said parents were attempting, they had no idea what to do, or even what to start trying
first... so she stepped in and wove an arm through one of Naruto's, tangling her fingers with his, and
Sasuke said, “usuratonkachi,” in his most expressively frustrated I'm-here-to-help-you-cut-the-
crap-and-let-me-do-it growl and shook Naruto by his other shoulder just so he could maintain
contact for a moment.

“We still have practice today?” asked Naruto, and his voice sounded rough, and small.

“Hasn't been canceled,” said Sakura. “Don't think Kaka-sensei would be surprised not to see us
though.”

Naruto looked up, scars stark against bloodless cheeks, eyes huge and a little bit bloodshot, and
asked, “Can I go?”

He asked for permission. Their Naruto never asked for permission. Ever. From anyone.

Hovering over Naruto's other side, Sasuke let out breath that ended in a hiss, apparently as shocked
as she was. Naruto's father watched the three of them, the skin around his eyes tensing into frown
lines and crows' feet, worry written in the shifts of leg muscles and slope of his shoulders.

“It's harder to keep you where we can reach you in the arena,” said Naruto's mother, and she didn't
look any less on guard than his father did.
“I just... I just wanna play hockey,” mumbled Naruto, and Sakura felt somewhat reassured by the familiar flavor of defiance creeping back into his expression.

And then it melted into something like submission, or desperation. “Can I... can I not do that? Play hockey?”

“You're still a run risk,” Naruto's mother said quietly. Pressing closer to his side, Sakura felt the flinch, the tension captured and coiled. *Does he really want to run,* she wondered, or does he just... not want them to watch him cry?

All the angles in the room felt sharper, all the corners growing dangerously pointed, and they stood at stalemate in the empty space Hina-chan left behind. There was so many freaking feelings in the room that there must not be enough left over for oxygen, because Sakura was beginning to feel a little dizzy.

“Why?”

They all turned abruptly to Sasuke.

“Why? Why do you get to come in and take control of someone's life? Naruto's lived well all this time, without you. So you found him. Congratulations. You're still nothing but strangers. *Random strangers.* What sort of entitlement is this, anyway?”

“Sasuke,” said Naruto, and Sakura couldn't tell if it was a warning, or if he was just really uncomfortable.

“No, really, why, Naruto? Why are you asking them if you can go to practice? They're not WoF mentors. They're not part of your contract. They're not teachers or directors or CPA officers. Even if they were any of those people, people who actually have power over your possibilities, you wouldn't listen if they told you not to play freaking hockey. So why now? Parents? They've been here for a few days, and they get to be freaking *parents*? You guys are less the perfect happy ending family you're pretending to be and more like the punchline of a really cruelly stupid joke—”

“Sasuke—” started Sakura, with no idea where to go next, but Naruto's mom was stepping forward with blazing eyes and flying hair and Sakura was afraid she was going to hit him—

Naruto beat her to it. Sasuke reeled back, white imprints of Naruto's knuckles rapidly filling in red. The corner of his bottom lip split, and a drop of blood welled. *There really isn't enough air in this room,* Sakura thought without distractedly, chest heaving as her too-fast breathing filled a second's silence.

“No,” growled Naruto. “Don't you judge me, teme. Don't you dare judge me, you, you of all people, you bastard.”

The wideness of Sasuke's eyes made Sakura almost-cry. Namikaze-san was holding Uzumaki-san, maybe preventing her from furthering Naruto's assault, but Naruto moved away from all of them, across the room and wrenching at the door before any of them had done more than inhale and move to chase after him.

The door was open. “You can get me some clothes, right?” it didn't sound like Naruto, that voice, and with nothing but her teammate's shaking shoulders to look at, Sakura couldn't fathom which emotion was writhing below it. “I don't want to come back here. Forget hockey. Let's—let's—let's go. Yeah. Let's go.”

“Naruto,” said Namikaze-san, quietly.
"I won't run," whispered Naruto, and this time Sakura could hear the panic, and the tears.

Iruka-sensei, are you texting during class?"

Umino Iruka glanced up from his smartphone just long enough to deliver his best Beware: Rabid Teacher glare. “Yes, Yuuki-kun, I am, and you know that if I am, it's because it is very, very important.”

Iruka believed in rules. He believed in consequences. But he only knew how to live heart-first, and that required the occasional damning of rules—and damn the consequences.

--Are you okay? Are you with your parents right now? He typed back to Naruto's out-of-the-blue: yo yo Iruka-sensei ^^ ~!

--ya.

--ya = yes to both counts? Did you sleep last night? Have you been eating?

--dude I know u havent rly met my mom but do u srsly think she wood let me go without eating. They give me snacks like every 20 min

Iruka smiled. It was good to know that someone was mothering Naruto. He was frequently accused of doing it himself, but the reality was that he simply didn't have the time and resources to give Naruto all the good he deserved.

--Good to hear.

--Iruka-sensei

--yes, Naruto

--its a good thing right

--it?

--my parents

--I think it's a miracle that your parents found you, and that having them in your life will be a very good thing. But they're still people you don't know, and you can't force a relationship out of nowhere. So yes, a good thing, but also a hard thing

--do u think their good ppl

--I think they're good people, yes. But I don't know them so I can only guess based on what the general public knows about them. I think you can judge for yourself, Naruto.
There was a long pause, and Iruka re-read his messages to make sure he hadn't typed in words he wasn't sure Naruto could read.

--i think i can trust them

The ragged mix of fondness, elation, and worry was stirring about in Iruka's soul was becoming a physical ache, tugging away right in the middle of his chest. He tried to choose his words carefully, but they spilled onto the screen in a rush of sincerity instead.

--that makes me so happy, Naruto! You're an excellent judge of character. Trust them. Build up from there.

--ok
thx sensei

--Any time. Really.

For a moment, Iruka just stared the screen, wondering if everything was really going to be okay. It buzzed against his fingers as one last message appeared.

--miss u Irka-sensei

--Learn how to type my name, you brat. I miss you too. All the time. So keep in touch.

I'll take you out for ramen.

When you have time.

He kept his phone in his hand, waiting for any further messages, but as he made the rounds of his classroom, checking each student's work and offering encouragement and correction, trying to stay focused so he could admonish his kids to do the same without descending into hypocrisy, no more messages came.

They all had problems, these kids; that's how they ended up in his classroom. Behavioral problems, emotional problems, academic problems... and there was always so much more going on behind the scenes, things that happened at home or in bathrooms or anywhere a nosey adult like Iruka couldn't see, and every day was its own special tragedy, because all he could do was be there and make his classroom as much of a sanctuary as it could be within the limits of educational law and school hours. He fought for them because someone had to fight for them, and wrote their specialized education plans with all the reckless hope and strict realism seven years of teaching experience had taught him, and sometimes he even made a difference he could measure and then it seemed like it might all be worth it in the end. Most of the time he just poured everything in and tried to believe that one good teacher, one dedicated adult who acknowledged and valued each troubled existence, one human being looking up and seeing another human being could be the invisible shield fending off one more tragedy.

Some days it was really hard to believe. But Naruto happened.

Naruto. The kid who came in stunted and scarred, taught muscles under scratchy new clothes, saying he was twelve years old when no one would look at him and guess more than eight or nine.

He would have been about ten, actually, if Iruka was remembering the age of the thought-to-be-dead Namikaze child correctly. He was small even for ten. His guardian had enrolled him at the local middle school, who had referred him to Iruka's elementary school, because the middle school had no idea what to do with a kid who couldn't read. Iruka's school didn't know either. They just
dumped him on Iruka and all his shiny ambitions and alternative educational philosophies he'd been annoying the veteran staff members with.

Iruka taught Naruto to read. Iruka discovered Naruto's uncanny ability for mental math. Iruka made Naruto promise not to hit someone in school, not anyone, for any reason, ever again, and Iruka administered the ice-packs and plasters when Naruto was too obedient, heartbreakingly obedient, and kept that promise through every playground scuffle and ganged-up bullying he so naturally became the brunt of.

Most of the wounds Iruka discovered, on the times he managed to catch Naruto in time and drag him into the classroom for validation and disinfectant, could not have been caused by pre-teen children, no matter how cruel those children could be.

So Iruka went to court. And got a job in the middle school. And saw that Naruto graduated from primary school, and was admitted to that middle school, and taken away from his guardian, and then taken away from a series of terribly unseeing foster families, until Naruto won his right to live as an emancipated minor.

And then Iruka got Naruto into WoF.

thx sensei

Such a simple text. It didn't take much, really, to be absolutely sure that it really was, all of it, worth it.

. vLvLv

“You haven't visited before.”

I didn't think you'd consent to see me, thought Sasuke, and kept his lips resolutely pressed as all his courage went to lifting his eyes from the heavy countertop to the face behind the glass.

Uchiha Fugaku looked thin and old and not at all the father Sasuke came here to see. The folds parenthesizing the downturned mouth were as stern and dissatisfied as they'd been in every childhood memory, but the shoulders were slanting, as if he'd stood so long against frigid wind that he couldn't stand any other way. The eyes cut sharp and cold, precise, without passion.

“You've grown tall.”

Sasuke nodded once, dumbly, like a tongue-tied child.

“Well?”

Don't you dare judge me.

“You mother seemed well when I saw her last. Has something happened in the interim?”

Cursing the words for mixing in his head instead of marching firmly from his mouth, Sasuke shook
his head again, this time in the negative. Two months. Two months and eight days. In two months and eight days, his father's term would end, and they would be a family again. So he told himself for years, looked forward to, prepared himself for. Had thought he was prepared for.

The frown was deepening, displeasure etching all the new lines on his father's face as deep as the old ones. Fugaku cleared his throat, and Sasuke forced himself to hold his gaze, to do something, anything, to earn more than disregard in his father's eyes.

“Mother is well,” he nearly choked on the stiffness of the words, but they came. “We...we are all waiting for you.” Where will Itachi go? The thought came suddenly, unbidden, glaring blinding light through the dusty mental windows of internal avoidance and denial. He had hated Itachi, at first, or tried to, but then... but then Itachi was Itachi, and as long as Sasuke was Sasuke he would love and resent Itachi in equal measure. Helplessly.

Itachi won't live with us anymore. He can't, not if Father comes home. And Naruto's face, fine muscles stretched in fight-or-flight grimace, blue eyes burning and: DON'T YOU DARE JUDGE ME, YOU, YOU OF ALL PEOPLE, you bastard.

“There's... there's a championship game,” said Sasuke. The season schedule he'd printed as an excuse for this visit shivered slightly in his fingers, so he kept it hidden below the window until he could make his hands stop shaking, not give this lack of control away. “Against Suna. Or possibly Kumo. But most likely Suna. I wanted to come... to come to invite you. To the game. It will be the first game after... it will be in seventy-five days.” You are free in sixty-nine days.

“Hockey?”

Sasuke couldn't tell if his father's growl conveyed opinion or not. “Yes, father,” he answered, and hoped that hockey was still acceptable. It had been—before.

“You invite me to the championship game, seventy-five days in advance, before the championship has begun?”

This time it was easier to meet his gaze, let the experience of his own abilities shine through—even if only a little. “Yes, father.”

The sound that came next was so startling, so far from anything Sasuke had steeled himself for, that it took a beat before he could accept what it was.

Fugaku chuckled. It was a brief, aborted sound, but it held mirth, and it was a chuckle.

“Ah,” said the man, leaning back from the window, shoulders drawing back to nearly fill his remembered frame. “I accept.”

Sasuke looked up, brimming hope and sparking anxiety.

“Play in the championship. I will be there.”
“You can still play hockey, Naruto, we just need to get... get a plan working, something we can all work with. We're... pretty much starting a new life here. With a lot of complications. But we'll get things worked out. I promise.”

“We know your championship's just months away, kid. I'm not going to miss seeing you play in that. Kakashi-brat said they need you to win.”

“Yes. What your mom said. But since you don't seem to be up for a lot of talking right now... could you take a look at this?”

For the first time, Naruto spoke. “What's this?”

“It's a real estate catalogue. Would you like to choose a house?”

“...a house?”

“Or a flat. For us. All of us. To live in. Together. Along with a lot of security guards...”

“Fat lot of good your security guards have done so far, baka-no-Minato.”

“It's not my fault our son is a ninja, Kushina darling.”

“Heh. You're right. All your skills, kid, you got them STRAIGHT from me. Your Mama, the Amazing, Beautiful, Outstanding, Dauntless, Undefeated, One-and-only—”

“Tomato,” whispered Minato. And ran.

For the first time, Naruto smiled.
Chapter 11

“...Where do we start?”

Haloed in lamplight and huddled over a hastily brainstormed notepad page, Kushina looked up at Minato and offered a helpless shrug.

“With the kids you and Obito were working with... where did you start?”

“That was a bit different,” groaned Kushina. “For one, I wasn’t one of the problems. And I don’t think there’s a kid in the world with a pile of problems as consternating as our kid’s. Plus we don’t even know what most of the problems are. This is like trying to decide which colored wire to cut on a freaking bomb.”

“Could you please avoid such accurate metaphors? I’m trying to hold back on the overprotective streak.”

“Aww, sweetie. Even if you're doing a terrible job of the not being overprotective bit.”

“Kushina. We've had him for three days. He successfully ran away twice, hinted that it's not safe for us to be his parents because someone dangerous and with significant influence over him hates us; purposefully misled us and Kakashi, hacking into your email and booby-trapping Rin to do so; tried to run away a third time, got into a fight that started with him being strangled and ended with him doing the strangling, passed out during a panic attack, broke up with his pregnant girlfriend, and punched his best friend in the face for questioning his motives. I'd say anything short of a locking him in a panic room with a fully armed escort is doing a pretty decent job of holding back. Give me some credit, hey?” By the end of his recitation, Minato had run out of fingers to tick, so he wagged them all at Kushina to make his point.

“Okay okay, here's your credit. When you put it like that... sheesh. I told you I'm proud of you. Now back to the list.”

“Yes.” Minato skimmed over their notes again, and stabbed a bullet point. “School. We can tackle that one. Let's meet with the WoF directors before any of this gets out just to make sure they'll handle things gracefully, because as long as he can stay in WoF, school is taken care of. Though he might need a tutor to help bring up his grades.”

“Makes sense,” agreed Kushina. “He's broken an awful lot of WoF standards, but if Kakashi's managed to keep all of that quiet this far, risk should be pretty low. Plus extenuating circumstances. So many extenuating circumstances...”

“...Including the extenuating circumstance where he seems to have gotten another WoF pupil pregnant.”

Kushina let out a long breath. “Yeah. That too. We need to talk about Hinata.”

“What happened at the apartment today? I interpreted things as Hinata having made her own decision to leave and Naruto accepting it, but I couldn't piece together how or why. What did you see?”

Kushina was quiet, thinking the question over. What had stood out to her most? First she'd been worried about Hinata, and Hinata's child—she couldn't bring herself to accept the word grandchild quite yet, but the idea had lodged in her heart without even that much permission—and then she
had seen Naruto's face, and reason was eclipsed.

“I saw my baby's heart get broken,” she said, and wished she hadn't been some of the cause of it. “He was really, really sad, Mina-kun.”

Minato sighed wearily. “I thought that was one part of his life, at least, that we could let him keep. Not that I can think about our kid having a kid for more than two thoughts without experiencing some mild internal hysteria, but, you know, if it's the gangs or the girlfriend, I have nothing against the girlfriend.”

Kushina snickered and blew her nose, adding to a growing pile of used kleenex. “Mild inner hysteria indeed. Grandpa.”

Minato ignored her. “Hinata's a good girl. I'd stake a lot on that belief, and I'm glad she's part of Naruto's life. Maybe we just need to communicate that to her more clearly.”

“Yah. Here's the deal. We track down whichever Hyuuga crony rushed her away today, tell him we'll cut off all his pretty hair if he doesn't reveal where he's stashed our precious baby's sweetheart, break into her hideout, make her promise to stop stepping on Naruto's heart and convince her we're motivated by more than keeping our potential grandchild within reach as we cart her off to live with us... all very sensitively and diplomatically-ttebane. You wanna drive?”

“Absolutely. Let's call her first, of course. It's only polite to schedule an appointment when carting off a damsel-causing-distress.” Tapping up a contact from his address book, Minato slid his phone across the table for Kushina's perusal.

“You hacked Naruto's phone. Already.”

“It didn't even have a security code—no hacking, no foul. And you took time to notice Hyuuga-kun's luscious hair.”

“Your locks are turning grey, Mina. I have to fulfill the lust for luscious somewhere.” Only half-present in their banter, Kushina stared at Minato's screen, where Hinata's name and number offered new problems and solutions to sort through.

“We need to include Naruto in these decisions as much as we can,” she said, reluctantly diving back into the deep end of their conversation. “He knows more than we do, he's used to making his own decisions, and he doesn't trust us. We have a much better chance at making things work if we're all on the same side, and even if you and I will always be on Naruto's side, I don't think he sees things that way. So let's put him in the loop and see if he stays there.”

“Then we're back to the ticking bomb analogy. Every time we begin to introduce a decision, there's a volatile reaction we weren't prepared for—hmm, maybe we should switch our morbidly violent comparison from bomb to minefield? As much as Naruto isn't ready to trust us, we already know we can't trust him.”

“Don't give up so easily, Minato. After what we saw today, I think we can trust him—trust that he is really trying to give us a chance. Try to see things from his perspective.”

“I've never given up, Kushina.”

Silence flowed in from the shadows, heavy with all the years Minato existed only for the impossible, while Kushina learned to live with the probable. She put a hand on his forearm, giving warmth hesitantly. The muscle twitched and tensed beneath her fingertips.
“I didn't mean it that way. Sorry for saying it, though.”

“It's the variables, Kushina. Enemies we know exist—and nothing else. We can't let everything be variable. We have to make some constants... you know what I can't stop wondering? How many hours we have left with him.”

“Minato...”

“There's nothing I can control here. Nothing I can make constant. I've been fighting this invisible adversary since the moment Naruto disappeared and I haven't won against them once. I have very little confidence that what is happening now—Naruto being with us, right now—is anything but the feint before checkmate. Naruto is just the last piece on the gameboard.”

“That's not truth,” snapped Kushina. “That's theory, not truth. And even if it's true, we can't think that way. It's paralyzing.”

Minato said nothing.

“What would they want from you? You already gave up everything. Your political career, your home in Konoha...me.”

“Two out of three,” said Minato, quietly. “Giving you up... I can't do it.”

“Oh,” she said, and the warmth of her hand pressed deeper with the new strength of her grip. “Oh. Don't. Don't give up.”

They lived a small time together in the lamplight. Then, “Okay,” said Kushina. “Let's get Naruto. Let's show him our list. Ask him where to start. We'll just keep not giving up, yeah?”

“Mmm,” agreed Minato, and together they stood.

Naruto braced his arms and bowed his head and tried to think of nothing at all but hot water rushing over him.

It was a good thing he'd already established that he liked long showers. Which he didn't—but when everything you did was watched by a team of professional bodyguards as well a two strangers who were also your parents, any excuse for a little privacy was golden.

He probably shouldn't have hit Sasuke. Sasuke shouldn't have said that about his parents. Weren't they doing what parents were supposed to do? And Hinata-chan—

**Water**, he forcefully redirected. *Lots and lots of water. Feels just like any other water. Like the locker room showers or my apartment's shower or—*

*You need to protect your family,* Hinata had said, one hand on his cheek, big pale eyes staring earnestly up at him. *You're my family,* he said, and the smile she showed him then made him feel
all warm and broken all at once, like he did something that made the world extra beautiful but it
would last only a day before it was gone forever. Neji-nii-san will protect me, she promised. He
will take care of me and B...baby-ch-chan. You need to take care of you, now, okay? Okay, Naruto-
kun? You get to be a son now, you get to make your mom and dad proud, you get to see them s-
smile at you, please, Naruto-kun?

Of course that didn't convince him. But she stepped back anyway, dropped her gentle hand,
stopped looking at him, hid her believing eyes. Pl-please, please understand... I don't l...like the
lights, Naruto-kun. There will be s...so m-many reporters, and-and-and cameras, and c-crowds,
and qu...questions. I d-don't want them to s-say th-things about this child. About us. I don't want-t
them t-to m-make up st-stories. P-please, Naru--naru-t-t--

What could he do?

Okay, he said, so she could breathe again, speak again. Okay, Hinata-chan, but—

She was looking up at him again, and it was like when the sun pierces holes in the clouds, making
these glowing lines of light dancing down to the cold grey ground, like when he imagined that it
was angels looking out for people that made the light do that, and he couldn't finish.

Thank you, she breathed, looking like light. He wanted to tell her so many things. Things about
what it felt like, coming home to her. Things about the baby he was waiting so anxiously to meet,
about how he loved that baby so much he couldn't breathe sometimes, even though when he saw
pictures of twenty-two-week-old in-belly babies they mostly looked like aliens. About how the day
he saw her fighting off her aunts in front of the clinic and got to rescue her by against-the-rules
stopping his bus and blocking all the traffic was one of his favorite memories, ever, and that the
food she cooked was the most delicious he ever tasted, except maybe Ichiriku-san's ramen. That
waking up in the dead of night and remembering she was there reminded him it really was a good
thing, living.

He didn't tell her anything. She was right. She didn't need him and the mess of his life spilling into
hers. She had enough hard things to deal with. Now that she knew Neji hadn't sided with the rest of
their family, that he wouldn't just turn Hinata over to her father like he was supposed to, that he
could and would support her, Neji was obviously the better choice.

She left.

What was he going to do, anyway, marry her? He had thought about it, a bit. He probably wasn't in
love with her, he didn't think about her all the time and have weird dreams and stuff like he had
with other girls he'd crushed on, but he loved being close to her. At first she was so weird and shy
that they could hardly even talk to each other and she was always turning red and having trouble
breathing and stuff and it make him feel awkward, anxious, and confused. But then she started
showing up on his bus routes all the time and the look in her eyes (when he was lucky enough to
catch a glimpse before they were hidden beneath all those dark lashes) was something he had
never seen in someone looking at him before, and it made his insides feel funny in a really bubbly-
good kind of way, and she was so cute and mysterious and different from all the other kids he
knew, until seeing her standing with her perfect posture and her blushing cheeks as he pulled a bus
up to a curb became one of his favorite things in the world.

And then she had needed help, and he was there when she needed it, and he got to save her.

Thank you, Naruto-kun.

Naruto slammed the water off, found a towel to shove his face in, pretended it was only shower
water his face needed drying from. I don't cry, he told himself furiously, I don't. It wouldn't have been a lie, a week ago. There were new clothes set out on the counter: one set of dozens Namikaze Minato had picked out just for him, crazily, giddily happy that he could finally “do something like a dad”. Kushina has lasted all of fifteen minutes into the shopping expedition before throwing in the towel (or a few boxed sets of designer boxers, in this case) and stalking off in search of a “chocolate-chocolate milkshake with hot fudge and triple malt, some caramel on top”. Rin-san and Sasuke's weird relative showed up within minutes and split up just as quickly. Obito legged it after Kushina, looking very relieved to have an excuse not to compare denim washes, as Rin and Minato were already blissfully doing.

Naruto just stood in the dressing room, and tried things on, and let Rin exclaim over how handsome he was, and stole looks at his dad, who looked like he didn't know what to do with himself, like he was happy and didn't remember how to be.

He didn't look like himself in the new clothes. But it was either put them on or dress again in the rumpled tracksuit he'd put on the day before, when he was planning his escape into the underground and missing the Takigakure game and ended up finding memories in Millenium Stadium and sleeping fully-clothed in a hotel room he shared with his father somewhere in the too-bright center of the Capital.

It hit his sixth sense first; he was barely into the silky new boxers when the hair stood up on his arms and the base of his scalp tingled in warning. There was a half-formed thought where he wished he was clothed—but there was only the bedroom door between the intruder in his bedroom and the other people in the suite, very very important other people, so the knife he'd stashed under the towels was in his hand and he was shoving at the door before his brain had named what his instincts were screaming at him.

He didn't know if it was the window latch he'd heard or a stray footstep, but the window was closed and the security cameras were still methodically sweeping when he burst through the door and leapt for the protective shadow of the wardrobe. He knew all exits were alarmed and there were two bodyguards just outside the door and more watching the feeds from the CCTV in a hastily assembled safe room. He still wasn't surprised to hear the low, creepy voice menacing from the too-black patch of twilight on the other side of the wardrobe.

“Naruto. What are you doing?”

“Showering,” he said into the dark. “Can't you smell the soap? It's like a flying angel crashed and puked flowers on my head.” Maybe he recognized that voice; fierce relief filled up his chest fast enough to make him dizzy. Cold caution kept him still.

“Were you shaving as well, or do you always shower with a knife?”

It IS him! A little unbalanced by the second surprise of the completely expected ambush, Naruto peered around the edge of the wardrobe, the blade in question snapping shut. “Gaara?!”
Gaara stood still and absorbed the damp Naruto-attack, wondering which would run out first, his patience or their time.

Naruto was in the middle of an anxious-slash-elated flood of questions Gaara hadn't had a chance to answer when the bedroom door smashed open. Security agents with tasers (and two with weapons considerably more lethal) stormed the room, cutting around them to block the bedroom window and bathroom door, all but one low-volt taser pointed carefully at Gaara's vital points. At least, Gaara mused, they knew enough to keep something trained on Naruto. Even such a useless something.

Naruto went from over-enthusiastic hug to defensive stance with his usual perfect reflexes. The knife was out and he angled his body into lines of fire from as many angles as possible, protecting Gaara, teeth bared and limbs ready.

_Time_, concluded Gaara, watching Naruto fondly, and not moving. Two new agents stepped in and completed a thorough sweep of the room as Naruto's laborious thought-process finally caught up with his instincts, and he dropped out of fight-ready and crashed into blooming mortification. His cheeks and ears were burning a fetching pink as he straightened from a half-crouch to slump dejectedly against Gaara, still playing the human shield, and slowly, explicitly, tapped his blade into its handle. He tossed the weapon at the nearest booted feet and let it be snatched up by a gloved hand while he slapped his own palms over his blushing face.

“Aw, shit. Sorry. This... this is embarrassing.”

Gaara carefully patted one bare shoulder. “We can tell them I'm your lover,” he offered tonelessly, as Uzumaki Kushina and her notorious husband stepped wide-eyed into the room.

“Naruto!” gasped Namikaze-san. “Are you—is everything—are you okay?”

There was a short, extremely awkward pause.

“Hmm,” said Kushina-sama, once everyone had a moment to look around and shift uncomfortably. “We were gonna tie you up and pluck your nose-hairs you until you revealed what you are to Naruto and how you got past security and most importantly why-ttebane, but I think I know who you are, and now all I really want to know is: are you the real reason Naruto dumped his pregnant girlfriend today? 'Cause being gay is fine and all, or bi or whatever, but knocking a girl up and then letting her go off with her stick-up-his-derrier Hyuuga-jerk cousin is just not okay. Don't tell me you condone that.”

“Kushina,” groaned Namikaze-san, but he seemed to be far more preoccupied with Naruto's scars. There were many, each its own engraved story, and they covered most of the boy's torso.

“Um,” said Naruto. “I'm... gonna get dressed. Right now. Just in that bathroom, don't make them follow me because I can and will maim anyone who follows me right at this moment.” And he disappeared back into the bathroom he'd so recently emerged from, mostly uncontested, leaving Gaara to face two hyper-protective parents and a full platoon of professional security agents who'd just walked in on a nearly-naked boy embracing a dangerous intruder solo.

“Actually, I still really want to know how he got past security,” muttered Namikaze-san, staring at the door his son had disappeared through. “And there're no exits in there, like a hole or a vent that anything bigger than a half-grown cat could get through, you're absolutely certain?”

“I'M RIGHT HERE, DAD!” yelled Naruto, followed by a bang and a curse as he hit an elbow or stubbed a toe or something.
“We should probably stop pointing guns at the Prince, here,” said Kushina, eyeing Gaara a little too appreciatively. “You look good in leather, Sabaku-no-Gaara.”

“You're looking rather lovely yourself, Kushina-sama,” Gaara returned courteously.

“If you're done flirting,” interrupted Namikaze. “How did you get in? No—first—why are you here?”

Gaara waited until he had everyone's glares to level with, before announcing calmly: “Naruto needs a bodyguard. And,” he added, as the Naruto in question emerged in checkered lounge pants and a charcoal-colored long-sleeved tee that was nothing like Gaara had ever seen him in before, “a warning.”

Long legs stretched across the hallway between their bedroom doors, causing Itachi to note, with both pride and dismay, how tall Sasuke was growing. He might surpass his big brother, given a few more years. Itachi hoped so. Outpacing Itachi in any way made Sasuke irrationally happy.

His little brother had earbuds in with the volume turned up loud enough that Itachi could hear and name the song his brother was listening to from the end of the hallway, and with his head tipped back against the wall and his eyes closed, breath slow and shallow, he appeared to be either asleep or close to it. His bottom lip was swollen and split at the corner, a subtle blossoming of pale purple outlining the adjoining bruise. Itachi frowned. According to the gps signal of Sasuke's mobile phone—an item he was as likely to willingly part with as the hand that held it—Sasuke had spent the morning at Naruto's flat, wandered a nearby park for a while (skipping hockey practice, but Itachi knew well enough that the dramatic changes in Naruto's life made ripples large enough to upset his entire team's schedule, and had let his brother be), and then, to Itachi's wonderment, traveled to the detention center where Father was incarcerated.

An unusual day, to be sure, but not one expected to leave marks.

“Otouto?”

He hadn't expected to be heard, but wide dark eyes blinked open; in the same moment the music was silenced and the earbuds gone and a floor full of lanky fifteen-year-old flowed up to fill more vertical lines. “You're late,” said Sasuke.

He was. He had research to do, after office hours and professional dedication to his official caseload ended for the day. He reached out to angle Sasuke's chin, the better to examine the injury there; Sasuke let him, immediately twisting habitual protective concern into full-alert anxiety.

“Naruto did it,” Sasuke blurted, and immediately looked angry with himself for it.

Itachi sighed. He approved of this friendship, was deeply thankful for it, but he would never, ever understand it.
“No teeth loose, this time?”

Sasuke scowled, and Itachi considered him. Physically, he seemed well, bruised face notwithstanding. There were signs of insufficient rest, but he did not have chapped lips, an unfocused gaze, dry tear ducts, or any other signs of dehydration, severe sleep deficit, or a compromised immune system. His hands and forearms didn't show any reddening or swelling, indicating that the altercation with Naruto had been a one-sided assault, and Itachi had seen him eat a balanced breakfast less than twelve hours previous.

“...Are you here because I was late?”

Sasuke held a moment of mulish silence, or perhaps he was just gathering bravery, because the when the words did come Itachi could hear how much pride each syllable cost. “I... Nii-san... can we talk?”

Itachi invited him in wordlessly, and closed the bedroom door behind them. He sat on his bed. Sasuke sat beside him. A worrying mental catalogue of possible scenarios that would provide an adequate context for the level of anxious gravity his foolish otouto was currently exhibiting typed itself out in his mind: coming out as homosexual and/or something to do with Father's prison term ending topped the list.

“Otou-san is coming home soon,” said Sasuke.

Aha. “He is.”

“When he comes home, you'll... leave?”

They had to talk about it sooner or later. Itachi had privately hoped for later—possibly even after the fact, in which case the conversation would be moot, and wouldn't have to happen at all. He built his sentences carefully.

“I... will be living in my own apartment, yes. It has two bedrooms. You will always be welcome.”

His brother's shoulders bunched unhappily. Itachi empathized; there were no perfect solutions here. From the beginning, Sasuke battled against his hurdle of an older brother to reach their father; before because Fugaku only saw Itachi, and after because Itachi betrayed Fugaku. Sasuke was left in the middle, all his formidable capacity for love and devotion split so treacherously they cleaved a whole boy down the middle. Sasuke could not choose both: there was only the father he'd always longed for, or the brother who had always been in there Father's stead.

But Sasuke chose both by choosing neither, and cracked and broke and nearly destroyed himself in the aftermath of it.

Naruto put him together again.

“How is Naruto?”

Sasuke glanced up sharply, and Itachi was startled to see forced-back tears tinting redness at the edges of his tired eyes. Sasuke hid his face just as quickly, retreating behind long bangs.

“Different.”

Itachi wished for half the wisdom he was both praised and vilified for. “Naruto is pretty constant.” Truth, but Sasuke needed validation, not rebuttals. Itachi was much better at the latter. “It is natural for him to show some sides of himself you may not have seen before; the unfolding situations are
things he has never encountered before.”

Sasuke's shoulder twitched.

“I predict a return to his habitual roguery sooner than Konoha is prepared for,” comforted Itachi, and poked his otouto in the forehead. Sasuke didn't brush his hand away, like he always did; he lurched from the bed and through the doorway, through his own bedroom, and out his bedroom window. Staccato, sprinting footsteps faded across the lawn and all Itachi could do was stay and fear: was it wet, the face he glimpsed, as Sasuke ran?

Sakura was beating up the punching bag she'd sacrificed her bedroom door to hang when Sasuke threw himself through her window, grabbed her by the shoulders, barely blocked her reflexive uppercut jab, stared wild-eyed at her face, caught a glimpse of her phone over her shoulder, and abandoned her in favor of snatching the device up and demanding that she swipe in her password so he could check for messages from Naruto.

Sakura's boys: forever infuriating.

Sakura hadn't heard from Naruto. She didn't think he had his old phone on him, and if his parents had given him a new one, she didn't have his number.

She expected Sasuke to leave again, and wished he wouldn't. Though she had no bedroom door and her mother might amble down the hallway at any moment, the blaring TV in the family room was more than enough to drown out any conversation Sakura and Sasuke had. Some risks were worth taking.

“Sasuke,” she said. Her eyes willed him to actually talk with her, be honest with her. For once. “How safe is Naruto?”

He scoffed at her. “You saw the personal security platoon.”

“I saw you get past the security platoon,” she answered coolly.

His silence conceded her point. He jabbed distractedly at her punching bag, walked a small circle around her room, settled on her windowsill.

And, finally, spoke.

“I don't think he's safe.”

It took her a moment to gather again the breath that had left her; her voice came out too small. “Can't Namikaze-san keep him safe?”

“No one can,” said Sasuke, eyes and voice flat. The muscles of his upper arms and shoulders rippled and bulged and he rolled his neck, exuding agitation. Maybe he saw her shudder, because then he softened around the edges, a little bit. “Maybe he can. Naruto. Keep himself safe.”
Sakura snorted. The blankness around Sasuke's mouth lightened into what could almost be a sardonic half-smile, but he held her eyes like he meant exactly what he'd said.

"Naruto gets himself into more trouble than anyone can get him out of," said Sakura, fearful and frustrated. "You mean power and money and intelligence can't keep him safe, but his own special brand of idiocy can?"

"He's not an idiot."

There was a pause.

"I know, Sasuke," she said, "I know. Except he kind of is. About us. About anyone who counts as his 'precious person'."

"So take care of yourself, so he doesn't have to," snapped Sasuke.

Sakura met his stare and raised it, chin thrust upward and eyes narrowed defiantly. "And can all of his precious people just 'take care of themselves'? I'm flattered, but not delusional, and even you aren't untouchable. I was... I was hoping his parents would be some sort of guarantee, you know? I've been really worried, since Hinata—but—"

Sasuke listened better than he usually did, up until Sakura's phone chimed.

"It's not Naruto," she said crossly, after retrieving the phone from his snatching fingers to unlock the screen and check her messages. "But it is trouble."

The text was from Ino:

–there are things you need to tell me, Forehead. don't pretend to be asleep cause i'll just show up at your window.

–Pig, Sakura texted back.

–Good girl. Now. WHAT'S UP WITH NARUTO

"Don't tell her anything," Sasuke threatened. Sakura just rolled her eyes. There was nothing more dangerous than telling Ino nothing.

–Not my story to tell.

–uh-uh. TELL ALL THE STORIES

Sakura stared at the screen, wondering what she could possibly type back that wouldn't fan the flames of Ino's gossip-honed, intuitive, horribly hazardous curiosity. Another message popped up.

–So troublesome. Has someone filed for custody? Or has Hinata's family started something?


Sasuke's fists clenched; they stared at the screen in companionable apprehension.

"Oh," moaned Sakura, hiding her eyes with her free hand. "Imagine... imagine Naruto plus paparazzi."

It might have been an exaggeration of her overwrought brain: Sasuke shivered.
“A warning?” asked Naruto, warily, once his parents had capitulated with the inevitable and accepted that Gaara wasn't going anywhere.

Heavily outlined eyes stared back at him.

Chapter 12

Going to Suna. Take care of stuff here okay bastard. Espesialy Hinata. --N

The note was jammed halfway through the slats of Sasuke's locker. Naruto's locker was empty.

The muscles of his leg twitched, ready to kick at every metal surface until the echoes rivaled the crashes. He sat down instead, on the disgusting locker room floor, and stared at the opposite wall.

Watch me win the championship, he'd told Father. And he would. Hang Naruto. He'd win every game, make all the goals, get Kiba to pass the pucks to him instead of--

No. He was good, but he wasn't stupid. Without Naruto there would be no championship. WoF didn't really do captainships—leadership was shared, rotated, collaborated. Same with coaching. But everyone knew who lead Konoha's hockey team. Naruto burst in years late, took months to learn to follow enough rules to stay on the ice more than a minute at a time, and was still the freaking compass they couldn't skate straight without. He played hard and fast and unpredictable, breaking apart opposing defense like a kid knocking down wooden blocks. Sasuke made the most goals. Naruto made the most assists.

Naruto's locker was empty. Did it mean the End—no more Team 7? Or was it a good sign, because Naruto took his gear for daily practice, and he'd be back in a week's time? Kakashi wouldn't tell them anything. He never did. Did Sakura know yet? Had Naruto shoved a note in her locker, or had he actually called? The image of Naruto climbing through Sakura's window had his jaw clenching and anger rising, and he kicked ineffectually at the bench, small bones creaking protest in too-stressed fists.

He heard footsteps in the tunnel and closed his eyes, breathing carefully, until his face was blank and posture untelling. He was on his feet before the door opened, slouched over his open locker, wondering what would happen if he just didn't skate today.

"So Naruto's missing, again," droned a lazy voice, and Sasuke swallowed an irritated huff: he'd recognized that shuffling footstep, but hoped he was wrong.

"Says who?" he challenged, voice flat. No answer came, and he swung around to meet the sharp, blankly unimpressed consideration of one Nara Shikamaru.

"It is a custody issue, isn't it?" said Shikamaru, watching Sasuke through eyes that clearly hadn't fully opened since he'd fallen asleep the night before. The distracting question of whether or not Shikamaru could pass entire days without raising his eyelids beyond half-mast presented itself for perusal, and was immediately dismissed.

It was exactly the kind of comment the idiot would make.

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"It's not one of the foster organizations he won emancipation from after joining WoF, is it? Sakura seems a bit too starry-eyed for that to be the case," pressed Shika, entirely unperturbed by Sasuke's hostile silence. "You've been in a piss since the day Naruto got put in hospital. Which Kakashi-sensei had some ulterior motive for. Obviously."

This is why we don't talk to Shika, thought Sasuke, murderously. He's so damn nosey when he's not asleep.

"I don't like you either," Shikamaru said, maddeningly calm. "But if Naruto needs help, I'm going
to give it to him. So are you. This will be much less of a drag if we begin with cooperating."

*Don't be proud if it's the same as being stupid,* whispered Sasuke's mental Itachi, in full agreement with Shikamaru. Not that it made anything any easier.

"...Naruto left."

Silence. Shikamaru's right hand slipped into a pocket, and Sasuke could hear the flick-flick-flick of the small metal cap of the lighter hidden there.

"Left. Left, or was taken?"

Flick. Flick. Flick.

"Here, genius." He meant to sound derisive, but he just sounded tired. Shikamaru accepted Naruto's note warily, read it swiftly.

"Suna."

Sasuke shrugged. Breathed in, deep, reluctant, made his body begin the motions of changing into hockey gear. The changing room would be crowded and clamorous soon enough.

“He'll be back,” said Shikamaru, and Sasuke could hear how much he hoped he was right.


He was just one more shadow in a room of slatted shade, wider and denser than the rest. He hummed acknowledgement, never turning from the high, dark window.

“Do you think he'll stay? In Suna.”

No. Naruto would never run away. No more than time would lengthen, spread out and make room for the tasks he must complete.

“Give this to him. Make him hear it. Gaara is a second option, should Naruto successfully evade. Brat's life depends on it.”

“Hai.”

She left.

On with the game.
“Care to spar?”

Naruto looked up from where he stared into the unfamiliar contents of the suitcase he’d been left to unpack, mouth spreading in grateful answer to Gaara’s suggestion.

“Sure!” Muscles rolled easily as he straightened and stretched, and it wasn't so hard to let his steps bounce a little, like they should. “Open hand, yeah? I got enough marks for them to freak out over already.”

Gaara gave him this loaded look, but nodded along amiably anyway. “We could just play basketball,” he offered, and Naruto shook his head swiftly.

“Nuh-uh. I got steam to blow. I'm not letting you up easy.”

“Challenge accepted,” said Gaara, one corner of his mouth twitching in what he passed off for a smile.

They walked cold stone hallways to a sun-drenched courtyard, Gaara taking the exchange of climate-controlled luxury interior for merciless Suna heat with perfect aplomb; Naruto shouting and staggering back with both hands over his eyes.

“HOW ARE YOU ALL NOT BLIND? And, I can feel my muscles melting—”

“Unprepared for the desert?” wondered Gaara, dry amusement crinkling the corners of his eyes, softening the habitual blankness of his face.

“Nah, just blind,” said Naruto, and he followed Gaara to a corner where soft fine sand spread under tall palms, currently shaded by the courtyard wall.

They faced off. Bowed, one more gracefully than the other.

“On your mark,” began Gaara.

“Go!” cried Naruto, and charged.

Naruto moved fast. Gaara hardly moved at all. As if held by roots spread strong and deep as those of the palms behind him, Gaara's feet sunk into the sand, limbs loose, gaze bright, face even. He shifted in fluid measures of weight and balance, avoiding hits by careful millimeters and striking once for every dozen dodges. Naruto attacked and barely defended, slipping and sliding in the sand and turning this to his advantage; he set up patterns just to break them and whirled down a relentless barrage of jabs and kicks until Gaara was forced to set his stance wide and fly into precision strikes and swift knee blocks just to stay standing. Naruto's teeth bared fierce in wide gleeful grins and then they both saw it: the long ribbon of crimson floating free from behind a pillar in the opposite corner of the courtyard, and the quick hand that whisked it back out of sight.

And Naruto started fighting stupid.

High kicks and three-sixty spins, jumps and flips and battle-cries and all the flashy crowd-pleasers he’d been trained in and was too smart to ever pull when there was anything more at stake than a mindless spectating mass to win over—ah, but there is a crowd to please, admitted Gaara, and resigned himself to a tiresome exhibition rather than a satisfying spar. A very special crowd of one.
Because Naruto was Naruto, Gaara went with it. He dodged indefensible leaps with useless cartwheels and backflips of his own, and could hardly feel silly about it, with the way Naruto's smile turned small with pleasure, and embarrassment, and gratitude. Their spar became an improvised martial dance, and their crowd stopped peeking to charge out hollering encouragement and trash-talk and ridiculous advice and Naruto's heart blossomed blue in his eyes like the Suna sun in the sky.

“Next time,” said Gaara wryly, when Naruto had 'won' and was blushing brighter and sweating harder under the ministrations of his hyper and adoring mother, “we will just go free-running, agreed?”

“Whatever, you stupid Tanuki,” said Naruto.

Be safe, thought Gaara, staring back with impassive face, and the words twisted around his ribcage, squeezed tight. For however long I can keep you...be safe.

“Talk with me,” said Minato. “...Please.”

The boy at the desk looked up slowly, kohl-rimmed eyes cool. Minato had recently filled in his surface-knowledge gaps with more intent research, of course; Sabaku no Gaara, youngest son of Kaze no Kuni's reigning monarch, twenty years old and gossip-page fodder from the tender age of fourteen. The age Minato's son was, now, and even if Naruto hadn't believed himself to be as much as four years older than his actual age, there were so many red flags going up about their apparent relationship, Minato hardly knew where to start. The fact that Kaze's Royal Family's PR department hadn't been able to keep their youngest prince's escapades in underworld crime and drug dens out of the press seemed as good a place as any.

“Come in and welcome,” said the prince.

Minato took the gilded chair offered him and held the reserved gaze directed at him, calculating how many questions he might get away with. That face was a mask, green eyes fathomless under the painted shadows and flagrant tattoo.

“I will tell very little about Naruto.”

Well, that was direct enough. If Sabaku no Gaara had his own agenda for this conversation, Minato would hear it.

“I will hear a very little, then,” said Minato, and Gaara's lip quirked.

The prince leaned forward, rested his forearms, entwined his fingers. “It seems I know more about your son than most,” he said. “I... am not well versed in the positive aspects of relationships between fathers and sons, but I know this: of Naruto, you can be very, very proud.”

What right do I have to pride? thought Minato, but something warm swelled wide in his chest, and he knew that pleasure might show a little in his eyes.
“Thank you,” he said slowly, and watched Gaara to see if anything more telling might be forthcoming. It was a powerful strategy, just listening; but Gaara seemed as poised and self-possessed as the most effective career diplomats. “Thank you, for caring for Naruto.” And then: “You say you know little of father-son relationships. I am also not at all an expert in... in that area.” He paused, let Gaara assess him, let more than usual show in his face and manner. “I do know that I have failed my son enough for both our lifetimes, that I need to protect and free him, and that I will probably fail again.”

“Free him,” murmured Gaara, gaze slicing narrow through thick lines of black.

“He is not mine,” said Minato, quiet and honest. “He is his own being, and my son, and I will do everything for him. Including... including letting him go.”

“So that is why you allowed me to bring Naruto here.” Gaara considered him gravely. “Your reputation for intellectual intuition does not exceed you.”

Minato didn't pause for the might-be compliment. “That decision was up to Naruto. Much as I might wish otherwise, I have very little power over his circumstances, and none whatsoever over his choices.”

“You have far more influence than you know,” said Gaara, and for a moment it seemed he might say more, but silence settled sharp and still instead.

In his bones Minato wanted Sabaku no Gaara to have no ties whatsoever to his son. But wishes had their own place, and it was not in making sound decisions for reality.

“Help me.”

Green eyes snapped to his, intent and unforgiving.

“Help me protect my son. Talk with me. Tell me what I need to know to save him.”

Gaara's stare was reminiscent of looking into dark water: calming and warning, telling you more about your own reflection than anything hidden in such water's depths. “Save him from what, Namikaze-san?”

“I don't know.” said Minato, and gripped the ornamented edge of the desk, desperation leaking through, and letting it. ‘You 'know more than most'. I know you know that someone's been tailing us, that your people have intercepted, in the past forty-eight hours, at least one person who may have been trying to get to Naruto. I know you have more intelligence, more background knowledge, and more connections with whatever—or whomever—took Naruto, hid Naruto, and let Naruto go. Work with me. Who are we fighting? I want to believe you are Naruto's ally—I want to believe we are on the same side—”

“I will always be Naruto's ally,” said Gaara. “As for who we are fighting—the correct answer can only be given to the question of 'what', not 'who'."

“What? What—okay—tell me, Gaara-san—”

“I cannot. I offer no trust where Naruto has not given his first.”

Minato's knuckles whitened, but the muscles of his face held smooth, pretending calm.

“These are your battles Naruto is fighting, not his,” said Gaara, voice low, and a little rough. “He is a victim of the war you started—the war you thought you won.” His back snapped very straight in
his heavy stone chair, and at that moment everything that was Gaara was regal, was command. One palm raised, forestalling the questions clenched tight in Minato's aching jaw. “I do not fault you for your fight. It is a cause good men and women must stand, even die, for. But Naruto has fought enough. Return to Konoha; leave Naruto with me. Do not reveal him as your son. Do not let him choose; he will always choose to fight.”

“My war?” echoed Minato, hearing each sentence over and over as they reeled round his mind, connected, disconnected, and still refused to make any sort of sense. “My war—what—the Revolution for Dignity? That's—civil disobedience—protest—activism—that's not a war, what war? Who are we fighting?” And as Gaara stood to match him as he leaned over the desk, hands splayed: “Leave him with you? And you talk to me about withholding trust—”

“You said you would protect him—even if it meant letting him go.”

The challenge settled in the air, swirling with the glancing sunbeams.

“Yes. I said I would free him.” Minato pushed off the desk, towered from his full height, words cold, precise. “I said I would let him go. Not that I would leave him.”

He stepped back, stared Gaara down, noted somewhere that the flat look he met now was a little less guarded, a little more accepting. There was too much to think, to solve, to do—“I chase every lead I get; I have for twelve years, because there's nothing else I can do. I will go to Konoha; I will leave Naruto—for now—because Kushina trusts you, and Naruto trusts you, and I trust them, if not you. Let's be allies, for all your cryptic crap. But Naruto will keep choosing, and keep fighting, if that's what he wants, because no one gets to decide in his place; but I'll never leave him, and you don't get to keep him in a bubble any more than I do. Like either of us could make a strong enough damn bubble...”

As he swept down the corridor, still grumbling, he heard a hum behind him, and couldn't tell if it was amused, thoughtful, or just agreeing with his sentiments on bubbles.

“...IoUoI

“We're changing the line-up,” said Kakashi-sensei, and Sakura felt something sour clench and coil in her gut; she immediately pushed that negativity down. Yes, she missed Naruto—he was the kind of person who left a big hole behind, once he was gone—but it was because now he had family, and family was good, so good, and not only that but these amazing, rich, famous, beautiful people were his family, and even if he wasn't playing hockey with them anymore (even if hockey was just the drop on the surface, and all that was Sasuke-Sakura-Naruto was three eternities of ripples and the endless ecosystem below) his life was just getting better and better and he doesn't need us anymore.

“And please repeat everything I just said for Sakura's benefit,” finished Kakashi-sensei, and Sakura traded her internal storm for being appropriately embarrassed. But Sasuke was glaring at Kakashi-sensei, not at her, and that made her feel both better and worse.

The new starting line wasn't as obvious as she thought; it put Sasuke in center, Kiba left, Shika
right, Sakura and Shino on defense, and Chouji as goalie—the only team member to keep his spot other than Shino. Those not on the starting line-up would keep their positions, for now.

“Also, Asuma-sensei will be rotating in as Head Coach. Thanks for working with me to get this season started right.” He happy-squinted at them, as if that would make his parting statement any less hollowly soulless.

They started with passing drills, getting a feel for the new patterns and partnerships, and then did more passing drills, because things weren't going all that well for anyone. Sakura was counting on Kiba to give voice to the entire team's frustrations. He didn't let her down.

“JUST TELL US WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON ALREADY,” he bellowed, whacking his stick into the boards for emphasis. Asuma-sensei started to whistle him off the ice, but Shino slipped in front of him, dropped his stick to the ice, and removed one glove with a flourish. Everyone stared.

“I, too, wish to hear an explanation,” Shino declaimed. “Why? Because Naruto is our important teammate, and is too loud a presence to be effectively ignored, especially in absentia.” And he dropped the gauntlet to the ice, with great ceremony.

Asuma-sensei sighed. “Kakashi? Tell me you got this, because I don't even know what to say, and I've got all the same questions.”

Kakashi-sensei, halfway up the bleachers, sighed mightily, turned slowly, and sauntered back down. The team gathered in haphazardly, drifting to the boards from the ice or the bench, and for once nobody was talking or elbowing or sword-fighting with their sticks.

“Ah. So. As you all know, our Naruto has never had the most... stable home life.”

Sakura narrowed her eyes at him. Yes, they knew.

“He was recently contacted by some previously undiscovered relatives, and has chosen to take some time off to get to know them.”

“...That's it?” said Shika, once they had all stared at him for several uncomfortable seconds.

“That's enough,” said Kakashi-sensei, and there was a rare bite to his tone, and nothing at all lazy in the heavy-lidded eyes staring back at them. Sasuke snapped his visor back down, stepped pointedly back into drill formation, and one by one the team peeled away after him. No one looked happy.

“Why didn't Naruto-niisan say anything before he left?” grumbled Konohamaru, gliding by wet-eyed and angry.

He's right, Naruto... thought Sakura miserably, catching a puck and sending it one mechanically. Why didn't you say anything? Why wait until you get back? ...You better come back, baka-no-Naruto.

I kinda miss you, baka-no-Naruto.
Half a month in, and the only word for what she was seeing was wilted.

“Aish,” huffed Kushina, catching Naruto leaving face prints on a windowpane. Again. “A few weeks in the desert, and you’ve crumpled up like a delicate rainforest blossom.”

The kid cringed a bit, looking up with eyes that were big enough and guilty enough to knock away her cheery, teasing, forcibly nonchalant facade in one artless blow. Ouch.

“Mom,” he said, and she could hear how alien it still felt on his tongue, even though he took just about every chance to say it. And made up some opportunities of his own, for practice. “Um. Am I, umm, late for something? Again...”

“Yep.” He was halfway off his windowsill already, so she pushed him back down with a firm hand on his shoulder. It was a strong shoulder, but he settled back with those blue eyes asking all the silent questions. “You missed lunch. I ate all the ramen. Now you have to sit and talk to me while Gaara’s chef makes more.”

Finally, some life in that face. She grinned smugly back at her son’s heart-rending wail (“You ate the ramen?! But, but, ALL? Gaara always orders so much! And—and—it’s for me! Gaara always gets it for meee!”), blew miso-scented breath in his face, and folded her limbs into a comfortable criss-cross on the cool marble window ledge. A very expensive sunscreen protected them from the full glaring force of light and heat of Sunagakure noon, and through it Gaara’s rather epic rock garden dropped into the glorious hues of the sea of sand. Because he saved me, me and everything, was Gaara’s flat and honest explanation. I would have brought him home years ago, had he been willing to come.

Like he’s willing to stay, thought Kushina, watching her son sadly. There was nothing about this Naruto that didn’t make her sad. There was joy and relief and amazement and gratitude and I-can’t-believe-this-is-true, more love and fear than her skin and guts and bones could contain—and cold and clinging to it all was that quiet ache—soul-stretching sorrow. She mourned what had been, what could have been, what might be. Her baby. Her. Minato. The family they had been, the one they could be, the one they would never be.

“Naruto,” she said, and wasn’t sure what to say next. Those eyes again. Would she ever be able to just look at them, and not feel a thousand things scraped up raw from the fleshy depths of her heart? “Naruto, sweetheart... do you want to be in Suna?”

He smiled a smile so practiced, it passed as professional. “Yeah, yeah! Gaara's cool, man! I mean, check out this palace of his—and this is just his getaway. You should see the real thing, in the capital. And have you been in the garage? I know grown men who would scrunch up and cry like little babies if they could see that line-up of billion-yen cars!”

Kushina raised an eyebrow at him. “Do you like cars, Naruto?”

He looked so taken off-guard and uncertain she might have laughed, quick as the expression was before it disappeared behind that polished grin. “Sure, I like cars! Fast cars that look... pretty... and are really fast. I should get one. Or three. Heh.”

She raised the other eyebrow, made her mouth a flat line, watched his smile turn sheepish, and decided to let it drop. “So. How long are we going to stay with Gaara? If we’re moving to Suna, we
should get our own place. Much as I love the ramen and the pool and the silky sheets and all, there's such a thing as over-staying.”

He turned serious, eerily-but-endearingly mirroring Minato. “I... dunno. I'm not sure why Gaara wanted me to come. But you guys were all worried about paparazzi and stuff, yeah? So actually I've been... well, it's probably stupid.”

“Tell me what 'it' is, and I'll tell you how stupid.”

“Ouch, Mom! Not everything I say is stupid! Sheesh. I won't tell you anything—”

“Tell me or no ramen.”

The look he gave her was almost dangerous, but he caved with fair grace.

“Fine fine fine. So, um, I heard D...Dad talking something about a... a press conference-thingy. Before he left. We should do it here.”

“Here?” Kushina frowned. “Here as in Sunagakure? Why Suna?”

“We can change my hair,” said Naruto, and the words were tumbling quickly now, like he could make his point better if it came out faster and more urgently. “Make it, you know, like it would look if... if it wasn't, um, black. Hide the scars. It takes a lot of makeup, but I know how to do it. I'll be wearing those new clothes Dad bought, I don't look like me in them anyway. We can make it all vague and police-speak-y. You know,” and his voice deepened comically, “‘Due to the ongoing investigation, further details are being withheld at this time' blah blah blah. And... and you can tell everyone that I'm the kid you lost, and all, but make it not look like me.”

Kushina was watching him so hard it made her eyeballs ache. “What do you mean, make it not look like you?” she queried, and soaked in the intensity of his gaze and his voice as he put together his answer.

“So, like, the person who... who I was with... that person is playing with us,” he said. “And we have to play too, because that's how the game is. I don't know what he wants.” He paused, stared at his hands, jerked in a thick breath, continued. “But we should try to keep it between him and us. If the whole world's gonna become all interested in us, and reporters and stuff are gonna be following us, that's a different game. We should keep them that way. Separate.”

Kushina listened well into the seconds of silence, watched the shadows sift through the sun shade, everything inside vibrating from mixed-up, full-throttle analysis-plus-emotion. “And Suna?” she asked, though she had an idea what his answer would be.

“Make it look like you found me here,” he urged, eyes wide, arresting. “Let them think you found me here, and I've always been here, or for years at least, and we don't even have to have a story really, they'll make one up and sell it how they want—but don't make me be the kid from Konoha, who drove a bus and lived with Hinata, okay? Okay, mom?”

“Why not?” and the fear rasping dry in her belly, why did she feel it? “What's wrong with being the kid from Konoha, Naruto? And your friends there—they'll recognize you—tons of people will recognize you. You're on the WoF hockey team, kid. Everyone who's ever played with or against you—”

“Not without the scars,” he said. “That's all people really look at. And the ones that might recognize me, they won't tell. Iruka-sensei won't tell. I mean no one ever recognized me before right? Even when my poster was plastered all over town.”
That hurt. Hurt hurt hurt.

Not now. “I don’t know, kiddo... we can do the first part, at least. Make it sound like we ran into you here somehow. Set up a publicity stunt or whatever. We can do that. But the rest—you’re not two people. It’s not like you can be just the bus-driving, hockey-playing Ichiraku Naruto from Konoha, or just lost-and-found Namikaze Naruto. You have to be both, because both are you. And that sounds really deep! Wisdom, dattebane!”

He gave her this smile, this little smile that showed too much of his heart, and she had to fling her arms around him and hold that stiff, strong, awkward boy, just to give herself a chance to wipe at leaking eyes before they betrayed her. They would need to talk with Minato, and probably Gaara too, and see what objections Rin may have (brilliant at coming up with worst case scenarios, that girl—could poke holes in any plan, just in time to make it watertight) and check in with Obito to see what he’d learned about Hinata, and that Sasuke kid, and... and the Nine-tails.

If he could find anything. And then there was the business of Minato haring off to Konoha because of something the prince had said, and Kushina still didn't understand it, but he was back in that mental place where every opponent he’d ever had—as a student, a sportsman, an activist, a politician—was a suspect in Naruto's abduction, and there were too many possibilities and too many connections and all but one of them was bound to be wrong.

Though Minato had plenty of conspiracy theories. And he was such a down-to-earth, benefit-of-the-doubt kind of guy, too.

Naruto started to squirm a bit, so she let him go, mussed up his hair, and challenged him to a race to the ramen.

And down the cold halls they ran.

Lights and noise and thick wafts of smoke and alcohol and the links of the cage and the muscle on the fisted limbs reaching for him—stop-breathe-focus-GO! And he had to really dodge this one, he was good at taking hits but too many of these and he'd stay down, maybe not get up. It was strange, Hina-chan was there, cheering for him, and as he whirled by he yelled to her HOW'S THE BABY? And a moment later he was slammed into the siding and her face pressed next to his on the other side of the links, and she said with her sweet smile that actually looked kind of sick, Oh I don’t want it anymore, I threw it away, just like you Naruto-kun, and he stared and stared at her until she shouted Behind you Naruto-kun! And he thought he’d moved fast enough but when he looked down the knife was still stuck in his shoulder.

It didn't really hurt. So he just pulled it out, but he was angry, so so so angry and the guy he was fighting (who was he fighting? Did he have a face? Where did he put his face—) was laughing laughing laughing at him, so he shifted his grip on the still-slick handle and leaped and stabbed and braced to pull the blade out and stabbed again and it was harder to take it out this time, like it nicked bone, but he did and pulled back again blinking, face hot from blood that wasn’t his, and
one more time should do it—

Naruto?

The cage was gone—just the shiny red floor and the gasping body beneath him and the lights and the man gaping at him, blue eyes wide, disbelieving; he looked young and handsome and just like his posters, just like Naruto imagined him, because he didn't really remember him. And Naruto was so happy. Daddy! He shouted, and held up his arms, wondering where that loud plip-plop-plip was coming from, but then he giggled, because it was just the blood, dripping from his arms—

Naruto!

It's me, Daddy! It's me it's me it's me!

But the man wouldn't come any closer. He was so tall and cool-looking, with his clean white shirt and yellow hair—

Naruto... Naruto?

Naruto looked at the body at his feet. It wasn't breathing anymore. It didn't look like a big muscly man anymore, either; it was a boy, a really pale boy with a pretty face and kind eyes staring empty at the cold cold sky, because they were outside now, and Haku wasn't breathing.

Of course Haku wasn't breathing. Haku was dead.

He's dead, Naruto told his father, solemnly. I thought I was gonna die too. But you came! I knew you would come—

No, said Minato.

No no no no.

No, you are not Naruto.

Look at your face. You are not my Naruto.

Look at your hair. Not like my Naruto.

Look at your hands...

Red hands raised slow, dripping, plip-plip-plip—

But I am Naruto, said Naruto. I am I am I am

The man was gone.

He didn't want to leave Haku alone, but he didn't want to stay, either, so he whispered to Haku that he'd be back soon and started walking, maybe to where he slept, or maybe to Sasuke's house. The blood was gone—all gone—but they were looking at him THAT way, and when he'd passed by on enough small, slow steps for them to think he wouldn't hear they'd whisper: Poor kid, did his parents do that to him? Or maybe he doesn't have any? He's little now, but if he's like that—he'll be one of them, won't he? They should probably get rid of him now—you can't reform those types— he's been marked like that—it's not like they'll let him go—they'll never let him go—never let him go—never let go—

Naruto woke sweating, rolled over, grabbed the glass of water he'd left on the bedside table, and
tried to sit up.

Muscles seized, head pounded, chest ached, and he still wasn't sitting up. He set the glass down, unclenched each finger, tucked his elbows in to brace both hands on the mattress—left hand scabbling a bit as it slipped on the sheeted edge—braced himself, tried again. He tried to steady his breathing, figured out he was wheezing, couldn't figure out how to stop. He needed—he needed feet higher than head—panic attack—the dream—just—just be calm—

His torso hit the floor heavy and unbalanced, shooting pain through his shoulder and leaving him breathless for long, painful seconds. His right leg thumped down with it, numb and heavy like it was packed in ice, and he tried to lift it, get it back up on the mattress like the left one, but he couldn't breathe and couldn't lift and couldn't think. The edges of the dream burst and shattered, images fluttering, dissolving as they went; and he was left with one foot on the bed and everything else on the floor and no idea how or why or what.

There was this voice in his head shouting warning—commanding eyes to stretch open, voice to cry, lungs to keep expanding, taking in, collapsing, letting out—and he tried.

He was good at getting up. He could take lots of hits, get all the air slammed hard from his lungs, get the thoughts and the sight bashed from his head, block a strike so hard half his body went numb—and he could still get up.

Get up.

“Naruto?”

*Not that dream,* he thought, but he was awfully tired. There was something wrong with his heart. With the beat-beat-beat pounding into his aching ribs, there was something wrong with it. *I really hate that dream.*

“Naruto—Naruto!”

“It's me,” he whispered. Maybe. The world was already black.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Drive drive DRIVE DRIVE DRIVE! His lips, Gaara-kun, his lips are turning blue—"

Gaara had never been gladder to own some very, very fast cars.

"I should—I should call Minato—Come on, Naruto, breathe breathe breathe, come on—"

The clip-on siren helped, too.

"Mina—you answered, I'm so glad you answered—Naruto—he—he—we found him by his bed—he's not breathing—or, um, just very shallow—yes, we're headed there, Gaara's got a doctor waiting—don't, Minato, Gaara didn't do this. —I don't know. I don't know. But it wasn't Gaara."

Automatically cooled air chilled the wet crook of Gaara's arm, where Naruto's sweaty head had rested.

"He's all, all limp and clammy. Unresponsive. I've got a pulse, but it's... erratic. I think it's his heart, Minato."

Was this it? The avoided-by-Naruto, refused-by Gaara message? (He wouldn't—wouldn't hurt Naruto, not like this—I thought—he's been protecting him—so why? Why—) There—exit freeway, down the off-ramp, easing off the gas pedal just enough to make sure anyone on the road between midnight and morning (What time is it? At this speed—can't look—) had time to hear his siren and scatter. Two flashed-through red lights later and the first skyscrapers of downtown Sunagakure reared up around them, the glow of the hospital's blue cross visible a half-dozen blocks too far away. Kushina was still speaking into her phone: "—right, get Kakashi—wait wait wait—what about the other teacher guy? Iruto or whatever—call him too. We need medical history here. We've tried to let him keep his secrets, but this—okay, call me when you're on the ground. There!—I see the hospital—no change, Minato, he's barely breathing, heartbeat too fast, I don't think he's conscious. I'm hanging up."

Gaara's lungs expanded a little more willingly once he swerved into the ambulance dock, saw the stretcher and crash cart and medical team, ready to receive. Kushina had her door open before he'd fully braked, and for the first seconds she tried to be part of getting the too-quiet boy out of the back seat before her brain caught up with her heart and she let them lift him from her arms and onto the stretcher, watched from behind a wall of shoulders as they covered his face with a mask to force oxygen up his nose, clipped a monitor to his finger, strapped a blood pressure cuff around his unmoving arm. They asked questions about allergies, warning signs, previous major medical history, and she told them all they knew: no known allergies. No warning signs. Possible history of panic attacks. Evidence of previous trauma; no known details. No signs of current infection or illness. And they were running, shouting numbers in percentages, Kushina pounding after them, leaving Gaara on the curb with his keys in his hands and fury and fear crawling cold up his throat.

Thirty seconds later and Kushina-sama was brought back out, screaming profanities.

"We'll go around front, we'll be in the waiting room," Gaara said to the broad man in scrubs bearing the brunt of Kushina's delayed hysteria, and held the car door for her until she finished telling the entire block exactly what she thought of hospital visitor policy and whirled around, frayed braid
By the time he'd circled the car, taken his seat, and started the engine, she was still and quiet, collapsed into the window. When he found her in Naruto's room—was it because she was a mother, that she woke, worried, ran faster? Naruto had the only guest room adjacent to his—she was all controlled calm and urgent efficiency, asking and answering all the right questions, and within seconds there was a plan and the first three steps were already checked off and all Gaara had to do was be strong enough to carry his most precious friend and fast enough to get them to someone who could actually help.

Now her face was white and wet, her hands twisted and trembling. He parked slowly, sat in the dark car and stared at the empty city. His phone was vibrating; no doubt one of his handlers had notified Temari, and she expected an explanation.

3:16 AM: they parked. 3:19 AM: Temari's first call. 3:23 AM: "Next time," said Kushina, voice sticking and breaking in her throat and face smudged damp, if not dry: "Next time, I'll drive. I mean, you're really good. But I'll totally beat you. What's your best time?"

(I answered: He is no longer obligated to respond to such a summons; if there are consequences, we will handle them— but these consequences—) "I believe tonight may be that record," he said, and they walked in to face the paperwork, and the wait.

Hatake Kakashi was at his door, it was a dozen minutes short of five-in-the-morning, and what was least forgivable was that the man hoped to abduct his brother.

Then, "This is about Naruto," said Hatake, and everything changed. "Also Sasuke."

"Come in," Itachi said, with near-perfect courtesy, and held open the door.

Hatake came in and stood stiff, body angled anxiously towards the door he'd just come through. "Naruto... was found unconscious in his room, very early this morning. He has been admitted to the hospital with symptoms of acute cardiac dysrhythmia, with possibility of cardiac arrest or stroke. He is in critical condition. This is all highly classified, very sensitive information. Don't tell your mother."

Within two sentences the world through Itachi's eyes shifted, sharpened, and hardened; the gnawing exhaustion clouding his perception peeled wide. Context, history, possibility, deduction—

"Not poison? Or another form of subtle attack? Pectoral perforation by a very thin blade can develop symptoms consistent with dysrhythmia," he said, but every part of his mind not fully occupied with analysis drifted down the dark hallway, to where his brother was hopefully still sleeping. If only he could spare Sasuke the inevitable pain of this—but it was always going to happen, however eventually, when one of the variables was Naruto, the Gatekeeper. One hand came up, pressed at the building tension tightening his brow. "Apologies, let me offer you some tea."

"No time for tea. They haven't found a source for what's happening to him. Can you wake Sasuke? I tried to call—"
Itachi stayed still in the middle of the hallway, blocking the way to his brother. "Is there no way to keep Sasuke uninvolved?" he pressed, though he knew that if there were better options, Hatake wouldn't be hovering in his entryway, wearing a winter coat over the houndstooth lounge pants he'd obviously slept in.

"I'm sorry, Itachi," the man said, and meant it. "They want me to go to Suna because they think I know the most. But I don't."

"And you hope Sasuke can provide some form of information, some memory or recounting of injury, that would serve as a clue." Itachi sighed. "And if he knows nothing pertinent?"

"Aniki. Let me try."

Itachi whirled around, alarm tightening all the small muscles rolling along his spine, to see Sasuke white-faced and rumpled, eerily lit by the phone in his hand. He shrunk back as Itachi turned on him, bare shoulders hunching defensively, chin jutting defiantly.

"Mother woke me," he said, and Itachi started from the third shock of the night. "Then I saw Kakashi-sensei's calls."

Itachi dealt exceptionally well with difficult situations, but this series of revelations was stretching his carefully hidden emotional core past its perfectly maintained barriers. A glance at Hatake revealed a faltering poker face, unease and anxiety leaking freely through the cracks.

"...Mother woke you?"

"Is Naruto really—how bad is it?" Sasuke said, staring at Hatake. He looked suddenly young, barefoot and bare-chested, hair a wild bedhead halo around sheet-creased cheeks. Itachi crossed to him in two swift strides, plucked the phone from his hand, ignored his affronted grunt.

—Something very wrong with N heart

Read the first text, and then:

-Anything you know?

Down the hall, the light in Sasuke's bedroom snapped on, flooding Itachi's peripheral vision.

"He's in bad shape, Sasuke," Hatake was saying, something aching and gentle in the way the words came out, "and what I've been told so far is that the few tests they tried turned up results that don't make sense, and they need to find out why."

"His heart," mumbled Sasuke, "He was in the hospital once... for his heart, he has these two scars —" the long, pale fingers of his right hand tapped the spot just under his left collar bone, and Hatake straightened, taut and intent, and took a half-step toward Sasuke that was probably subconsciously directed.

"That is exactly the kind of information we need to know. Sasuke, you're coming with me. Get your passport—"

"I've packed it," said another, quieter voice; the three men in the room startled and, in the same movement, shifted unconsciously into best posture as Mikoto stepped elegantly into the room.

It was only a plastic claw-clip holding her hair out of her face and a well-preserved silk dressing-robe keeping her strawberry-print pajamas mostly out of view, but she wore them like ivory and
cloth-of-gold and the look in her eyes was wry and knowing. "I woke when the words 'don't tell your mother' sullied the pure air of my home," she said dryly, and handed Sasuke his old middle-school backpack, fat with whatever contents she'd deemed necessary. "I'll call him in sick; Sasuke, darling, you've caught that seasonal flu going around. That gives you forty-eight hours. Now go put on a shirt; and a sweater. I trust he won't be late, Hatake-san?"

"No, Ma'am," managed Hatake. Sasuke stumble-leaped the distance to his room, the muffled sounds of drawers slammed open and closets slammed shut drifting back to replace him. "Uchihasan, may I ask... why?"

Itachi watched his mother turn a sweet smile on the hapless man, beneath eyes as hard and unforgiving as her granite counters. Hatake met her cool gaze with rather remarkable courage.

"Because," said Mikoto, "I don't want my son attempting to drive to Suna on a scooter."

Sasuke returned just in time to hear her and blush. Itachi's attention returned swiftly to their mother; there was something else in the shapes of her words and the lines of her body that told him there was something more to her side of the story, but right now Hatake was breathing thanks and bowing and tugging open the door.

"Forty-eight hours," said Mikoto.

"Thank you," said Hatake-san.

The door slammed.

Sasuke's fingers closed numbly around the phone Kakashi pushed into his hand, the number already dialed and ringing. "It's the cardialogist, the one currently in charge of Naruto—put your seatbelt on, I'm driving stupidly fast," the man said, knuckles white on the steering wheel, and then another voice, female and no-nonsense, sounded on speakerphone.

"Hatake-san."

"Yes. I have the friend with me. We're ready."

"Let's proceed, then. Friend-san. You have history you feel may be helpful?"

Kakashi jerked his chin at him, and feeling blank and stupid, Sasuke repeated what he'd said before. "He was in the hospital for some kind of heart surgery when he was kid."

"Can you be more specific with the time frame?"

It was hard to think, with the adrenaline mixing up all his questions and fears and memories. *Naruto said he was... ten?... so...* "Maybe seven, eight years ago?"

"Do you know anything about why he had the surgery, what symptoms or episodes led up to it?"

Sasuke thought hard, trying to find details he wasn't sure he'd actually heard. "He just said he was really sick and they finally took him to the hospital because he kept, kept blacking out, and having trouble breathing, and stuff. And he was way stronger after. That's why he likes those scars. The
ones—there's two, one's a little shorted than the other, and they're right under his left shoulder. On his chest."

"Yes, we noticed the scars. If he had a procedure done, it wasn't anything requiring a full or partial opening of the chest cavity, at the least. We can rule out everything requiring open heart surgery."

"He said it was heart surgery," Sasuke insisted, the nausea roiling in his stomach combining unhappily with an angry rush of heat to the head.

"No one has contradicted that. Do you have any other pertinent information?"

And there, in the midst of all his desperation, the memory of Naruto spread-eagled on a soccer field, covered in grass stains and saying casually: *I was supposed to go back, like, every few years, but that was too big a risk and I've been fine ever since so what do those doctors know anyway?*

"He was supposed to go back," said Sasuke, straining against the shoulder strap where it tightened in protest to the urgent forward tilt of his body. "He said they were supposed to take him back every few years, but he never got to go back."

There was silence from the phone for long, taut seconds. "Is it possible..." said the voice, muffled but still heard, even if it wasn't meant to be. Then: "Thank you, friend of the boy with too many mysteries. You have given me a theory." There was a shout for another unseen speaker, the beginning of a phrase: "We're looking for a fibrillator—rule it out before you give me that look, you useless—" and the line went dead. Two city blocks slicked by in steady silence, heat and energy draining from Sasuke's body, leaving him cold.

There was no reason for him to go to Suna, now. He'd told all he knew in a two-minute phone call on the way to the airport. He stared out the window, waiting for Kakashi to turn and do that annoying eye-squint at him, along with something like: *Ah, so that was the entirety of your contribution? Well done, now let's get you home and back in bed—I'm sure Asuma-sensei's got a big practice ready for you this morning!* Before pulling an illegal U-turn and following through.

But Kakashi stayed tense and quiet, driving too fast, and when they reached the airport Namikaze's assistant was waiting with calm eyes and two tickets ready. "Fly safe," she told them, and the moment they were through security Sasuke let his muscles burst into the run his mind knew wouldn't bring him any closer but the rest of him didn't care.

As a dozen tons of sculpted metal roared into the air, Sasuke held still and watched the lights drop away, ignoring the insistent logic in his brain that this was all happening—Kakashi, Itachi, Mother, and now his presence on a Sunagakure-bound airplane—just so he could say goodbye.

XxYxX

Namikaze Minato didn't know who he was praying to, but there was no other word for the soul-brain-word-ache singing taut through every physical part of him.

*Let Naruto be safe please please please let him be okay just let him live, let him grow, let him be—whatever he wants to be—don't take him again, please please don't take him again—*

The flight to Suna was a short two-hours-forty-minutes—short anytime but now, when each minute weighed leaden, hooked, and swinging, monotonous milliseconds measuring city-turned-forest-
turned-mountain-turned-desert.

And then it became a rhythm.

—please Naruto please please please please please please Naruto please—

Several lifetimes of beyond-measure seconds sloshed by before he realized that beat was the rhythm of his own harrowed heart.

The pressure of unbearable possibilities was crushing him. He couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't make the pieces fall apart and reassemble so he could figure out what—how—where—what to do, to tell—his eyes pressed closed but panic pushed in anyway, and now his hands were over his face and this—this wasn't how Namikaze Minato was meant to act, but how could that matter?

Dad.

It was all a mess inside, but something brave floated, still and warm, from the dark. His eyes were still shut, his hands still covering his face, but he could see that smile.

Hi! Dad-Dad-Dad hi!

He wondered if he was hallucinating, if he was unconscious, if he was dreaming, but his mouth shaped sounds, breathed a question in three syllables to the moist palms of his hands.

Na...ru...to?

There was a softness, a warmth, around the back of his neck, like little hands, like baby-skin, like a blessing.

Hi Daddy!

A little push of warmth and wet caressed his cheekbone, just under his eye, and the still warm thing blossomed, bloomed, burst. Heat rushed through his chest to his soles, his elbows, his scalp; eddied in the small hand-clasp at the back of his neck: and with the heat: peace.

Peace, faith, hope.

Peace.

Minato exhaled.

When he raised his face from his hands, when he opened his eyes, there was only the cabin of a chartered airplane to see. There was wetness on his cheek—tears.

So maybe just a memory. But a memory of a being very small, but very strong, and very brave. A memory of what loving Naruto felt like, before the fear.

Before the fear.

Okay, Naruto.

I got it. I know you.

I believe in you.
Kushina stared blankly at the patient intake forms, willing all the empty spots to either fill themselves or disappear. Name, birth date, blood type—she’d filled them all in quickly, skipped the address and insurance slots, moved on to the family medical history box, checked off the few things she and Minato knew about their own families. And then ground to a stop.

It wasn’t the queries she couldn’t answer that paralyzed her; it was the ones she already had. She’d printed in painstaking capitals a name and birthdate that were inscribed on a memorial stone—and when the questions came (and they would come), she wouldn’t have the answers she needed.

Naruto had a different identity now. A different name, different birthdate, different home address, different guardian. Did he still have a guardian? He was an ‘emancipated minor’—but did that mean he was considered legally independent under all circumstances? Age of majority was twenty in Hi no Kuni—Naruto was listed as what, eighteen? Nineteen? Gaara didn’t know. Minato would know, Minato would have the proof of the DNA tests he’d had done, Minato would have digital images of every fake ID Naruto had ever possessed stored in his phone, which was really creepy but would really come in handy.

Minato was still at least an hour away.

A knock on the door of the polished little VIP waiting room Gaara-kun had arranged (before excusing to his own urgent errands, leaving her alone—), and as promised, Suna’s most renowned cardiologist stepped briskly in. Kushina rose, hands splayed over the paperwork she’d just flipped over, heart halfway up her throat.

"Chiyo-sama," she said, and managed a respectful nod, eyes searing every wrinkle on that alarmingly venerable face for hope, hope for Naruto.

The woman looked her over, seconds drawn long in the blankness of her face. Then: "You are the boy’s mother."

"Yes," breathed Kushina. "I—yes—"

"He is stable."

She hit the chair hard, and was glad it was there. But she would have been fine sprawled on the floor, so long as she could just drink in this relief.

The set edges of a thousand wrinkles shifted, softened, if only a little. "We found the source of the problem and conducted emergency surgery to remedy it—temporarily. Our patient is still in a delicate and unresolved circumstance, with many more questions needing to be answered. But he is stable—and whatever adolescent friend some connection of yours scrounged up is owed your gratitude, Mother-san."

"He’s okay? Naruto—he’s really—he—is he awake? I’ll go see him—"

A sharp hand rose; Kushina subsided, though each breath came hard and urgent, even if no words were allowed with it.

"It was necessary to place him under general anesthesia in preparation for surgery. He will stay
sedated for the next several hours. His life is not currently in danger."

"Not currently in danger," Kushina whispered, and the words she heard and words she needed to say spun dizzily round and round, so she had to pick them out one by one, and all through that hazy cloud of relief. Her voice came out steadier this time. "What...was the source?"


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Minato stepped outside of his need to know just long enough to hold his wife, and smooth back the soft tendrils of crimson hair that had worked themselves free of the braid she always slept in. Four, five, six, seven seconds...

"I'm here. I'm here, Kushina. Now please, please tell me what you wouldn't over the phone."

She looked up with haunted eyes washed pale in midmorning light, drew in a breath that shuddered through her where she pressed against his chest and abdomen, and slipped out of his hands.

"Dr. Chiyo's assistant will be here soon," she said, not looking at him. "I... let him explain it. You'll have questions I won't be able to answer."

Her words collected cold in the pit of his stomach, but watching Naruto helped. He'd been moved from Recovery into a private room, and his skin was warm and tan and his breathing deep and even. An IV drip injected and taped to the back of his left hand and a monitor clipped to his left index finger were the only medical devices attached to his body, and a strong, steady heartbeat projected in digital beeps and etched-out mountains on the screen beside the bed.

"Is he sick?" he'd asked the questions before, shaking hand gripping the phone (shaking from relief —because Naruto was okay, he was stable, he would wake up—) as the jet taxied down the Sunagakure runway. No, she'd said, and then she couldn't talk through the tears.

Kushina shook her head. Still not looking at him.

So he moved around to the other side of the bed, scraped a heavy armchair that was the only other visitor's chair over the floor, and sat where he could told Naruto's free hand in both of his.

"...Is he still out from the anesthesia? No change since they moved him in here?"

"He mumbled a little. I couldn't understand anything though. They said to give him another forty-five minutes."

There was clean white gauze padded thick and carefully taped over the left side of Naruto's chest, just under his collar bone. There were no other signs of the surgery he'd just endured, or the terrifying symptoms that lead to it. If only Kushina shared his hope, his relief—he was standing again, ready to go find this doctor or her assistant or the manager of the hospital of necessary, when a polite knock preceded a grim-faced young doctor into the room.

"I'm Dr. Ryokan," he greeted, with a brisk nod. "Before I proceed, let me assure you that Gaara-sama's orders for utmost privacy and confidentiality have been, and will continue to be, fully met.
Now, to tell you what we understand so far."

Minato could have kissed the man for his efficiency.

"This child is fitted with an internal electronic device similar to an artificial cardiac pacemaker, or an implantable cardiac defibrillator. Are you familiar with either of these devices?"

All that came to mind was elderly people trying to stay alive after triple bypass surgery. "Used to regulate pulse rates in patients with cardiac disease?"

Dr. Ryokan nodded that sharp, grim nod again. "Yes. Even very young children with certain heart conditions are sometimes fitted with a pediatric pacemaker, and the device inside Naruto is similar to one of these. A programmable generator is attached to the muscle here—" he indicated the bandaged area of Naruto's chest, "—and leads, or wires conducting an electrical current, connect the generator to the heart itself. The generator can send an electrical impulse down the leads to the heart, causing the heart to contract, creating heartbeat."

The room felt cold. Minato grabbed Naruto's hand again, tight.

"Implantable artificial pacemakers are meant to be permanent, as a patient requiring one will most likely be dependent on it for life. The pulse generator is battery operated, and the batteries typically need to be changed every five to seven years. Pacemaker malfunction can be caused by failing batteries. That seems to why Naruto ended up... here."

The man paused, and Minato watched, muscles knotted and mind racing, as frustration and uncertainty made taut lines of the doctors face, tugging brows and lips into sharper angles. Minato kept his breath even, his face calm. "Please continue," he said.

Dr. Ryokan sighed. "The generator in your son's chest was sending erratic impulses that disturbed his heartbeat, causing a dangerous dysrhythmia. He lost consciousness due to the disrupted flow of blood to the brain and was at high risk for stroke or cardiac arrest. Dr. Chiyo was able to regulate the pulse generator by replacing its batteries, and he is currently in very good condition, considering the night's events. His life is not in danger, and he is recovering well from the surgery."

"And now the bad news," said Minato, quietly.

Dr. Ryokan heard, nodded. "Indeed. The bad news is this: the device in your son's body is not simply an artificial pacemaker or fibrillator. It is not made by any legally trading medical device company and was not implanted to treat any form of heart malady. Because this is my last bit of good news: apart from the very dangerous foreign device connected to it, this child has a very healthy heart."

He could hear Kushina's teeth grinding, see the bone-white knuckles of her fists. Naruto's heart monitor chirped cheerful, steady beats. He's like a ticking time bomb, he'd said. A minefield. A grenade.

"Most implantable pacemakers are designed to be remotely programmable by computer," Dr. Ryokan was saying. "They collect data on the activities of the heart muscle that can be transferred to a computer, where it can be analyzed by a doctor, who can ensure the device is programmed correctly, functioning properly, and meeting the patient's needs. When we attempted to connect to this device," he gestured towards the mockingly white bandage, "we found ourselves dealing with a highly sensitive, fully encrypted transmitter that is most definitely remotely readable and programmable to the persons with the paired decryption software. And until we know more about
the device, there are too many risks to attempt to remove it."

Kushina put her head in her hands, moaning. The room that had grown cold now seemed to be
distorted, tilting and skewing as Minato listened, listened, listened.

"Gaara-sama has debriefed us somewhat on the background of this patient. I realize this is already
a very difficult and delicate situation, and it is possible a solution may be found quickly.
However..."

Minato met tense, warning grey eyes.

"...until we find a way to safely remove or deactivate this devise, please understand that if there is a
person who knows how to access and program this pulse generator, that person has the power to
control the beating of this child's heart."

He knew the answer, but wished so desperately for a different one that he asked the question
anyway.

"The worst... what's the worst they could do?" Would there be time to stop what was happening, if
Naruto was attacked that way? How close would an attacker have to be? Would a computer that
could connect to pulse generator wirelessly be recognizable? Can I just hide him keep him away
from everyone that isn't trusted?

He closed his eyes, because he could see the answer on the Dr. Ryokan's face.

"They could stop it," Kushina whispered. "They could just stop his heart."

"Yes," said the doctor. "Yes, they could."

He's dead, thought Sasuke, when he stepped cautiously through the door, and caught a glimpse of
Naruto's parents. Naruto is dead.

He didn't even need to see their faces. Their angles looked all wrong, like they'd already been
shattered and put back together with too much glue, and every crack was showing. They were
bowed over the bed in a protective huddle, and Sasuke twisted to step back through the door,
because he didn't want to see what was on the bed, because he didn't want any of this to be true.

"Hurry in," grumbled Kakashi from behind him, shoving him back into the nightmare with a steely
hand to the shoulder.

"No," said Sasuke, turning resolutely back to the door. His eyes were hot and leaking, and he
needed to get out out out.

"SASUKE!" yelled a voice, a loud, cheerful, annoying voice, and Sasuke stopped. His feet
stopped, his breath stopped, possibly his heart stopped— "Aaahhhhh finally! Please come be a
bastard like you usually are, these weirdoes are smothering me—"

And then Naruto stopped, because Sasuke was on top of him and had fistfuls of stupid hospital
gown clutched in his fists where they met at Naruto's back in an embrace too fierce to ever be
admitted to.

"Gaaahh, not you too," groaned Naruto, shoving him away. But Sasuke's back was warm from where strong limbs had hugged him back, and Naruto's grin split his face bright and wide and he's alive. "And ouch." There was a large bandage taped under his left shoulder.

"You idiot," said Sasuke, face burning red as a small warm hand landed on his shoulder and he remembered who else was in the room. "Idiot. Usuratonkachi."

"Thank you, Sasuke," said a voice that kind of glowed it sounded so warm, and he looked sideways to where Uzumaki-san's smile spread over her tired face and then away again quickly, feeling embarrassingly fuzzy inside. "It was your phone call that saved Naruto. Thank you."

A larger hand landed lightly on his head, messing up his hair before he could flinch away. "We will always be grateful, Sasuke-kun. Thank you for being the kind of friend that saves a life."

Sasuke jerked off the bed and several feet away from the overbearing parents, until he was safely out of arm's reach.

"Sasuke, convince them they don't need to invest in a zombie apocalypse bunker—stop it, Bastard-sensei," said Naruto, batting Kakashi's hands away from ruffling his hair and prodding his sore shoulder.

"Are you admitting to being one of the undead?" asked Sasuke, voice flat but still tuned high in relief. "Because it's a lot more believable when you aren't lying around, feebly hooked up to IVs."

"Teme," Naruto scowled. "But at least then I'd be on the outside of a stupid bunker."

"It would explain a lot," said Uzumaki-san, mouth twisted in a wry half-smile.

"We're not talking bunkers," said Namikaze, though Sasuke thought the man was rather partial to the idea. "But this was a wake-up call. In spite of everything we've done to keep you safe over the past few weeks, you're here because—well you wouldn't even be here if Kushina and Gaara hadn't acted fast enough. You'd be dead, Naruto."

Sasuke took stock of the adults in the room, looking for context to what he was hearing. There was so much tension between the family of three that even Kakashi was looking uncomfortable, right hand inching suspiciously towards the pocket he kept travel-size erotic novels in.

"That's a different issue," Naruto was insisting. "It needed batteries. It got batteries. Same thing happened when I was younger too, and then I went on perfectly fine until now. So I'll just make sure to get the batteries replaced quicker next time. Or get the damn thing taken out."

"Batteries?" hissed Sasuke. His eyes moved to the bandage on Naruto's chest; Kakashi wasn't reaching for his porn anymore.

"Oh yeah, I have this machine that helps my heart if the beat gets messed up," said Naruto easily, rubbing the back of his head. "'S probably what the Fox wanted to talk to me about. Remind me we needed to get it fixed."

"The Fox?" echoed Uzumaki-san. Her face was white, and beside her Namikaze had snapped straight, veins popping prominent on his forearms. Naruto's stilled, mouth open, and then smacked himself on the forehead.

"Shit. Shit shit shit."
"Your heart doesn't need any help." That was Namikaze, and his voice wasn't angry or harsh but it made Sasuke's toes clench in his shoes. "The generator isn't there to help your heart. It's there to hurt it. We're done with secrets, Naruto. We shouldn't have to rely on Kakashi waking your teammate in the middle of the night to see if he remembers anything that might give us a clue as to why your heart isn't functioning. We're your parents, we love you, support you, believe in you, and we're damn well going to protect you." He rose up, and looking very, very tall, took two long strides to where Sasuke stood, put a strong, strong hand on his shoulder. Sasuke forced himself to be still, to not flinch or fight or fall to his knees in submission, and watched Naruto slowly look up from under his hand, mouth pressed tight and defiant, but eyes wide and vulnerable.

"We'll start with you two," said Namikaze, and it wasn't a request. "Since there are things you felt safe enough to tell Sasuke, you and Sasuke can tell us those things together. We'll work deeper from there. But."

Namikaze released Sasuke, stepped back, folded his arms across his chest. He looked down at them, intimidating in spite of his tired face and rumpled clothing and messy hair.

"No more secrets."

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Chapter End Notes

A recent review reminded me that I've been intending to add more chapters for... years. I'm sorry for the long wait! Thank you so much for reading and reviewing! Got 20 chapters headed your way...
"I was thirteen."

If his heart wasn't still beating panic into his ribs, if his insides weren't still knotted too tight to breathe right, if there weren't shallowly bleeding crescent-moon grooves in short stinging lines on each palm, if he could stop looking at Naruto between every breath to make sure he really was there and not in the empty broken bits he had sometimes dreamed about—Sasuke could have kept his mouth shut.

"When I met Naruto. Almost thirteen."

He paused, hoping to be interrupted, but there were no questions. No protests. Kakashi nodded at him, the lines around Namikaze's eyes eased slightly, and Uzumaki-san leaned forward a little, hands clasping and unclasping. She still seemed unnaturally pale.

Naruto had a lip sucked between his teeth, biting hard, and had ducked his chin down with a shake of his head that sifted all his dark hair forward, shading his eyes. His hands were open and empty on his sheet-draped lap, the muscles of his arms twitching and contracting under the skin.

You can hit me, dobe. I deserve it.

"I was... I was pit fighting. For money."

He watched Kakashi close his eyes, Uzumaki-san take in a shuddering breath and suck in her bottom lip, exactly like Naruto. Watched Namikaze's face go blank, sharp and untelling as Itachi at his worst. But Naruto didn't move. Didn't speak. And that kept the words pushing up and out, tongue shaping secrets he'd never said he'd keep because—because they hadn't needed a promise. Because he would never betray Naruto. Because it was his secret too.

Because he knew damn well how to keep his mouth shut, and damn the consequences.

Stop me.

"I didn't meet him right away. I had a... sponsor."

Naruto's jaw flexed tight, biting hard on the rage he always showed when Orochimaru came up. It was almost enough normalcy to let Sasuke fall quiet. Almost. After the years of hiding, masking, burying, denying—the words came on their own, so easy, too easy, and he couldn't stop.

"I started working with this sponsor after school. Training. Learning about the fights, how they worked, how to... Not die."…Win."

Subtle movement caught his peripheral vision, releasing his gaze from Naruto, if only for a second. Kakashi had straightened to his full height, his regard intense. He'd always been denied this part of their story.

"Before my first fight—Naruto already knew about me. He came in, told me to get out."

Naruto's fingers closed into fists.

"Where?" the question was from Namikaze, soft and encouraging.

Concrete, pipes, faulty machinery piled haphazard in one corner. The stink of sweat, fresh blood
making small starbursts on the cold floor, spattered from a crushed nose over a torn lip. Whose? He didn't know; the man had staggered in, cried into a towel and a bottle, staggered out. Sasuke stayed alone, too tense to sit, blood burning eager, searing his veins—his whole body was shaking, but not from fear—

"A holding room."

They staggered in sideways, two teens taller and broader than Sasuke and one scrawnier one strung up between them, an arm braced around each of their necks and one leg dragging so limp it almost looked like the trouser leg was empty cloth, tethered to the scuffed black boot sliding askew over the filthy floor. There were thick red welts swelling up on shoulders and arms, disappearing under a black sleeveless shirt that looked wet in patches—sweat, or blood? He couldn't tell, and for the first time the roaring anticipation in his belly curdled sour—"—freaking set match, effing Sora! You still got two more tonight—can you—" the kid on the right broke off immediately when she saw Sasuke, eyes narrowing dangerously. "—the hell's this?"

Sasuke had his chin behind his shoulder and his stance set before any of them had finished noticing him. "That," said a tired voice, and the beat-up boy in the middle straightened slowly, weight balanced casually on one leg. He pulled his arms down from around the other kids' necks with a caution Sasuke thought was strange—until he saw the wickedly curved blades taped to each hand. "Is snakebait."

He hop-limped to the nearest bench, lowered himself onto it with mumbled curses while the other two traded glances, then sized up Sasuke with what looked unsettlingly close to pity. "Get these off me, -ttebayo," gimp-kid grumbled, holding out his blade-taped arms with a pouting bottom lip that looked wholly incongruous between sharp eyes and scarred cheeks. Sasuke watched, confused, as their elders did exactly as asked, peeling back thick layers of wide-banded medical tape until they could remove the claw-blades one by one, which they did very carefully. Was that really blood, glinting red on the wickedly tipped metal? The taller two rehashed the fight in rough, low voices as they worked, using terms and phrases Sasuke didn't understand, which irked him. The kid who'd done the actual fighting just sat there silent, arms out, eyes slipping closed. There was a tightness around his jaw that made Sasuke think he must be hurting, but he didn't make a sound.

"Thanks, eh," he said, when the last blade was unstuck and he could pull in his hands and yank off the rest of the tape himself, which he did with a harshness that ripped little pale hairs from his arms and made Sasuke wince.

"I guess he'd just finished a match. I was up soon."

"Remind me to lose enough fights so I don't go up against mini-fox here, man," the bigger boy said, and the girl scoffed: "Remind you? When do you ever win?" and as they started to mouth off at one another the scarred-faced-kid grinned this empty, menacing grin and said, between gritted teeth: "Yah, I'm bloody demon-king of all cages. Now get out." and swore after them until they were gone.

His forbidding expression spilled away the moment they were out of sight, and Sasuke was staring at blue eyes hiding too much to guess or define, so he just stared back, disturbed and defiant. The kid looked small, and too thin, and Sasuke couldn't understand why he felt scared of him.

"You shouldn't be here." The words came low and sure, and maybe it was the casual way the kid was wiping the bloodied metal claws with his tattered shirt, but something inside was screaming to heed him, heed the warning.

"Says the kid who just lost a fight and leg," he said instead, lips twisting.
The smile spreading the kid's scars was startlingly genuine this time—genuinely amused. "Lost? Who lost? This is what it looks like when you win."

"Did you have to fight each other?"

Sasuke focused slowly back on Namikaze. He was still waiting for Naruto to sit up, speak up, curse him into silence, tell his part—or just look at him, and maybe break his jaw. "No," he said. "No, not that time."

*Gimp-kid levered himself up, not quite masking the pain as he pulled on the limp leg, experimentally shifted weight onto it, gasped, and went back to balancing on just the one foot—and when he looked up, his eyes were too big and earnest, like it was really important to him that Sasuke hear him, like Sasuke mattered.*

Why would Sasuke matter?

"You can change your mind," he said, voice cut rough in discomfort. "I can get you out. You can get on a bus, make it into the city, call your brother. Go home."

Sasuke might have listened, might have been smart, but then gimp-kid said brother, and fury and hatred seared away every chance of choice. So he kicked him, and the kid reacted and twisted—fast, really fast—but Sasuke was wearing steel-tipped boots and while it was glancing instead of the shattering hit he'd aimed for, he'd aimed dirty, and before his brain had caught up with the brother-anger-pain reaction in words and reason the other boy was down, clutching his bad hip and spitting curses.

"He just told me to leave. I didn't."

"Why did he tell you to leave?"

*He skipped backwards, realized he'd put his opponent between him and the blades on the bench, cursed himself for being so stupid—blues eyes caught his, tight with agony, and that scared him, but what really scared him—*

"Bastard."

*There was no... no anger. No defensiveness. No fear. None of the things a person was supposed to show when they hurt that bad, when facing something that made them hurt worse. He just... he just smiled, again, half-curled on the floor. "Guess I see why Orochimaru loves you. So go on. Go out and fight. You want to. 'Cause you're stupid."

Sasuke wondered how he was going to answer that question.

"'Cause he shouldn't've been there."

Sasuke's head snapped up, sharp and careful, but Naruto kept his head bent, his own eyes hidden. His lips moved slowly, and the words came out low and a little numb.

"The place where I was—it's a place for lost people. It wasn't just... wasn't just fighting. It was selling. Selling lives. Selling drugs, sex, violence, people. Sasuke—Sasuke wasn't lost. I knew him. I saw him at school. He had people waiting for him."

*I was lost, thought Sasuke. I hadn't ever noticed you, and I was more lost than you.* He felt bad for the adults in the room. For Naruto's parents, looking scared and white, like a nightmare had walked
heavy and odorous into the room and they couldn't pretend it was just a dream anymore. For
Kakashi, who looked like his back might break under whatever blame or shame or regret or guilt he
carried there. For Naruto, who was being stupid and brave and saying the things he was sure would
make them reject him.

"We were pretty lucky though," Naruto added, words angled flat, reflecting nothing.

"What did you do? How did you live?" asked Uzumaki-san, words put together so gentle and calm
that Sasuke turned to take measure of her, to see how fake. But her big eyes were sad and solemn
and not at all surprised. "Let's just... let's just get it out in the open now, okay? Okay, Naruto?"

He looked up at her, a quick, careful glance, hands twisting, and then settled, resigned.

"I wasn't a whore," he said, and Sasuke felt his face flame red, and his gut twist sick, that they had
to clarify that. Though it probably was their biggest concern. It had been Itachi’s, and the only time
Sasuke had ever seen his brother cry. "But even if I was—I mean—they're really just people, good
people, most of them—it's not like—like that wouldn't make you worth nothing—or, or not a
person, or—"

"Yes," said Uzumaki-san, "a person will always be a person, and always have great worth, no
matter how terrible the choices forced on them may be. And no matter what choices other people
have made against them. Of course, Naruto."

Namikaze had his head in his hands, fingers tight in his hair. "I don't—we don't—we don't even
need you to tell us this, just so that we know," he said. "It's not so we can, can judge you. Or
measure you. We just... just want to take care of you. And... and understand. As much as we can.
...I... I’m sorry. Son."

For some reason, Sasuke's throat was swelling tight, and his eyes stung. He wanted to leave, but if
he moved—if he moved, the tension might burst and break over him, and he would drown—

A rough hand closed over his, grip unyielding. "Don't run." Naruto was looking at him, jaw
working and eyes over-bright. "You got me into this. Bastard. Don't run."

Sasuke stilled, and the muscles of his throat loosened enough that he could breathe, talk again. "I'm
not running, dobe. But why are you getting into all that useless stuff?" His tone was harsher than it
needed to be, but as least everyone was breathing again. "They just need to know stuff that affects
the future. Like medical stuff. If you got AIDS. If you're dealing or addicted to illegal or controlled
substances. Or what you're going to do to about getting Hyuuga Hinata pregnant. Stuff like that."

"I don't have AIDS!" squawked Naruto, head flying up, indignant. "And I don't do drugs!" He
cought Kakashi's raised eyebrow and shook his fists at him. "I don't! You know that!"

"Aa," murmured Sasuke, deadpan, "So I guess that's all the secrets. Oh wait, there's the one about
your math grades—" he pulled away from the bed and out of Naruto's reach (though unfortunately
not out of ear-shot), goals accomplished. Naruto could hold his own from here. Sasuke could find
an empty room somewhere to fall apart in.

"Not quite," said Uzumaki-san, and Sasuke made the mistake of glancing into a gaze that warned
every one of his senses to obey, and sent unease creeping fast up his spine because those grey eyes
were suddenly, terribly familiar. Naruto must have looked too, because he wasn't spluttering swear
words at Sasuke anymore. Uzumaki-san hadn't moved, hadn't shouted, didn't need to.

"Tell me about the Fox."
"I can't tell you about the Fox." Everything open about Naruto slammed shut. The steady blips of the heart monitor sped until the pauses between the tones were shorter than the tones themselves. Sasuke stepped back toward the bed, eyes moving between Naruto and the door, at his muscles stretching taut on the exposed chest and shoulders, the fingers ripping at the slips of tape holding the IV needle in place over the raised vein on the back of the other hand—

"Hey, hey, Naruto—" that was Namikaze, standing carefully, watching his son like one might look at a dog left chained too long and finally set free—

"I can't!" cried Naruto, and the heart-rate monitor flew off his finger, reached the end of its tether, and recoiled back to swing at the side of the bed, as an alarm started to sound—

"I can," said Uzumaki-san, still seated, still pale and deadly calm. "His name is Uzumaki Kurama. He's an aggressive anarchist, founder of the Nine-tails gang, a serial murderer, and my father."

Everything stopped. Naruto doubled over, right hand clutching the bandage over the left half of his chest, frozen halfway through crawling off the bed; Namikaze half-an-arm's reach away from Naruto, both hands out and open to stop him; Kakashi snapped straight, chin up, eyes wide; and Sasuke with one hand on the sliding door, the same door being forced open from the other side as a team of harried nurses rushed the room.

"Please be calm, Naruto-san," they were saying, and taking hold of Naruto's arms, and putting the finger-clip back on, and drawing their brows together when that frantic heartbeat filled the tilting room. Naruto's shoulders were starting to shudder, and his voice shook too as he gasped "Don't lie, Mom," and Sasuke saw the look that passed between too of the medical personnel, and the syringe with what was probably a sedative being prepped behind his best friend's back.

"Behind you—" Sasuke started to say, and wondered if Naruto could even hear him—

"Timing, Kushina," Namikaze sighed. And, noticing the nurse and the needle, "Hey—no, no, get that away—"

"How," choked Naruto, "how—if he's your—then—then—

"Out, now," Namikaze ordered, and with Kakashi's strong hands on uniformed shoulders, successfully bullied all four nurses out the door. "Yes, please do call the attending physician. After we have thirty seconds of privacy. And the general manager, by all means alert her as well—"

In moving out of their way, Sasuke found himself pressed back up against the bed, and somehow Naruto's hand found his again.

"Sasuke," said Naruto, looking at him with big eyes showing too much white, and a crack-angled tilt to one side of his lips that looked like his smile had been broken and squeezed back together not right. "Did'ya hear that, Bastard? That Old Man. The Fox. The Demon. He's my—my old Grandpa." And then he started laughing.

Namikaze fell back into his chair, posture crumbling, breath hushing out like he wanted rid of every scrap of air in his lungs. Kakashi was outside, guarding the door. And Uzumaki-san was just looking, looking at Naruto laughing, with hard grey eyes Sasuke knew why he recognized, now.

"So it is him," she said, and the pooling tears brimmed high and spilled over, running swift and silent down her washed-white face.
Left behind, mused Sakura, standing still on the ice as teammates buzzed around her, shouting, passing, shooting. They've left me behind. Again.

It wasn't just Naruto missing today. It was Naruto, Kakashi-sensei, and Sasuke-kun. All with different excuses, of course, but Sakura knew them and their lies very well. Something had happened to one of her boys, the other two were there to do something about it, and none of them thought to so much as text her.

You're so lucky, Ino liked to say. You got the two hottest boys on your mentor team! The star players! And the legendary Hatake Kakashi for a mentor! Plus they're all dark and mysterious—I get why you're into hockey now, wink wink.

Yeah. A puck whizzed by, chased close by a swearing Kiba. It was intercepted by Chouji, who spun it expertly to Shika, who caught it with a sigh but didn't note Shino gliding silently around his left until Shino's stick slipped around his, snagged the puck, and propelled it halfway across the rink, just in time for Kiba to slam it into the goal. Me and my absent team. Sooo lucky.

"YES!" roared Kiba, beating his gloves on his chest. "Who needs those sluffing jerks? We GOT this!"

"Not quite," countered Shino, voice dry. "Shikamaru is neither focused nor motivated. Chouji is hungry. Sakura hasn't even moved for nearly three minutes. This is not a scenario we will encounter when facing an opposing team."

"Pessimist," grumbled Kiba. "Come on, celebrate that wicked goal we just made—"

"I am a realist," interrupted Shino, very calmly. "Without Sasuke and Naruto, our chances of qualifying for tournament finals are very slim."

"Truth," sighed Shikamaru, and catching their coach's eye, turned his gaze pointedly to the bench.

"All right, all right, off the ice," ordered Asuma-sensei. "Moegi, Udon, Konohamaru, you're up. Show me how many passes you can complete between the goal line and the blue line. Number Sixteen! Wake up! Off the ice! Move!"

Startled out of her reverie, Sakura booked it for the boards, heat rising in her cheeks. I can still play hockey, she told herself. I can. I have all the same skills. I can still skate and track and shoot. Even if those two aren't here to pass to. Doesn't change anything. Doesn't change anything, Sakura.

Except it changed everything. She was recruited into WoF for her brains, and gave up her spot as the star of the nerd circle to fight her way onto the hockey team. She played hockey because Sasuke-kun played hockey, and Sasuke-kun was the coolest kid in school, back when she was eight and getting all swallowed up in her first crush, as consuming as it was infantile. She got good. She got strong, and fast and smart and mean, and with Naruto in the middle (because for all that she worshipped him and changed for him she was nothing to Sasuke until Naruto shoved his way between them—) and Sasuke as the other wing they were unstoppable front-line genius and every team they played learned quickly to fear them. If they ever figured out what hit them.

"They didn't tell you anything," said Shika, more statement than question, and Sakura turned to take in his irritable face and the way the skin narrowed his eyes and bunched between them, reading more emotion than she was used to him showing. "Troublesome."
"They'll be back," she said.

"Is everything okay?" worried Chouji. "Naruto missing practice isn't so strange, though he's never missed this much before, and Kakashi-sensei forgets to show up sometimes, but Sasuke? He looked like he was going to kill anyone who got in the way of him winning this tournament. And now we probably won't even qualify."

"There are bigger things in life than a hockey tournament," snapped Sakura, and immediately felt bad for the way Chouji's jaw tightened in hurt, and how his phone appeared from somewhere under his chest padding so he could hide behind it, and how Shikamaru leaned closer to his friend, like he needed defending. "I just meant priorities, you know," she finished weakly. "Like family. Family's really important."

"Uh-huh," said Shika, and he was actually rolling his eyes, an action Sakura felt all people everywhere should have grown out of by the end of fifth grade. "I can't wait for my mom to find out how the team's been doing lately. That will be fun."

"We should probably warn Asuma-sensei," mumbled Chouji, a bit of color missing from his usually rosy cheeks.

"Nah, let him live his final moments in blissful denial," drawled Shika. "Maybe the village idiots will be back before shit really hits the fan."

"They better be," mumbled Sakura. "I have a new kick I want to try out on Naruto's face. As a trial run for when I aim it at Sasuke's face. Do you think squashed-Uchiha is still remarkably-good-looking-Uchiha?"

"That," said Shikamaru, edging subtly away from her, "is a question far better suited for Ino."

"Hey," said Chouji, voice small and choked, like he'd been told potato chips were irrevocably linked to cancer. "Hey. Shik. Look at this." He held out his phone, trembling on his thick, sweaty palm.

"Dude, Sensei'll confiscate that if—" the rest of Shikamaru's breath left him, squeezing off his words, and his eyes narrowed into sharp-tipped slits. His index and thumb pinched together, then swept outward on the screen, and he stared hard at the blown-up picture. Sakura craned closer, curious, and he leaned back suddenly, pushing the phone at her, the movement strange and jerky.

"What—" she said, and then her tongue nearly crawled backwards down her throat, because there on Chouji's little screen was a picture of Naruto.

Naruto, kneeling on a bed, doubled over and—really upset, or in pain, or—it didn't matter, because reaching out to Naruto was Naruto's dad, and behind them was Naruto's mom, and even if she hadn't recognized any of them (the window was behind them, shading them in soft grey lines with little contrast, but she would know than messy head of spiky hair anywhere—), there was a headline in giant bold letters, quickly revealed by Shika's prodding fingers: BACK FROM THE DEAD?

"No," Sakura whispered. She could sense Shikamaru's hard gaze on her, and Chouji's confused one, but that little bit of logic and warning was lost in the dread curling sour in her gut and in her wrists and behind her knees. "No—how—how did they find out? It was supposed to be—"

She cut herself off, chanced a nervous glance at Shikamaru, flinched at the calculated revelation shaping his brow.
"So it's true," he said.

"Break's over!" roared Asuma-sensei. "Got your heads screwed back on yet? Back on the ice, let's give this another go!"

"That's true?" asked Chouji, glancing anxiously between his phone, his friends, and their sensei. "I just did a search for 'Naruto' because I thought he might have been arrested again—"

"That's why he's been missing? Previously unknown relatives—possible custody case—it's his parents?"

"They really are his parents?" echoed Chouji, eyes round in wonder. "So Naruto—is—is—that Naruto? Really?"

"SHIKAMARU!" bellowed Asuma-sensei. "CHOUJI! Get your lazy asses down here—you too, Sixteen—"

"How long?" pressed Shikamaru, leaning in with eyes that had already puzzled out too much. "How long have you known? No—wait—how long as he known? And why is he in a hospital? What happened to him? When?"

"I can't tell—what—he's in a hospital?!" Sakura grabbed the phone back, stared down at the image again, saw the raised bed, the bandaged chest, the edge of what looked like a heart monitor in the far right corner. "He's in a hospital," she whispered. "Did they get to him that fast...?"

"That phone is mine," growled a bass voice, and the three stared up into Asuma-sensei's cloud-of-doom face, too overwhelmed to be cowed. Chouji's eyes were as round as his face.

"Did you know, Sensei?" he asked, watching Asuma-sensei pull his phone from Sakura's unresponsive fingers. "Did you know about Naruto?"

"Know what about Naruto?" Asuma snapped, checking the screen to make sure it wasn't cyber-bullying or porn that had three of his best players uncharacteristically impudent. "He's been excused, how many times do we have to tell—oh."

He squinted at the little screen, swiped up, swiped down, stared again. "No way," said Asuma-sensei, deep voice thin, stretched. "This is—but—wow. Wow." He looked at the three of them, gaze moving from face to face to face, back to the screen, back to them. "Here," he muttered, pushing the phone into Chouji's hands with a small shuddered shrug, cheeks pale above his beard. "Take it back. Put it away. Just—just don't say anything. Get back on the ice. Get through practice. Uh, Shikamaru, you take charge...can you pull this off, or do I let Kiba be boss? I need to make a call."

"I'll do it," offered Sakura, annoyed that Shika was even being considered. He had that gleam in his eye that meant there was a puzzle to be solved, and damn the rest of the world until he understood it to his satisfaction. But of course Asuma-sensei wouldn't think of asking the girl.

"Right, sure," mumbled Asuma-sensei, and dropped his whistle distractedly into her hands before abandoning them all.

Don't think, Sakura chanted, blowing furiously until the whistle rang shrill and everyone was staring at her; she knew there was probably a manic cast to her eyes, that her cheeks were flushed and her movements too sharp. Don't think.

"Me and Chouji versus Everyone," she announced, and enjoyed the tiniest moment of satisfaction
when Udon's adam's apple bobbed nervously. Good. "Chouji's got goal, of course. Kiba, you coach those brats past me, get one past Chouji, you leave practice ten minutes early."

"I'll leave fifteen minutes early," bragged Kiba, clutching his stick a harder than necessary.

Sakura smiled.

(Okay, Naruto, Sasuke-kun... I'll keep the hockey going, yeah? We'll all still be here, so... so come back.)

(Just. Come back.)

(...changes everything...)

mluIm

Gaara's death stare was second to none, but the image on the screen refused to combust. A man and a teenage boy in a hospital room, arms reaching for each other, a woman's distraught face just visible between and behind them. Blaring title blown up so big he had to scroll past it to see the full picture, and the caption—

BACK FROM THE DEAD?

Troubled boy found in Suna hospital could be Namikaze Naruto—officially declared deceased more than a decade ago.

The third time the browser refreshed, a hastily written article appeared.

Sunagakure—Are there real-life happily-ever-after endings? Namikaze Minato famously hoped for one, and was spotted in a Suna City Hospital just moments ago, tearfully embracing the child he believes to be his son. A former Prime Minister of Hi no Kuni, Namikaze-san resigned from office following the disappearance of his infant son, Naruto. When remains were discovered and positively identified as belonging to his missing child, Namikaze-san publicly rejected the evidence, continuing the search for his son in spite of widespread belief that it was a tragically lost cause. Click here to see public statements he made when confronted with the evidence of his son's demise.

So who is the boy in the hospital? "I think it's real, he really is Namikaze Naruto, even if the child doesn't know it," an employee of the hospital, speaking on terms of anonymity, told this reporter just minutes ago. "I can't go into the details, but tests have been done—blood work, DNA samples—and DNA doesn't lie. We have a miracle on our hands."

Is Namikaze Naruto alive? Where has he been for the past twelve years? Will the mystery of what really happened that September night all those years ago at last to be revealed?

He refreshed the page. Five thousand views jumped to seven-hundred-thousand views, soon to be replaced by 1.2 million. Perhaps in a bout of weakness—procrastinating the inevitable—Gaara clicked the link. Two ball-point pens were destroyed as he waited for the pre-play ad to end, and the screen played through a broadcasting logo, fading to show a much younger Namikaze-san being welcomed onto the set of an internationally renowned talk show. The hostess welcomed him with a sickening mix of good-story-glee, bleeding-heart pity, and star-struck fangirl, quoting official reports of Naruto's confirmed death without drawing breath from the string of dripping
condolences already offered. Namikaze-san took it all with his face set in so perfect a balance of hard intelligence and perfect courtesy that Gaara's own brow furrowed to compensate for it.

"Those are the official reports, yes," he agreed.

"But you don't believe them," prompted the hostess.

"This is not the first time I have been in disagreement with the police," said Namikaze-san, voice eerily empty of everything but the rise and fall that made it polite, human. "Though I commend them for their hard work throughout this investigation."

"So you will continue your search."

"I will search for a little boy with missing teeth," said Namikaze-san, and turned to the camera, staring through the screen with startling, intense, pleading eyes. "Naruto," he said, and the hostess moved to put a hand on his arm, but he ignored her— "Naruto, if you ever see this, keep waiting. Just wait for me, baby. I'll—" the clip cut off, messily edited to the hostess sitting alone, smiling into the camera to wrap up the show.

Gaara closed his eyes. 'I'm sorry, Namikaze-san. I'm so sorry, Kushina-sama, Naruto.

I failed.'

Three sharp taps on the office door, and Baki-san entered, jawline angled something fierce. "The employee responsible for this leak has been found and detained," he reported. "Would you like to interview her yourself, or shall I proceed?"

Gaara didn't bother to open his eyes. "I would like to talk to her. But before that... I must debrief Naruto and his guardians... and present my apologies."

"Let me apologize on your behalf," said Baki-san quickly. "I am remiss. I apologize first to you, Gaara-sama. As your chief of security, I take full responsibility for this. Please allow me to handle the worst of the consequences, and once I have done all I can, I will submit my letter of resignation immediately."

"No," said Gaara flatly. "I'm not giving up your talent and loyalty. By all means do what damage control can be done, and carry on with all your other duties. Give me a resignation letter, and I'll burn it before your eyes in my decorative ash tray."

There was a pause. Then, "Yes, sir," said Baki, and, more quietly, "Thank you, Gaara."

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"So," said Naruto, twisting his bedsheet into another creative knot. Gaara had just left them. Naruto felt bad, seeing how upset Gaara was over the whole thing, but he didn't have as much energy as usual for helping other people with their emotions. He had too much shit of his own to sort through.

He hadn't even seen the needle Sasuke said they tried to stab him with. No one saw the camera, or more likely the cell phone, one of the nurses had stolen a picture with. 'Wake up. Pay attention. Shit like this gets you killed. You know that, Naruto.'
He watched his father rub tiredly at his eyes. "Yeah. So. So they caught us—it was only a matter of time. The question is how, exactly, we plan to respond."

Kakashi-sensei spoke up from where he lounged against the door, apparently having appointed himself guard duty. "The quality of the image isn't very good. We could get the whole story discredited."

"It'll all come out eventually," said Naruto. He felt tired, but like it would be a million years before his mind would let him sleep. There were so many questions—Don’t go there, Naruto! Focus! "I mean, the story's true, and even if we get people to believe that the picture is fake, there will still be all these stories about whether or not you're actually in Suna, and what you're doing here, and how you don't believe I died, and stuff... We would get what, one, three, ten more days of hiding me? Might as well suck it up and deal with it now."

Sasuke was sprawled on the floor, back against the wall, watching the conversation with half-closed eyes and a tightness around his mouth that meant he was totally freaking out about something while stupidly pretending nothing was bothering him. Usually that look meant he was going to start throwing things or hitting things. Or hitting things and then throwing them, maybe not all in one piece.

Mom—Kushina-san—Mom—was still and silent, just like she'd been since she said—only the tilt of her neck had changed, so her head fell down a little bit, and the tears kept spreading the dark patches on her lap. Not even Gaara's pained confession that someone in his hospital had taken and published a picture of them distracted her for long. Naruto looked away quickly.

"We can move first." He kept pushing the words out, faking himself out just like Sasuke, making confidence he didn't feel shape the way he used his voice. "We can control what people find out next. Like I was telling Mom yesterday—or, a couple days ago—we can announce I'm... I'm... you know, that Naruto, and let them make some wrong conclusions, like that I'm from Suna or something, so that at least at the beginning they don't figure everything out and go chasing all my friends around..."

"Don't worry about us, dobe," sighed Sasuke, sounding all put-out and too tired. "You win 'biggest problem' right now."

"You want to—make a public announcement, about who you are, about—finding us?"

Naruto tried to meet his father's gaze head-on, but his stomach was all sick and twisty with a weird sudden shyness, so he just stared awkwardly to the side instead.

"Well—yeah. I mean, the secret's out, and we've been talking about a press release for weeks, it's not like you guys didn't prepare me for this..."

There was this extra-long wet sniffle, and Kushina (finally, finally) looked up. "That's right," she said loudly, chin jutting forward. "We should make sure we're heard first. Before all the stories can be made up and sold. That way we can influence what those stories will say, and have a bit of an edge."

Namikaze stretched straight, taking on that calm, sharp, I-fix-things look Naruto had only seen twice, but immediately recognized.

"If we're going for it, how about we take it all the way, go big," he told them. "This is international headline material, so... let's take it to the people who do big news. And own the rights to sixty percent of all smaller media outlets, giving us even more control of what goes out, and where. I
have a contact—Naruto, be perfectly frank here—how are you feeling? We can do the shot right from this room—you could stay in bed—"

"I'm not showing up on everyone in the world's screens wearing half a shirt in a freaking hospital bed," Naruto cut that idea down, he hoped, very firmly. Sasuke snorted. "I mean, not more than I already have. I need real clothes, and fake hair, and no scars—"

He held the man's assessing gaze this time, unwilling to back down. "...Much as I wish it wasn't like this, you have a really good point," Namikaze conceded, and then smiled. "I should really stop worrying so much. You handle yourself...well. I'm impressed, Naruto."

He could feel his cheeks getting hot. And stupid Sasuke was watching. Also, his mom was pulling herself out of her chair, with that look that threatened either a hug, a hair-ruffle, or both. "So go make your call already—MOM! I had freaking surgery just hours ago—"

Covering what looked an awful lot like a quirked-up smile with his phone, his own father abandoned him to being mauled by an overly emotional redhead, already exchanging greetings with whatever mysterious 'contact' he'd called. Kakashi-sensei hastily following him out, muttering some super-lame excuse, and then Sasuke was standing up too, mumbling about how he was gonna find somewhere to sleep—

"TEME!" cried Naruto, or tried to, but it was hard with his mom pinching his cheeks and saying terrifyingly:

"—So I get to do my Naru-chan's makeup for the very first time today? So exciting. I'm going to take lots and lots of pictures to, you know, document-ttebane! Ahh, blackmail..."

He'd nearly died, raced through half the city in one of Gaara's super-sweet cars but been too out of it to even enjoy it, had minor surgery, watched his parents find out that his heart came with auto-destruct and his past came with lots of blood (but they didn't understand yet, not really); that everyone knew things about his family he hadn't really come to terms with himself yet—and that the Fox was... no, the Fox wasn't family. DNA didn't mean family.

But this—the annoying fingers messing with his hair, the still-a-little-broken voice making bad jokes about wigs, the warm blue eyes that had looked right into him and been so—so proud—this—does this mean family? We're telling the whole freaking world—that—that—

*That this is my family.*

"Hi," he whispered. Mom pulled back a little, so she could look at him with *hi-what?* eyes. He held out his hand, took hers, shook up and down, grin spreading side-to-side. "Hi," he said again. "Nice to meet you. My name is—is—is Namikaze Naruto!"
Chapter 15

—*hiya hina-hime* began the text, and already Hinata's heart was beating hard enough to make an echo in this small, lovely, impersonal room. She pressed her phone to her heart and her eyelashes to her cheeks until she could breathe again, and lifted courage to keep reading. —*i know maybe u need space rite now but i just want to ask you 1 thing can u turn on channel 4 and watch at 5:30 tonight plz for me hina-hime <3*

The image of Naruto's eyes big and pleading and fly-free-sky-blue her mind built to go with his simple words had her pressing her fist to her chest, where something was clenching in an affection so intense her body was felt far too frail to contain it. But her heart was expanding to match the ever-growing being beneath it, and there was room.

She read the text twice more, anxiously checked the time (4:28 pm), read it again, fell back on the bed with a sigh.

"You make it so hard to let go, Naruto-kun," she whimpered to the ceiling, eyes full of plain paint but mind full of warm hands and strong shoulders and smiles that rivaled every sunrise ever. "I know it is the best thing to do...for Naruto-kun... but it's like...l-like promising never to feel warm again..."

She solved her three remaining trigonometry homework problems and mixed bread dough from scratch to pass the time, smeared her phone with flour to check each passing minute (5:04 pm, 5:05 pm, 5:06 pm), tried not to feed the anxiety over what she might see on the 5:30 news, what she might know when her bread dough had risen, been punched down, had risen again. It may be just a story he liked, something funny or heartwarming, maybe something about teenage mothers, something to give her hope? (*not on Channel 4—that's just for headlines—world-wide headlines —*) (5:07 pm) Or it could be that Naruto's past and parents had been revealed, and the world-wide headlines would be some version of his secrets—(*don't think, you can be calm, the bread—cover it, put it somewhere warm, wait wait wait—*). 5:08 pm.

Her feet beat tight patterns on the tiled apartment floor, moving in and out of rhythm with the soundtracks of the commercials playing loud on Channel 4. At long, long last, the series of small materialist eternities ended, and she stared at the news ticker at the bottom of the screen scrolling upcoming headlines with eyes straining so hard it seemed they would see clear through the screen and into its electronic guts if she just kept looking. Continued draught in Rai no Kuni, a bungled theft in the Capital, tips on protecting one's online identity—"Coming on at half past five," announced a newscaster with startling red lipstick, "a miracle no one thought we would ever see—a happily-ever-after ending to a tragedy that struck all our hearts more than a decade ago. You may have seen the viral photo proclaiming Namikaze Naruto to be alive and well. You may have wondered if it was real. For answers, for details, for exclusive interview—stay right here on Channel 4, where we will be introducing a very, very special guest. Stay tuned, this is shaping up to be the story of the year. Sano-san?"

"Absolutely," agreed the sharp-suited Sano-san. "It's unbelievable. I mean—I don't believe it. And only here on Channel 4. Call your friends, gather your family—news like this comes once a lifetime."

Hinata's phone rang.

"Sakura-chan?"
"Hina-chan! Are you watching the news? Did Naruto text you? All I got was this cryptic 'You might wanna turn on channel 4' text—with like four words misspelled and there are only six to begin with—" 

"Y...yes, he tex-ted me," Hinata managed, but Sakura continued so quickly she wasn't sure she'd been heard.

"—so of course I turned on the TV and they're keeping all the references vague but it looks like his actual identity is going to be released worldwide—of course that boy can never do anything subtle—but—do you know, do you know what this means?"

Hinata asked herself the same question, and couldn't find an answer.

"I mean, I saw the picture, and read all the articles that have been coming out, but they're all speculative—and obviously made up, honestly—no one has any real proof—so is Naruto announcing everything himself? Why would he do that? This is going to be such a huge story, the media will go crazy for months—"

"...What picture?" interrupted Hinata.

"You didn't see?! Someone took a picture of Naruto in a hospital with his parents—and published an article about how they've done DNA testing and everything—but the picture's really poorly lit, and the person who took it seems to have disappeared, and there are all these experts debunking it already and it probably is real but no one who doesn't already know Naruto could possibly know that, I mean I might not even have recognized him if there hadn't been a caption, okay actually I would have, but most wouldn't."

"Wh-wh—" Hinata stopped, gathered breath, forced the syllable through. "When?"

"Just hours ago! Six—six-and-a-half hours? Chouji saw it during hockey practice, and it had only been uploaded for, like, five minutes. Of course it's viral now. All the major news sites are showing it."

Commercials were on again. Hinata stared numbly at a bouncing potato telling her to buy gluten-free crisps.

"Nine minutes," sighed Sakura. "What are we going to do for nine endless minutes..."

She told Hinata about trying to reach Sasuke-kun, and how his phone seemed to be powered off, but she was sure he was with Naruto, and probably Kakashi-sensei too. And then Sakura finally stopped to gather breath and Hinata heard the loss and loneliness in her friend's silence.

_I know what it's like to be left behind, too, Sakura-chan._

_But I made this choice. I have to keep making it. Again and again, right now, each minute from now._

(5:24)

"...I'm going to h-hang up-p," Hinata apologized. And she did.

_(i just want to ask you 1 thing)._  

Each breath took several seconds, so she focused on each one, feeling the slight rush of air over nervously damp lips, the prickle of each individual hair on her arms standing on end, the way the
long muscles on the backs of her thighs ached. She let her eyelids drop, indulged in the memories she kept behind them, felt a smile curl her cheeks as she wrapped herself in the lonely comfort of them.

Three months ago: A bus-depot bench, the last stop on Naruto's route; horror and rage she couldn't stop shaking from, arms clamped tight around her middle to protect what could become, what hadn't asked to become but was hidden inside her there—and a face so bright and kind and anxious she could see the warm curve of the jaw and the brightness of the eyes through retinas blurred over, drowning and dripping tears. Panicked assurance: I know, I know! Come stay with me! I have my own apartment, so it's perfect, ne Hinata-chan? And I can bring you food and everything! And—and—what do you need, medicine? Do you need medicine? I can get you that, but maybe if it's too expensive I'll have to ask Sasuke to lend me some money, but he totally will—oh, you don't need any? Okay! Great! But if you do, I can maybe ask Sakura too, she will totally understand. And then I can pay her back, so no worries. Aish, your family's sure confused. But hey, hey! Don't think about them. Think about me! Okay? Okay Hinata-chan?

One year ago: Continental Figure-skating Association free-skate trials, a short red costume she hated, a stern father's face already anticipating failure, just-off landing on a triple toe loop and the harsh smack of ice against her forearms as she hit down hard, the tears she'd been fighting back since before even stepping onto the ice falling too. She couldn't think of a single reason to get up. Her limbs moved anyway, in blind obedience to the muscle memory born of relentless training, and she danced through the next two measures of her routine like a wind-up doll slowly un-springing, falling a little more short of each proceeding beat, lost and mechanical. The first time she heard her name called out—screamed out, brazen and jubilant—she skipped half a step and whirled, dizzy, unbelieving. HINATA-CHAAAAAAAAN! Beautiful Hinata! Amazing Hinata! Go Hina Go! You got this! You're changing every second! This second is YOURS! YOURS, HINATA-CHAN!YEAH HINATAAAAA! She couldn't see him, but everyone, everyone could hear him; and caught on his warmth her soul danced forward, singing elation, body flying after strong and warm and heart beating like this: he knows my name, he knows my name, he knows my name!

Three years ago: Watching Uchiha Sasuke come through the door—no, watching the other girls as they watched him come through the door—feeling bemused, wondering what made that boy so unhappy—even more unhappy, she thought, than she—and what made the others cling to him. He didn't want their attention. Anyone could see that he didn't want that sort of attention. He wanted things no one could give him, Hinata thought, things he would never get, and he would always, always be angry for it. She could understand, at least a little, she thought, turning away. Oi, Bastard! Wait up, I don't know where I'm going— curiosity turned her back. She tried not to stare, truly she tried. She was nothing if not conscientiously courteous. But those eyes—that smile—

(5:29)

(5:30)

"You've seen the photo," began the newscaster. "You've read the headlines. Is Namikaze Naruto—called Konoha's Angel, in tragic tribute, after he was declared dead—the baby boy who went missing, whose remains were believed to have been found, who has been gone for more than a decade—is he alive? Reporting live from our Sunagakure office, where we have a very, very, very special guest."

He looked different. He had blond hair—must be a wig, because it was longer than his own (black) hair, and was styled to mimic his father's. They must have covered him in makeup, because there was no sign of the scars, and his complexion was a shade of pale that had never been touched by the sun. All this Hinata noticed second: first she noticed the way he looked right into the camera,
calm and dangerous, and the way his right index finger chafed at the cuticle of his right thumb, which he only did when he was very restless, or very nervous.

On either side were his parents. Namikaze-san looked like the leader of nations he had been. Uzumaki-san looked aggressive and on-edge, the way she focused her eyes making Hinata imagine she was glaring down each unseen person in the room, one by one. The screen split in two, one side zooming in on Namikaze-san, the other focused intensely on the boy at his side. The father spoke first.

"Good evening," he said. "I am Namikaze Minato, and I am very, very grateful, grateful and humbled, to introduce to you today my son: Namikaze Naruto. He is home."

There was a moment in which Hinata thought she heard cries and shouts echoing over all Konoha, as she imagined home after home centering around Channel 4, on their lost leader, on his lost son. Her hands were over her mouth, her eyes leaking, the tears burning.

"As always, I will opt for the most direct line of communication. This is why we are here, today, making public a reunion that has been a very difficult—wonderful, but difficult—and very private miracle for our family. I beg you, my friends—please allow us some privacy as we settle affairs, remake our home, and allow Naruto time to step into his new world."

Uzumaki-san was saying something, Hinata thought, but her words were muffled. Naruto wasn't looking at the camera, now; his eyes were downcast, his jaw rigidly determined.

"There are parts to this story that remain a mystery, and others that must be kept private until the investigation into Naruto's disappearance, newly re-opened, has been successfully concluded. I ask all media organizations to show the highest integrity in respecting this. I can say that he was recognized by an old family friend, that we were reunited in a hospital, that his identity has been confirmed beyond all doubt, that we love him—as we have always, always loved him—and we just rejoice that we no longer have to endlessly miss him. There are lots of answers left. What matters is this: this is Naruto, our Naruto, my Naruto, and while we have a lot—a lot, too many, years and kilometers and moments to make up for, we are—at last—"

The deep, sure voice broke, was swallowed into a painful pair of seconds. Hinata's own throat ached, swelled, closed.

"-at last—able—we get to bring him home."

Namikaze-san reached for Naruto, then, and Hinata's stomach tightened in fear that Naruto would flinch away; but he leaned into the touch instead, the small corners of his cheeks curling hesitantly up, and his right forearm swept swiftly across reddening eyes. Then he straightened, and stared once again into the camera.

"Is it my turn now?" he asked.

"Go for it," said Namikaze-san, and Uzumaki-san's arm wrapped itself around Naruto's wide shoulders, though the camera stayed too close to show her face.

"I'm—I'm, well, glad to be alive," said Naruto.

Hinata giggled, a wet, helpless sound that turned into hiccups.

"I've been... lost for a long time, not really sure who I was—heck, I'm still not sure," he continued, and there was that grin—that big, bright, bewildering grin, and somewhere in the dark corners of Hinata's mind a disheartening anxiety counted out the many million girls who must be watching
this, and how many hundreds of thousands of those millions must have fallen in love with him right at that second, and how Hinata's forever-slim chances of holding on to the only gold she would ever want or need in her life were too small to even see, now—but I'm letting him go, I already let him go, I knew this was coming—

"So. Um. I have an old life, and a new life, and I don't really know much about this new life, yet. I just think I'm the luckiest kid in the world, probably."

*Oh, Naruto.*

"But even when I was lost, I was lucky. I found good friends. I had some good teachers. I learned a lot of stuff I wouldn't have, otherwise. So there are some things I hope can come with me now—or, er, someone—Hina-chan, are you listening?"

She couldn't breathe. She couldn't believe. She was rigid, carved in marble, balanced on the edge of her sixteen-years-life, sitting too straight on the couch in her new apartment with a bowl of bread dough rising fat in the corner kitchen.

"I just—I know it's hard—there will be lots of people watching, and I know sometimes it will be really really hard, having so many eyes and questions stuck to us all the time, and this is so selfish, but—but you and Baby-chan—can you stay with me? Please, Hina-hime?"

Heartbeat heartbeat heartbeat heartbeat—

"It's just, you know, you're a piece of home, in my heart, so... Hinata-chan? Can you come home?"

She was crying. There were tears chasing races down her cheeks and her nose was running and her heart was clanging and her throat was aching and hope grew so big it just burst, flooding joy.

It took a few breaths, heaving, soaring, life-confirming breaths, and the words were in her mouth and typed in little glowing characters on her cell phone screen.

—*okay, Naruto-kun*

—*okaeri, Naruto-kun!*

Sighed, sung: "...love you, Naruto-kun..."

*xtotx*

Naruto melted over his phone, limbs weak in relief. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you, thank you, thank you..."

He still had the blond wig on, and it itched. His chest ached from being sliced open and stapled closed, his head ached from thinking way, way too much, his stomach ached because they wouldn't give him anything solid to eat so soon after surgery—

*okaeri, Naruto-kun!*

Welcome home. *Welcome home.*

Sasuke was gone. Kakashi-sensei was taking him back to Konoha. Obito was here to take
Kakashi's place—except Obito actually flirted with all the Channel 4 worker people, instead of just annoying them like Kakashi had. And now Naruto was famous.

He would have to face the Fox. He would have to look at him, knowing—knowing he was seeing his mother's father, knowing the Fox had always known where Naruto belonged, had always had the option of sending him home. He would have to look at him and not think that, or he wouldn't be able to think at all. That was a fight for someday. Not now. Because he had to know about his rigged-up heart, and if the Fox held the trigger, and what he wanted for it.

And if the Fox didn't have it (please please please don't be the one who can decide when I die in a way I can't can't can't fight—can't even put my fists up, go down trying—) he needed to know who did.

Gaara thought the Fox was protecting him. He had, a few times. But then he'd always thrown Naruto back—back into the empty struggle, where he had to fight for every night's sleep and every bite he swallowed and could never, ever trust anyone—the moment the bleeding slowed enough to be kept in check with a bandage, or the fever was down and he could crawl a few feet to pee by himself and feed himself water again, or the cast was set and the bones would heal, so long as Naruto didn't screw up enough to do new damage even through the plaster. And if Naruto found someone, someone who wanted to help, someone who saw the scars and didn't pretend like they'd seen nothing at all—the Fox made the choice clear. If Naruto chose selfishly, chose help, chose hope, his new someone would disappear.

Just like that.

But Namikaze wasn't—wasn't just a soft-hearted someone. He was the father Naruto had hated because he couldn't forget, couldn't give up, couldn't stop waiting to be saved; when waiting to be saved was the stupidest thing even an idiot like Naruto could do. And Kushina—Kushina was his badass mama, a mom who knew the streets and the kids that fought for each miserable day there, knew the grunge and the horror and probably more about where Naruto was coming from than anyone who hadn't played part of it.

Namikaze had connections and influence and, most importantly, money. Plenty of money. Kushina knew what she was fighting. They were both smart—smarter than Naruto, how could they have had a son who couldn't even do math?—and were taking the wreckage of attempted survival that was his mess of a life very, very seriously.

Was it enough? Maybe.

Maybe.

Damn. His head really hurt.

okaeri, Naruto-kun!

He hoped Hinata would be there, when he finally got home. Whatever "home" meant. He seemed to have talked them into Konoha, anyway. And they said he could still play hockey, and go for ramen with Iruka-sensei, and waste time at the park with Sasuke and Sakura-chan (okay they totally weren't comfortable with the idea of hours in a huge open park full of all kinds of strangers, any one of whom could maybe just—just stop his heart, if they wanted too—but Naruto wasn't worried about that, because if someone wanted to stop his heart, it would be for a reason. They would use him somehow, and chilling in a park wasn't a likely way to be useful to someone like that) and Hinata would be there.
Hinata, with her soft hands and warm eyes and tiny voice. Hinata, who looked at him like he was going to do something spectacular every time he stuffed on his shoes and shrugged into his jacket because there were errands to run. Hinata, who believed he was just plain good, even though she had plenty of evidence that he really wasn't. Hinata, who saw him like no one else did, and in all those years, never, ever stopped watching.

She made the right choice, when she told him she needed to go, when she explained why. It all made sense. It was probably best for her, even if she was wrong about it being best for him, and if he'd learned anything it was that the people he cared about would be hurt when he chose to be selfish—

*What have I done?!!*

*They'll protect her,* he rebuked himself. *Maybe they can't protect me, but they think her baby is mine, so they'll protect her, and that's something they can do.*

*I need them to protect her. And Baby-chan. Didn't she say we could find out this month, if Baby-chan is a boy or a girl?*

"Hey, you ready?" Namikaze's blond head was poking around the doorjamb, eyebrows scrunched together, concerned. Naruto shook himself, looked down at the clothes he was holding, the ones he'd been supposed to change into. If he just put on the hoodie—

"This good enough?" he asked, once the thick hood was pulled up around his face, and was embarrassed by how small and insecure the question came out. Namikaze *(Dad! I can call him Dad—but it's just—so weird-)* had stepped all the way into the room, pulling the door shut behind him. Naruto heard Obito's voice on the other side, too loud to be muffled by just one door. Because of the hood he didn't see the hand reaching for him until it was really, really close *(too close!)* and he'd moved out the way before his brain could catch up; by the time it did, Namikaze had let his arm fall, the hurt only showing in his eyes for a second.

But Naruto saw it.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "It's just... long day, you know."

There was a small, angsty pause. Sasuke would have owned it.

"I know," agreed Namikaze. "For me, too. And yes, just the hood up is enough, I think. Let's make our escape while we can, yeah? Gaara-kun's agreed to host us for one more night. He's... generous, when it comes to you."

Hope rose. "One? And then—and then Konoha?"

Namika—*Dad*—Dad smiled. A real one, simple and tired. "Yeah. And then Konoha. It seems you have someone waiting for you. Princess, you called her?"

"Dad," groaned Naruto. But his chest felt lighter.

"Can't keep a Princess waiting," Namikaze-Dad (*savior*) teased, and when he reached out this time, the movement slow and clear, Naruto let himself get folded up in it.

His father's arm was strong and warm around his shoulders. Hinata's answer was straight and free.

*-okaeri, Naruto-kun!*
"Tadaima," he whispered, mostly just his lips moving.

"Hmm?" asked Dad.

"Nothing," said Naruto.

"So this is it," murmured Kakashi, gazing around with tired eyes. The past twenty-four hours had been a whirlwind for everyone, from frantic plane flights and media explosions to more emotional turmoil than anyone was prepared to deal with. Rin, though, had stayed behind, coordinating travel plans, managing security details, dealing with all the daily minutiae of running the Namikaze and Uzumaki portfolios (about to get much more complicated as the media hounds descended en masse-) and, somehow, making sure there was an actual house to come home to.

"There's so much left to be done," she sighed, tucking loose bangs behind one ear, and Kakashi wondered how many urgent calls and emails she'd fielded in the past few hours. Anyone who knew Minato-sensei, after all, also knew his assistant.

Nohara Rin, ever too capable for her own good. Not to mention brilliant. And she had ridiculously soulful eyes.

*Focus, Kakashi.*

He forced his attention from the girl to the building, and let his finer senses mourn for it. Though it was an interesting house.

"How did you even find this?"

"I started looking before you even got the kid into the hospital for DNA testing," she told him, eyes staring at what must be a mental to-do list three hundred items long. "Thought it would be a good idea to at least get a feel for the market, in case—in case it all turned out to be real. Security and location were the first priorities, obviously, but a quirky family deserves a quirky home."

They were standing in the foyer, and their view into the house was dominated by a giant flourish of a staircase, wide and curling all the way to the second level. A walk-through of the ground floor introduced Kakashi to what was likely meant to be a formal sitting room, a study, two storage closets, a door to a spacious garage, three bathrooms, another open room that would likely become some sort of family room—and two fully equipped kitchens, one of which was clearly designed with entertaining in mind. All of these rooms were arranged in a ring around a giant, empty gymnasium of a room, with faded wax on a painted wooden floor and a professional-quality basketball hoop on either end. The ceiling soared two-and-a-half floors above, the bright grey of an overcast autumn day peaking through narrow windows nestled just below it. Admitting just a bit of awe, Kakashi shuffled back to the ridiculous staircase and up to take in the second level.

"Sensei's going to throw a fit over the size," Rin remarked resignedly, poking her head over his shoulder to peer with him into the palatial master bath. "He always was one for moderate, practical, minimalist space."

"Kushina will love it, though," said Kakashi, and smiled at her.
"I set up separate rooms for Hinata and Naruto," she said, distracting him with her eyes again. "Do you think that's all right? I mean, I would have just put them together, since they've been living—and obviously sleeping—together, but I don't think Sensei and Kushina-san are quite... ready to accept their relationship at that level, yet."

"Sounds like a good call," muttered Kakashi, not eager to follow that train of thought. Although...

"You did the same for Sensei and Kushina, yeah?"

"Yes," said Rin, eyes downcast. "Kakashi... do you think... do you think this might, you know, fix them? Sensei is just... he misses her. He's used to it, but it's constant."

Kakashi shrugged. "Living in the same house is a good start. Hell, living in the same country is a good start. And she hasn't thrown anything at him, yet, which is—well—bloody miraculous."

"Let's hope Naruto can keep distracting them," Rin said, lips tugging up wryly. The almost-smile evaporated before it could fully take shape, unfortunately. "But hopefully not by almost dying. Again."

"Have you spoken with Tsunade-sama? About—that."

"Yes. She's even agreed to work with Chiyo-sama, which goes against their entire mutual history."

"The barriers people break for that kid," murmured Kakashi, fondness for his favorite knucklehead swelling up warm. "The place looks great, really, Rin-chan. Anything you need me to do?"

Was she blushing over his praise? He would absolutely find something else to compliment her on, post-haste—

"Um—everyone has a bed to sleep in, linen and towels are set out, the kitchens and bathrooms are stocked, we got a secure internet connection put in this afternoon and Genma and Raidou went over every other security detail exhaustively... Seems like they got a lot to prove after bungling everything till now, and it's weird to work with such a perfect set up."

"It is really weirdly set up," Kakashi agreed, reflecting on the hidden passage he'd found at the back of one of the storage rooms on the first floor, the bars on the windows in the master bedroom, and the built-in security cam niches. "Was the previous owner paranoid?"

"Yes," said Rin. "He's a patent lawyer who goes through various sports fetishes; rumor has it he's currently building a home that doubles as a minigolf course. Also believes he's being haunted by vengeful ancestors, and thinks he may have finally trapped them in this house."

"How... charming."

"I got the place for a great price," Rin told him cheerfully. "It's been on the market for two years, can you believe it? Everything else in this neighborhood gets snapped up in weeks."

"Ghost stories?"

"Yep," said Rin. "That and the basketball court. Seems the elite of Konoha's upper crust have far too little appreciation for Victorian grandeur wrapped around two hundred square meters of indoor sports court."

"They always have had their priorities wrong," agreed Kakashi. "However Sensei managed to put up with them for so many years remains forever mysterious..."
"He'll have to do it for a few more," Rin said grimly. "You know they'll all be after Naruto. He's the most interesting thing in all Hi no Kuni—for now. Probably for too many months to come. But," she grinned, those eyes catching his, mischievous and sweet. "At least he knows how to use his fame to woo his girl."

*And the student surpasses the teacher again,* inner-Kakashi agreed glumly, heart thumping away enthusiastically.

...xuOux...

Itachi had meant to leave work early, to catch Sasuke at the airport before Hatake-san could take him home. He needed to gauge his brother's emotional state and wanted to snag a few precious moments of focused brother-time in the car. Which meant the universe conspired to get someone murdered; he'd never wished Shisui to be less right about how much a given case needed his attention. It was being investigated as a gang feud casualty, and perhaps it was—but on a scale far, far beyond the typical rage-fueled territory disputes spitting out bodies of kids doing what they thought they had to do, just to survive. No. This time they'd taken out an expert assassin, a man with a minimum two decades of life-and-death experience, someone who had always managed to be the one to walk out alive.

The victim was called Han, and he was a Nine-tails. Han had been gutted. Cut open and left to bleed to death. Body dumped publicly. A message.

*Is this why you left Konoha, Naruto? Were you the mark, or the would-be murderer? And if you return...?*

Sasuke's light was on, and the slight ache of persistent worry pressing at Itachi's ribs released in relief. He parked and turned off the car with absent fingers, long strides taking him into the house and to check on his brother, though he did pause to take in the pallor and sharp lines drawing anxiety and hollow anger with his mother's face. She didn't look at him, or respond to his murmured greetings, and he concluded gratefully that nothing was too far out of the ordinary.

Sasuke's room was empty, the bed stripped, linens and pillows strewn over the floor. A wreckage of textbooks, notebooks, pencil holder, and the pencil holder's contents heaped chaos on the floor, apparently swept off the desk in one fell swoop of teenage angst.

*Breathe. It's his age. You can't help if you can't be calm.*

The window was open. To allow for more time to collect himself, and because he had actually learned their mother's lessons in civility, Itachi turned and went back through the house and the series of doors that would lead him to their narrow back lawn and the aspen grove Sasuke was frantically beating up. Or getting beaten by, if one took the results-oriented approach and considered which of the two parties was taking more damage.

Ten steps closer and he could hear each rasping breath between murmurs of dry fall leaves in cold night air and the trickling rush of the little stream running through the base of the trees. He was jogging, now; Sasuke was wet, must have fallen in—hadn't he stopped doing that when he was six? And his knuckles looked black where they should have looked white in the colorless moonlight, and those smudges on the pale aspen bark—
"Sasuke," he said, catching a fist centimeters from the bark, and the second as it flew for his jaw in
defensive reflex, simultaneously blocking a kick with a swift ankle lock; wild black eyes rolled up
to his, and Itachi was stunned to see the evidence of actual tears.

Sasuke did not cry. Didn't even know how to cry. Sasuke broke things, because he felt too much,
and could not let it out.

Sasuke didn't cry.

He let shaking wrists go slowly, entirely unsure of what an unstable half-grown baby brother might
do next. Fight, probably. Itachi would let Sasuke hit him. It might be the only thing he could do for
him, tonight.

Sasuke hugged him. Long strong arms gripping tight around his rib cage, cold face pressed hard
into his shoulder, heaving breaths shaking them both. It took several seconds for Itachi to calm
enough, heartbeat slow enough, mind clear enough, to tentatively return the gesture.

Had Naruto died? Surely Hatake would have warned him—but no, images from Channel 4
news flashed bright through Itachi's mind, Naruto pale and blond but announcing to the world that
he was very much alive, in real time. Had something happened between Sasuke and Mother? Was
something wrong with Sakura? What did Sasuke know that Itachi didn't?

Sasuke, like this, scared Itachi more than anything in the world.

"...Otouto?"

Sasuke shuddered, flinched, lurched away—but Itachi didn't let him go far. He kept ahold of
Sasuke's shoulders, ducking his own head to try to read his brother's face, but couldn't think past
the chill of the wind on the damp of his clothes where Sasuke had pressed into them, and the hot
blood welling slowly from swollen knuckles, and the rising welts on bare feet in damp grass. So he
set a nonnegotiable arm around his little brother's back and steered stumbling, reluctant steps back
to the light flooding bold from the house.

"Kicking trees rarely solves things," he sighed, "but thank you for staying home."

Mother watched them come in with eyes dark and heavy with sorrows and secrets, mouth softer
than Itachi was used to. She raised her eyes to his, and he faltered, but after a moment could only
shake his head regretfully, and she let him nudge Sasuke past her and into his own room.

"Get dry," Itachi ordered, and Sasuke limped into his bathroom, where the hiss of hot water soon
met a hiss of pain. Exactly why Itachi hadn't recommended the shower.

Alone in the bedroom with no one to see, Itachi let himself fret.

"I can't tell you," said Sasuke, once he was dry and dressed and grudgingly allowing his foolishly
self-inflicted injuries to be bandaged. Itachi taped down the final edge of a fresh roll of gauze
wound secure around Sasuke's left foot, raising a stern eyebrow when the boy's foot jerked and a
curse slipped out under the careful pressure. "I—I told his parents I wouldn't tell anybody. Not even
you. But I will, if—"

"No, Sasuke," said Itachi quietly, before the need to know could overcome his integrity. "You don't
have to tell. They would not have asked you not to without sound reasoning."

"I know the reason." Itachi couldn't be sure, from the quiet words and bowed head, if Sasuke was
relieved at the release of expectation, or burdened by it. "It's... an important one. I...
"I want to tell you," whispered Sasuke, and the eyes that glanced across his had that wildness in them again, the gleam of prey chased manic, then cornered.

Itachi finished his careful treatment of Sasuke's right foot, stayed crouched and silent for a moment, then slowly stood. Sasuke watched him, perched still and stressed on the bathroom counter.

"Don't hold your burdens too closely," Itachi said at last, settling on the words carefully. "Naruto is not alone, Otouto. He has people around him, bearing up the weight of his burdens. As do you."

Sasuke turned away a little, damp bangs clinging to his cheeks. "You're leaving," he said, words barely voiced enough to break the seconds of heavy silence. "Father will come home. And you will leave."

"Come with me." The words escaped him before he would press them back, urgent with all the fear for what Sasuke's future would become in this oppressed house, with a sad and silent mother and harshly judging father. For every whirlwind of loss and confusion that would come howling while Sasuke stood bare, nothing to protect him from the reaching tendrils of a vortex of self-destruction he'd so narrowly, and so recently, escaped.

His otouto was staring at him. Itachi breathed, closed his teeth, closed his eyes. "Sasuke," he said at last, tired enough that even his voice exposed it. "Don't think about it. You need to sleep. You need to get up in the morning, catch up on your schoolwork, and explain to Asuma-sensei that you are still sick. Which you probably will be. I will change your bandages in the morning, and you will need to keep them clean and dry throughout the day. I'm sure Mother can help you with them too, if you need it. And then another night will come, and you'll grow in your sleep, and you'll have to play hockey with sore hands and feet in the morning."

He went across the hall, then, and brushed his teeth and washed his face and combed his hair as he listened in the austerity of his nearly-emptied room to the bathroom door creaking across the hall, and weary footsteps dampening the floorboards, and the boneless flop of an exhausted body collapsing into bed.

Sasuke's light was still on, so he went to turn it off. Dark eyes that felt too much watched him.

"Goodnight, Sasuke," he murmured. Then he leaned against the doorjamb, guarding, until those eyes gave in and stayed closed, and the tightness around the mouth and furrow between the brows loosened and softened, and his baby brother was, for a few hours, free to dream.

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Japanese translations:

hime - princess
okaeri - welcome home
tadaima - I'm home

Apologies for the fangirl Japanese. I wrote this a long time ago. I know better now, but am lacking the time/will to edit.
When they couldn't find Naruto in the mornings, they learned to look under his bed. It was always open eyes glinting back, when Minato put his cheek against the floor to see into the dark there.

Naruto offered his good nights lying very still in bed and heaped with blankets, but his good mornings came with blushing cheeks and averted eyes after rolling out of the cold hollow under it instead, always popping up on the side Minato wasn't near. He tended to sleep fully dressed, and though Minato hadn't caught him reaching for a blade since that day in the car on the way to Millenium Stadium, he strongly suspected his son was always fully armed, too.

Twice, now, Naruto had left his room in the middle of the night, and wasn't to be found in or under any bed, or in either of the kitchens or living rooms, or the den, or the family room, or the basketball court, or any of the far-too-numerous rooms of this blasted house—or so Minato thought, coming quite close to panic, until a sheepish Genma admitted that the security team had tracked him sneaking into Hinata's bedroom and not done anything about it.

Minato made Kushina open that door. She chuckled and told him to cover his virgin eyes and didn't even knock before cracking it open. And then sighed this forlorn little aw that Minato felt was rather inappropriate for busting teenagers caught in illicit activities.

Except there weren't any illicit activities. Just Naruto sleeping cold on the floor again, not quite under the bed this time. He had his hood pulled up and his head pillowed on one arm; the other stretched up over the edge of the mattress to curl an unconscious hand around one of Hinata's.

Kushina eased the door shut, leaned warm against him for too-brief seconds as they stood silent in the hallway, and for once Minato thought Naruto might be deeply asleep enough not to have caught them checking on him.

The second morning Naruto was found in Hinata's room there were two blankets folded carefully over him, and Hinata was covered only by her top sheet.

"Should we just tell them they can share a bed?" wondered Kushina, though she didn't seem quite as comfortable with the idea as she was pretending to be. "At least then he might sleep in the bed instead of under or beside it."

In the end, as with most things involving Naruto, they didn't say the things they wanted to say. They put more blankets and pillows in Hinata's bedroom and twisted the thermostat up high each night.

It was a dream he was living, Naruto decided, except that he kept waking into it rather than out of it. It made it even harder to give in to sleep. Because feeling alien and unsure and over-protected all the time wasn't making sleeping hard enough.

He kept opening his eyes in warm soft rooms that smelled clean, and when he managed to stay in
bed for at least part of the night, he'd have to fight his way out of this delicious mattress-and-blankets sandwich that felt way better than anything he could be sure was real. Mornings he woke on the floor by Hinata's bed were better—he might be cold and a little stiff, but he could hear her breathing, and sometimes he would catch her looking down at him, and the way her eyes were all bright and her lips turned up before she caught him catching her and hid away under her blankets. Waking cold on the floor under his own bed let him hold on to something familiar, if only for a few seconds, but too often it was the worried gaze of his mother or father that woke him when he hid there, and starting a day in this strange new life would ratchet up to a new level of awkward.

They didn't say much about it. Not with words, anyway, though he saw too much in their eyes and their lips and the way their hands were always reaching. They didn't say anything about him sneaking into Hinata's room, either, though he knew they knew. He didn't want to wonder if they thought he was doing anything other than curling up on her floor because she had the magic ability to chase away nightmares just by breathing.

There were usually three breakfasts a day, and he tended to make himself present for all of them. First he traded obnoxious stares with the night-shift security team over bowls of timed-cooker rice porridge and whatever preserved toppings they'd scavenged out of the fridge that day. They liked to remind him they were always watching; he liked to remind them it hadn't made a single difference in when or where he went. Don't press your luck, brat, we know about your sneaky little nighttime wanderings, they'd say. He thought it was nice of them not to report him, even though Namikaze figured it out anyway.

Next there was an awkward shuffling of tea and eggs and toast with Namikaze himself, whom he was getting a little better at naming Dad. He could always feel the questions the man was forcing himself not to ask, so he tried to think of something he could offer up instead of all the answers he didn't want to give. Which was how they ended up having push-up and pull-up and sit-up and suicide-sprint competitions in the built-in basketball gym because Naruto was good at boasting and Namikaze was game to being beaten, and put up a good fight, too. Of course then there were chess and shougi games he couldn't back out of and lost spectacularly, and football and basketball and floor hockey, which he lost a little less spectacularly—but he'd beat the Yellow Flash one of these days, maybe not at basketball or shougi, but DEFINITELY at hockey.

They were always sore and sweaty by the time Big Breakfast was called. Also drooling, because the smells coming from the kitchen were so tantalizing even a steaming bowl of pork ramen might be put to shame (but Naruto would never ever tell Teuchi-sama!). It was almost torturous, turning his back on the aromas beckoning from Kushina's kitchen, but there were people he cared to impress, and he could shower fast and looked good damp, if the shade of Hinata's cheeks were anything to go by.

Big Breakfast was Kushina's thing. It was amazing. It was huge. It's a dream, Naruto told himself, between bites of divine french toast and hot bacon rolls and strawberry salad and fresh cinnamon buns drizzling melted icing, a really, really, really delicious dream.

He watched his mother reigning over her feast, spatula in hand, long braid flying, eyes flashing and mouth commanding but hands quick and soft on his shoulders in between loading his plate with flavors he'd never even imagined before but was already craving.

Hinata came down for these breakfasts, shy and shining-eyed, and Naruto wondered how his mom figured out her obsession with cinnamon buns before he did, when he'd known her for so much longer. Security Team members were always sneaking by, too, holding out big bare bento boxes for Kushina to fill and bowing their lifelong devotion and gratitude to her while pretending not to sense her husband's flat stare. They weren't the only casual imposters, either. Rin and Obito were usually
there, which made sense because they were part of the Uzumaki-Namikaze household; Kakashi-sensei somehow contrived to detour by (and, Naruto suspected, might as well be part of household considering he spent more time there than in his own home). Sasuke had taken to showing up for their usual drive to hockey practice earlier and earlier, and Sakura started coming when she overheard the boys reminiscing over Kushina's Eggs Benedict and declared it an unforgivable blow against Team 7 unity if she wasn't involved in all future feasts. It was when Itachi presented himself politely at the door over a scowling Sasuke's shoulder that Big Breakfast really took a turn for the surreal.

But Naruto was grateful. With all those faces glowing around the table, the happy chatter that came with good company and amazing food, the strange blend of people Naruto felt safe with and those he was trying, really trying, to grow to trust—it let him stay in the part of his mind that made it all a dream, floating above the fear that was wild and desperate and whispered cold certainty: You have to protect. You have to protect, and if you have to kill, you will.

You will.

"There are two things everyone needs to know," Kushina confided in him, flushed with success as she powered through another heaped sink of dishes she wouldn't let anyone else wash. Naruto was allowed to dry, as long as he put each dish exactly where she told him to. "One: how to run. Two: how to cook."

Naruto didn't get it.

Mom said: "You run to save yourself. You cook to save everyone else."

Maybe he did get it.

Itachi drew him aside, twenty-five days after their return from Suna, three-and-a-half weeks into this new dream/life. And ripped the dream-lie raw.

"Kokuo's body was found this morning," Itachi said. "Just like Han. And Fu. That's three, Naruto. Who will—" And then he stopped, probably because Naruto never did learn to not give everything away with his face.

"You didn't know?" asked Itachi.

"Fu?" asked Naruto.

They stood in silence, Naruto's fists shaking.

"So you really are... free, now," mused Itachi. He put a careful hand on the younger boy's shoulder. "Congratulations, Naruto."

"I'm not free," said Naruto. His throat hurt. "Just. Distracted. Or separate." He felt Itachi's fingers tighten around his shoulder, fought the urge to shrug him off, because this man had the right to hold on to him if anyone did.

"You said you could get out," said Itachi, words formed just under his breath, and Naruto's eyes shot sideways, checking for tells that anyone was near enough to hear them. No one was. "You said and you did, and you owe it to yourself to stay out. More than you owe anyone anything."

"If you believed I was out, you wouldn't have told me about Fu," said Naruto, and twisted away. Itachi stepped back, giving him space to go gracefully.
His chest was knotted too tight to go gracefully, though, and he spent the next few minutes beating furiously at one of the storage room's walls, where Sasuke found him with a string of swears dedicated to Itachi.

The ice-rink kids were keeping his secret. It couldn't last, everyone warned, but each morning he and Sasuke circled their motorbike onto WoF grounds and cautiously over side-paths to the back of the rink and there still wasn't a crowd of reporters waiting for them, Naruto thought he might grab each of his peers one-by-one and kiss them soundly for this level of awesome. Even Shino.

He was kind of sucking at hockey, though, and that wasn't cool. He owed them this championship. The rest of the team was fitting together smoother and stronger than ever before. Sasuke and Sakura were on top form, pulling off the new combinations Kakashi-sensei was drilling into them sharp and fast than deadly. Except for when Naruto fumbled things in the middle. Which he was doing a lot.

"Dobe," growled Sasuke, grabbing him by the collar and pressing him into the tunnel wall after a horribly tense and awkward changing session with the rest of the team (minus Sakura) in the locker room where everyone pretended that Naruto hadn't just missed the puck twice and the goal every time he'd taken a shot at it. "You get yourself kicked off the starting line-up, which Kakashi will do because he's a decent coach and you are not, right now, anything approaching a decent player, and I'm done. We're through."

He let go before Naruto could shove him off. Didn't show up for Big Breakfast the next day. Dad drove Naruto to the rink instead, and Naruto tried not to show how much he didn't want him to because he was so freaking happy to do it. "It's because his dad's coming," said Sakura, face all twisted and eyes not really meeting his. "To the—if we're in—the championship game. Sasuke's dad will be out by then. He promised to come." She wasn't angry with him, he could tell. It was something much worse. Like the way everyone was always watching him, now, going stiff if he breathed too fast or looked tired or checked for exits too obviously. Like he was going to collapse at any moment, faceless villain laughing in the shadows with the remote control to Naruto's freaking heart pressed firm in one hand, or like Naruto was going to do what everything in him was screaming for: run.

"Fu," he thought. Han and Kokuo he knew by sight—he knew everybody by sight—but Fu was wicked smart and forever irreverent and the same age as him (or two years older, but age never had meant much to him other than the usual limitations—) and she shouldn't be dead. But that wasn't the worst of it: the worst of it was that she was dead, dead, and for the first time since he had any semblance of independence or usefulness he didn't know how or why or even what until Itachi told him. Itachi, who expected him to already know.

Because he was the Gatekeeper. The one who never forgot a face. The one who knew what was going to happen before it happened. Who could change the outcome, if he wanted to.

And then he was Hinata's Naruto, the Naruto who went to school and played hockey and drove a bus and held together the careful pieces of a normal—beautifully, beautifully normal—life.

And now he was Namikaze Naruto. Whoever the hell that was.
"Where's Mom?"

It was Sunday, and nothing was scheduled: no WoF trainings, no appointment with Dr. Tsunade so she could poke around and grumble about the battery attached to his heart, no text from Sakura telling the boys they had twenty minutes to be at her house if they wanted their pizza while it was still hot, because she'd ordered delivery and had picked out a movie and no, they couldn't complain about her choice of movie. It was Bruce Lee night. Period.

There were texts from Sakura. They were all too cheerful and said nothing. There was nothing from Sasuke. Hinata was swamped under the semester-and-a-half of advanced coursework she was trying to complete so she would be caught up academically, even if she took a few months off after Baby-chan arrived. She wouldn't say it, but he finally figured out that she needed him to leave her alone.

He'd tried climbing the gym walls, curious to see if he could make it to those narrow windows nestled two stories up, just under the roof. They didn't have security cameras aimed at them.

Not without wires and grapnel, he learned, though he could probably make do with what he could find in the house. He was wandering towards the kitchen in search of bendable-but-dependable metal when he came across his dad and the security team in conference, and realized that he hadn't seen his mother since breakfast.

She was too cheerful at breakfast.

"She's gone out," Dad told him, lips tipping tight in a quick, sure smile, but it was Genma-san's face that gave it away.

He knew the security team was watching her. Not as closely as they watched him, but he'd been watching her, too, to see if she'd go after the Fox. Because the questions were all there, he could see them itching, pulling at her skin, and she wasn't asking him, and there was only one other person to ask.

Did she know how to find him? Doesn't matter. I can find him.

Naruto turned around. Went to his room. Found his old hoodie from where he'd hidden it inside a new jacket (after salvaging it from the dumpster their household waste bins were emptied into), decided there was nothing he could do about the jeans and the shoes, and went to Hinata's room.

"Pretend I'm still here," he begged, and wriggled through her bathroom window. It was like all the bolt-holes that served him so well for so many years: hard to get through. Too small. No—too big. I'm too big.

He hit the lawn three meters down, rolled, ran. Uniformed security guards saw him, burst after him. He stretched stride, broke into a full sprint, would be fast enough to outrun them all as long as he kept this lead—but two were coming in angled too close to evade, so he tacked left and hit them head-on, swinging all his momentum into the first strike. The man went down hard, and between exchanging blows with his partner, Naruto glanced his first victim over and counted one out.

The men stationed at the gate were rounding in on him, so he went dirty and spun a kick down at
an ankle in the moment it unbraced, transitioning out of a block. He took the hit he hadn't blocked
to twist into that turn and they both went down, but he was back up while his opponent sucked in
curses and clutched the ankle they'd both heard snap. The two from the gate were just out of
striking range and staying there: caution, or distraction? This was four out of five security guards
accounted for—where—oh. There. At the just-abandoned gate. Standing next to his father.

"That was fast," said Namikaze, and his voice and face were equally bland but his eyes hurt too
much to look at.

Naruto stepped back, tracking the two men at his back, the two he now faced, the distance to the
gate, how many seconds he'd need to reach the wall, if that left enough seconds to get over it
before they could reach him—was anyone armed? Tasers? They didn't normally carry them, but
they were obviously following some sort of protocol for a Naruto runs scenario.

"I would have asked," said Naruto, "if I didn't already know the answer."

He could feel it, feel the horrible weight of his father's stare. Didn't meet it. Four seconds, five
seconds—

"You're not a prisoner, Naruto," said Namikaze, and if his gaze had felt heavy, it was nothing to the
gravity of those too-quiet words. "If you need to go somewhere, you can go. If you can be safe."

"So just I'll go, yeh?" he hadn't meant for it to sound quite as impudent as it did, and he couldn't
stop himself from checking on Raidou-san, whose ankle he'd probably just broken, but Mom—the
Fox—Mom—near the Fox—

"Go where, Naruto?"

He took the moment he needed to make his voice come out calmer, quieter, safer. "To find Mom."

"How do you know she hasn't just gone shopping? She goes out just about every day. And has all
those projects she's still running, people she meets—"

He did meet his father's eyes, this time, because he deserved a lot of things, but being talked to like
he couldn't see what was in front of him wasn't one of them. "Yeah and I'm just going shopping
right now," he said, "and I have those projects I need to finish, too, people to meet—"

"Naruto," warned Dad.

The two behind him were creeping closer. Naruto said: "She's gone to meet the Fox! She can't meet
him, she's—"

"She knows him," said Dad, but Naruto knew with this, if nothing else in the whole stupid world,
they were on the same page. "Look, let's work together here. You tell us where she'll be looking for
him, we can have a team sent to intercept her—or extract her—"

"Like hell I'm letting more of you get close to him," said Naruto, shoved everything in and through
his legs to run.

Namikaze was fast. Way, way too fast. Naruto gasped, gulped in the air that had just been slammed
out of him, rolled out of Namikaze's hold—tried to roll out—swallowed shock as the larger man
held his own, kept him pinned to the grass.

"Much as I want to protect her," huffed Namikaze, and Naruto was glad that he was out of breath,
"Kushina has always protected herself. Much better than I can. But I can damn well protect you—"
he was cut off as Naruto bucked him off, but didn't make it out of arm's reach, was pinned again—"or die trying."

Naruto's chest was doing funny things, the sensation so strange that for a moment he knew it was his stupid heart-bomb and this was how he was going to die, pinned to the grass in front of this huge mansion that was supposed to be suddenly home. Except his eyes were getting hot and wet and his throat was all achy and his heart was actually beating exactly the way it should be, he could feel it in his chest and his wrists where Namikaze had them pinned, but there was still something strange in his chest. Something that made him think of Iruka, of Sasuke, of Sakura when she ran into his arms to be held tight and twirled.

"No," said Naruto. Didn't know why he was saying it. "No, no, I have to go." He was out of the man's hold now, scuttled across the grass, staggered to his feet. There was something smooth and hard in his hand, warm from being always tucked right next to his skin. His fingers flicked the catch without checking with his brain first, because his brain was panicking and this was what he did when he panicked.

Namikaze was still reaching for him. Like the knife wasn't even there. Like Naruto wasn't fully capable of hurting someone, with one guard still out on the ground and the other trying to hide the tears leaking slow from eyes screwed shut in pain.

Broken ankles hurt like hell, Naruto knew.

"It's okay, Naruto," Namikaze was saying, and he was too close. Close enough to put a hand out and take the knife. Would he? Why was he touching Naruto's face? Stupid, stupid, stupid—"You can use the knife," he was saying. "Go on, I wouldn't know how to stop you anyway. You'll have to if you want to go through that gate."

"I am going," insisted Naruto, and twisted away from the warm hand on his cheek, flipped the knife. Drew blood. "I won't stop until you open the gate."

Namikaze's—Dad's—that man's face went white. His eyes were wide, seeing horror where they had only wanted to see a boy he'd lost too many years ago. Naruto reached an edge, turned the knife, started a slow pull back.

"Stop," said his father, and Naruto would have, if he could. There was blood on the grass now, dark against the green. "Open the gates, let him go!" Dad yelled, and the sound strained hoarse through taught white lips.

"Boss—" one of the guards, hesitating.

"Do it," said Namikaze, and the man obeyed.

Naruto ran.

Ran with his knife tucked sticky-wet in his waistband, ran with his right hand hand gripping his left forearm, thick sleeve pulled back down and clamped tight around fresh wounds, soaking up the blood.
Uchiha Sasuke walked into the Konohagakure Office of Public Health on a hunch and a hint and the hope that he was wrong.

He was right.

"You don't have an appointment," said the woman he decided must be Yugito, looking tall and formidable in her smart grey suit and long, elegant braid. He wondered where the gun was hidden.

"I need to see Otsutsuki-san," Sasuke repeated, matching his voice to hers in drawling indifference. "I can wait."

"There are appointment request forms in the lobby," she told him, every word indicating contempt for his presumed level of intelligence. "You may fill one out. Give it to the secretary at reception."

She turned back to the screens at her desk, dismissing him.

Sasuke stood still and looked at her, possibilities shuffling swift through his head. Rather than a plan of action, it was the image of Naruto that rose bright to the front: last Tuesday's Naruto, dripping sweat and breathing hard and smiling small and stripped of his carefully carefree facade because he was too busy celebrating the shameless foul play he'd used to steal the basketball from Namikaze and the basket Sasuke had made with the ball Naruto'd smashed straight to him and Sasuke could see blue eyes all lit up with plots to do it again and Namikaze shoved Naruto, gently, but Sasuke could see the way Namikaze's eyes closed, like a tiny grateful prayer, because Naruto just shoved him back, didn't flinch away at all.

That was who Naruto was supposed to be, Sasuke knew, not the mess of scared eyes and distracted reactions he'd been since Itachi talked to him. Warned him, probably, and Itachi didn't do that if the stakes weren't life-and-death high.

Sasuke swiveled on his heel and marched back to the lobby, face set. He found the form, filled in a few blanks, but didn't hand it over to the general secretary as requested. He brought it back to Yugito-san. Slid it onto her desk, braced himself.

Her glance shifted over it in brief annoyance, stilled, returned to the name he'd block-printed there. She looked at Sasuke, then, expression finally tipping past blank and into thoughtful. "Wait, then," she said, and went back to filing her nails with a piece of metal she could kill him with.

Sasuke waited. Sat with legs aching to run, fingers fisted to keep them from shaking. Waited as the doors finally, finally opened, as a nondescript person in a really nice suit stepped out, as Yugito slipped in. He was standing when she reappeared, and did his best to meet her stare evenly as she looked him over head to toe.

"I'd run," she advised dryly, "but you're welcome to enter."

It struck him as funny, how innocently, decently plebian the office was. Calendar and award certificates on the walls, big, tidy desk, slatted shades over sunny windows, three thriving potted plants in a corner. The man at the desk was sitting, and he was smiling, but Sasuke managed to meet those inhuman eyes for tiny seconds before he was looking away, stomach twisted inside-out and toes curled in his shoes.

"You wanted to see Uzumaki Kurama," said the Fox.

Sasuke scooped together all the sanity and rationality and instinct to live he had into a ball and shoved it away under the ever-raging distrust and disgust and defiance for the world at large that always made his muscles too taut and his skin too tight but gave him the dangerous courage he
needed to meet this man's eyes. Their gazes locked; the floor tipped and skewed beneath him; he
didn't look away.

"Hmmm," said the Fox. "And how is Naruto?"

"Happy," said Sasuke. It was only a half-lie. He couldn't read the old man's face. Couldn't see
anything but hard lines and old scars, but something changed in the small muscles around the keen,
cold eyes. Reaction.

"I see," said the Fox, words dust-dry, maybe amused. His eyes moved, just a little, considering
Sasuke. "My name you must know from Kushina... never could keep secrets, my Kushina. How did
you find my office?"

He'd known the question was coming, had spent two nights turning over answers. Had decided to
tell the truth. "Itachi."

There was a grating, grumbling, groaning sound, and it took a few moments for Sasuke to
tentatively decide that the Fox was laughing.

"Uchiha Itachi," wheezed the Fox. "The foul-sired brat with the beautiful brain. I'd make him mine,
you know, but that child knows no loyalty." And then those eyes were cutting into Sasuke. "Much
like another child we know."

"What is it," asked Sasuke, lungs suddenly short of oxygen, ribs stabbing in—"what is it that you
want, from Naruto?"

He still couldn't read that face, couldn't put names to the silent shadows there, but he felt the threat
snap lethal and his palms and back grow clammy. The Fox rose. Blocked all the light, seemed to
fill up the room with shoulders as wide as the desk and head brushing the ceiling, angled grey eyes
glinting down cold.

"I doubt, you know, that little Itachi told you about this." The man indicated the nameplate on the
desk, where the characters of Otsutsuki Hagoromo were etched in gold. "I'm surprised that Naruto
chose to endanger you like this."

"Naruto doesn't know," said Sasuke. "He didn't even recognize your real name, how would he
know this fake one? And Itachi didn't tell me either—not directly. I guessed."

Sasuke had to withstand that hollow stare for several seconds, then: "Itachi doesn't trust the
Department of Health?"

"He doesn't trust you," said Sasuke. "He described Otsutsuki-san, a long time ago. Naruto described
Kyuubi, not long ago. They told me so I could run away. If I saw you."

The Fox made that sound again, that growling grating laugh. "You're not running away."

"He's your grandson," said Sasuke, the words choked in his throat and harsh on his tongue. "And—
and his parents—just—just. Let him go."

"Why?" said the Fox.

"Because he needs to be free," breathed Sasuke. "Because—because he can stay happy. Because I'll
tell Itachi if you don't."

"I'll kill you here," said the Fox, gently.
"It will go online." His own voice sounded hollow, echoed in his own ears. "I made a blog. Everything I learned behind the Gates. Everything I know from when I was with Orochimaru. The names and places and faces. Who's selling. Who's buying. And the things I don't know, but can guess. It's all there. I reset the publish date twice a day. Itachi will see it immediately. But once it's live, anyone can see it."

That sound, again, that sound that must be a laugh. Bits of Sasuke's skin flushed hot. "I see," said the Fox. "Childish, and not as much a threat as you believe it to be, but nice effort."

"What do you want," begged Sasuke, words coming out naked, because he couldn't pretend anymore. "Just tell me—tell me what you want, from Naruto, I'll find a way to get it. Or do it, or be it, or—I will. But don't. Don't blow up his idiot heart."

His hands were gripping the edge of the desk and nothing seemed stable and he was staring into eyes that were like staring raw into a mirror and the realization came slowly that he didn't have to crane upwards anymore, that the Fox was sitting again.

He was still huge, still deadly, but he was bent over the desk a little and—and the way he breathed, like a tired old man, like a sigh. "You have the wrong enemy, little Uchiha," grumbled the Fox. "You're an idiot, like Naruto, but it's because of Naruto that you're a breathing idiot. There is nothing I hate more than an Uchiha."

"The reason Naruto has found his parents," said the Fox, "is because I already let him go. I let him go years ago."

The door crashed open.

Naruto slammed in smelling of blood with darting eyes and desperate hands, and Sasuke turned to reach for him reeling with the same panic reflected on Naruto's face and saw Yugito pressing thumb and forefinger between her eyes with a jarring calm disdain for everything.

"Like clockwork," the woman muttered, and at a sign from Kyuubi, pulled the door shut on her way out.

"Sasu—but—my mom—where's my mom—" and then everything about Naruto shifted and stilled and shuttered closed, and his sleeve slipped out of Sasuke's grip and he was on the floor by the Fox's desk, bowed and obedient, head nearly touching the floor.

Sasuke couldn't think, couldn't speak, couldn't move, could only stare and feel a kind of horror he never had before.

He knew Naruto belonged to the Fox.

He'd known as long as he'd known Naruto.

But he also knew Naruto and—and Naruto couldn't belong to anyone.

"Now you come," rumbled the Fox, the words rippling in fine tremors through Naruto's cowed shoulders.


"The Uchiha brat and I have already exchanged our threats, Naruto," said Kyuubi.

"I didn't tell him," said Naruto, voice hoarse. "I never would have let him find you."
"You gave up the Gates, brat. And any power you had to control who finds whom."

Naruto's head lowered the fraction it'd raised up, and he was still again.

"Leave him alone," cried Sasuke, ignoring the smart part of his conscience that knew he had to be silent, give up, get out, trust Naruto to make it out of this like he'd made it out of everything before. His body was moving on its own, speaking on its own, hauling Naruto to his feet on its own, trying to get between the Fox and his friend— "You said you already let him go. Why is he like this?"

The Fox looked him over blankly, and it was harder to ignore the part of his head that was reminding him that this man killed. Naruto stepped in front of him, face white, terrified.

"I'm here now," said Naruto. "So just—just give me your terms. I'll take them." And suddenly he was Sasuke's Naruto again, stance set, chin tipped up, not fighting but not shaking. Sasuke remembered the fibrillator embedded beneath the scars on Naruto's chest, remembered that there could be something, something in this room, that could control Naruto's heart, and tried to put himself between the Fox and Naruto. As if he could block infrared signals with desperation.

A rumble of air and lost patience rolled slow from the Fox; he tipped his head forward onto long fingers, grumbled low: "Will you ever stop being an idiot, my Naruto? ...The one thing I have asked of you, brat. Say it. Tell it so your idiot Uchiha hears it."

"Stay alive," mumbled Naruto.

"Louder," commanded the Fox.

"Stay alive," said Naruto, bitter and clear.

"There, brat: my terms."

There was a moment that sucked in all the oxygen and made Sasuke grip Naruto's sleeves harder as the room started to spin, and then: "...You don't have it?" whispered Naruto, making Sasuke's chest ache with the hope the other boy couldn't hide.

Cold grey eyes stared them down, flat and hard.

"The control, the thing that can—can zap out my heart, you don't have it?"

"I don't," said the Fox. Naruto's weight sagged limp and Sasuke found himself holding up more than holding on.

"Then—then, Fu, and Han and Kokuo," said Naruto, when he seemed to be breathing again. "Who—do you need me to—"

"No," said the Fox. "I do not need you."

Sasuke glanced sideways, saw Naruto's gaze freeze wide, stricken.

"You were in hospital in Suna," said the Fox. "Was the surgery successful? The battery was replaced?"

Naruto, still wide-eyed, nodded.

"There's another one," said the Fox. He waited, but Naruto didn't speak, and Sasuke couldn't find words. "There is another battery, a back-up power cell, attached to the primary battery, with leads to your heart. It was killing you. Will kill you, if the primary battery runs out or is tampered with. It
was their safeguard—if the primary fibrillator is tampered with, disconnected, or removed, the back-up cell gets you."

"Who has it," asked Sasuke, "if you—who has it, who has the control—who put that thing in Naruto—who—"

"There are no remaining paired devices, to my knowledge. They have been destroyed. But that does not mean you are safe," he looked at Naruto, "or that that fibrillator cannot be used against you by anyone with knowledge of it. As for your latter question, Uchiha: ask your mother."

Sasuke went blank inside as the Fox rumbled black laughter.

"Mother," echoed Naruto. "Where is—where is—"

"In the tunnels, waiting," said the Fox. Something changed in the angles around his eyes. "I will not hurt her, Naruto. She is mine."

Naruto stared up, up at the man who stood between him and the sky, and Sasuke thought he almost reached out for him.

"Go home, Naruto," said the Fox. "You have heard my last lesson. Don't come again."

ViXiVi

ViXiV
Chapter 17

Naruto was crying.

Sasuke's coat was thick and the bringing-winter wind didn't reach this forgotten space between forty-storey buildings, but the Fox's words echoed ice down his spine and he was shivering. He leaned into brick and waited for Naruto, who crouched with his head in his arms, tears dark on the pavement. He was waiting, too, for his own heart to calm down, to stop beating frantic response to the warnings firing in his brain that it didn't have long to beat at all. He looked at Naruto again and suddenly the tears looked wrong, looked red, and he realized: Naruto wasn't crying. Naruto was bleeding.

"Naruto," he said, alarmed; but at the same time his phone buzzed and his face turned to it automatically and there was a threat from Itachi:

-You have 20 seconds to call me and tell me where you are and you lost two reading this.

There were irreverent words for that but he didn't have time to indulge in them. He looked between Naruto and the entrance to their alleyway; ran to the latter, phone pressed to his ear, casting for some excuse that could get past his brother, or at the very least, a place to get Naruto cleaned up before Itachi descended.

"I'm sorry," he found himself saying, when he heard the way his name sounded in Itachi's voice over the phone. "I just—I just had to—I'm sorry, Itachi. Yeah, we're—we're safe. No, um, no, Nii-san—okay, okay! The Noodle House across from the building with the Department of Public Health in it. With Naruto. In the washroom."

Naruto hadn't moved. "We need to go," said Sasuke, nudging the Naruto-lump with his foot. "You're freaking bleeding—I don't want Itachi to find us like this, things are already bad—come on—" As they'd left the office Sasuke had kept out of striking range, because he saw something in the other boy's eyes he didn't want to face on the end of a fist. He followed quietly as Naruto made it out of the building and into the sharp light of the street and back into the shadows, watched Naruto hit the wall, slide down, bury his face, not make a sound. His own mind was reeling, tilting askew to an endless repeat of ask your mother, Uchiha, ask your mother, Uchiha but now Itachi was coming and Naruto was hurting and there wasn't time. If they wanted any control over what was going to happen next they had to look like they had themselves under control, and Naruto dripping blood wasn't helping.

Naruto stood up slowly, jerked his arm away when Sasuke reached for it to get a better look at where the blood was coming from, stalked out into the street with no regard for traffic. Sasuke hurried after, glaring down drivers who screeched to a stop or swerved to avoid them. Naruto looked a bit lost when Sasuke caught him at the curb, like he couldn't remember what they crossed over for, so Sasuke took the lead down the block and into the oily air of the chain restaurant he'd picked solely because their restrooms tended to be clean. He stopped by the kitchen to ask a blushing waitress for a first aid kit, which she gave in exchange for his tightest smile, then shoved Naruto down the narrow hall and into the men's room.

It was the mirror that finally snapped Naruto back into acting like Naruto, and Sasuke set the first aid kit carefully on the counter and leaned back against the wall in welling relief as his best friend stripped off the familiar sweatshirt with its sopping sleeve and set about swearing and splashing as he washed red from his face and hands and neck, soaking his T-shirt and giving Sasuke a good look at the zig-zagged line cut down and across Naruto's forearm. The corners were deep and a little
torn; the blade must have twisted in place and cut back across without lifting, and Sasuke wondered who could keep Naruto still enough, long enough, to make a mark like that, and came up blank, because he was already bleeding when he met the Fox. It was a deliberate cut, not something Naruto could have picked up from a broken window or too-hastily-vaulted fence... Namikaze...? Naruto would let him, if he thought he had to, but the man really didn't seem the type—he'd seen the man flinch watching Naruto pull a too-small piece of toast out of the toaster, like he couldn't stand the thought of the idiot possibly burning a finger.

Naruto was trying to open a foil packet of antibacterial ointment with his teeth. Sasuke took over with a huff, catching the injured wrist in one hand to keep Naruto from messing with it further and sorting through the medical kit with the other. The plastic bottle of saline solution was emptied in a careful stream over each of the three jagged lines, saltwater slipping pink down the drain. As the arm dried he attacked it with alcohol-soaked gauze pads, indifferent to the hisses and whines this earned him. "Who?" he demanded, once the mutilated packet of anti-bacterial ointment had been emptied, its contents thoroughly slathered, and sterile gauze pads wrapped firmly in place. Naruto looked away.

"Me," he said.

The wrappings Sasuke was gathering to throw away drifted to the floor. "What?"

Naruto shrugged.

Sasuke grabbed him by the shirt, stared him in the face, tried to see something that made sense. "The hell, Naruto?"

Naruto laughed. "Don't ask," he said, and then his eyes were sharp, dangerous; "unless you want me asking you what the fuck you were doing introducing yourself to a man who will kill you for knowing his fucking name."

Sasuke let go.

Naruto picked up his sweatshirt, wrinkled his nose as it dripped blood on the counter, stared at it with a twisting face, shoved it in the trash.

He helped Sasuke pick up the wrappers from the floor, wiped down the counters and the sink, scrubbed his hands again as Sasuke repacked the first aid kit. "Wait," he said, just as Sasuke moved to snap it shut, and dug some crumpled bills from his jeans pocket. "So they can replace the stuff I used," Naruto mumbled, and Sasuke rolled his eyes but snapped the box closed with the money inside.

Sasuke tugged off his coat. "Wear this," he ordered, with a glance at Naruto's white-bandaged arm, but it was the winter wind and Naruto's wet T-shirt he was thinking of.

"Your mom bought you that coat," said Naruto. "Give me your sweater instead."

"You need the hood, idiot. People can recognize you." He handed the coat over; Naruto hesitated, but took it. "Get so much as a stray raindrop on there and I'm telling Sakura you had sex dreams about her."

"You—!" huffed Naruto, eyes you-wouldn't-dare wide.

Sasuke smiled. "Try me."

Then Itachi threw open the door, and Sasuke wasn't smiling anymore.
He thought he'd won everything, beat everyone, the first time he made it out of the room the Fox kept him in and far enough through the tunnels that he thought no one could find him. He didn't know, stupid and small as he was, that leaving was the easy part.

He always came back. Never under his own power, at first, but eventually he could evade—or the Fox forgot about him—for long enough that there was this illusion of independence, of freedom, until he learned all over again how freaking big the world was, and how little it cared if a kid like him was hungry or hurt or used or dead. He stayed away as long as he could, but in the end he always went back (the Gates are hell and home).

Those were the beatings that broke him, and he would promise, in moments where he was just pieces of himself, to do anything, anything, to not have to feel that way again. Coming back was never free, and the longer he stayed away, the harsher the homecoming.

(Naruto, Idiot: keeps promises to everyone but himself.)

He knew what was waiting for him, when he ran to the Fox today. He was ready. His stomach cramped and twisted until he emptied it in the little bricked-in square of weeds surrounding a sidewalk tree, and then he spat the taste of bile from his lips and kept running. If he could just get between the Fox and his family, keep all that fury aimed only at him, it would be okay.

Go home, Naruto.

He watched Sasuke bandage his still-bleeding arm, and all the sentences that started in his head split and tattered before he could figure out what they meant.

And Sasuke—how could Sasuke be there? He knew—

Go home, Naruto.

He'd thought, once he went back, that he wouldn't leave again.

He was putting on Sasuke's coat when Itachi came in; avoided the man's searching eyes, hid under Sasuke's hood, followed meekly. He felt bad for Sasuke; however much Itachi knew about the incredibly stupid risk his brother had just taken, Naruto could read just in the stiffness of his steps and set of his shoulders that Itachi was Not Pleased. He wondered if they would part ways at the doors of the restaurant, just steps away, or if Itachi would try to send to his parents' house, and how he was going to get away. Itachi had a taser and, Naruto knew, would not hesitate to use it.

"Say your goodbyes," said Itachi, and both boys looked up at him, surprised. "I believe you're both very, very grounded. Naruto... good luck."

"What—" began Naruto, but his eyes had already swept the street through the Noodle House's glass doors, recognized the car idling there, and gone wide with terror. Itachi pushed him through the door. Across the sidewalk. A car door swung open.

"Get in," said Dad.

All the gut-busting terror he'd pushed through rushing to get between his mother and his
grandfather boomeranged back, and Naruto wondered if it was okay to throw up. But Itachi's hand was unrelenting pressure at the base of his neck, guiding him forward and down and in with all of his super-cop putting-away-baddies expertise and there was really nothing for him to do but get in the car.

"Seatbelt," said Dad, and Naruto tried to obey as quickly as possible without giving away just how badly his hands were shaking. Itachi swung the door shut from the sidewalk, the locks clicked into place; Naruto risked a glance through the side mirror at Sasuke, who looked almost as awful as Naruto felt, and wondered if they would really make it out okay, this time.

Minato and Kushina hadn't tried to punish him—yet. He knew he'd pushed their boundaries—he'd run from them, lied to them, stolen food, kept secrets, hit Sasuke, slept in Hinata's room, been obnoxious and maybe disrespectful—he didn't always know, honestly, if things he did or said were okay or not. He'd waited, knowing the moment would come when the miracle of finding him would be eclipsed by the reality of what they'd found.

(This is it.)

How did real parents punish their kids? His thoughts swirled to Sasuke, and how he feared his father, almost like Naruto feared the Fox, but Sasuke's dad had been gone longer than Naruto had known Sasuke so he really had no idea what, exactly, that fear came from. Itachi—Itachi never raised a hand against his brother, but he'd never been able to keep Sasuke entirely under control, either.

They would take away meals, at least, but he'd eaten so well lately that he'd be fine for a couple days. How long would he have to stay in his room?

Would they take away hockey?

Would they take away Hinata?

"Breathe, Naruto," said Dad, and Naruto looked at him before he could stop himself and got caught in really sad and complicated blue eyes before they snapped back to the road.

They were almost home.

Go home, Naruto.

Silence swallowed them the moment the motor stilled, and the breaths he'd managed to take slipped shallow and fast at the sound of the key being pulled from the ignition. His parents' house loomed over the windshield and his fingers fumbled as he pulled on the door catch, listening very, very carefully to the way his father's footsteps shifted the driveway gravel. The man stayed on the other side of the car, so Naruto got out and made himself follow, staying behind but within reach, because it was time to reap.

He paused for a long moment on the threshold, unsure if he still had the right to cross it. Minato wasn't giving him any sort of sign, just taking off his shoes and coat and shooting sidelong glances Naruto was careful not to meet. It was hard to work the words past the uncertainty wrapped around his throat, but he forced them through and made them audible enough that he wouldn't have to say it again.

"Can I come in?"

Dad looked... surprised. "Of course." And then, with half his mouth tilted up, "Where else would you go?"
Naruto didn't know how to tell him that the answer was nowhere. That he would beg, if it would help.

(When he ran through the gate that morning with a bloody arm and a bloody knife, he'd thought he wouldn't come back. Wouldn't get a chance.)

(They'd take care of Hinata, wouldn't they? At least until they learned where Baby-chan came from—but maybe even after that? Maybe Hinata's child could be the kid they'd lost and longed to love?)

"Come on," said Dad. Started reaching for him, froze with his hand halfway and his eyes watching Naruto's, took his hand back, breathed in, stepped back.

Naruto followed him through the entryway and up the stairs and to his father's bedroom. He couldn't think of any reason for them to go that way, except that Minato wasn't wearing a belt.

"Coat off," was the next order, as Dad disappeared into the adjoining bathroom, and Naruto laid Sasuke's coat carefully on the bed, glad for the chance to spare it any damage, and moved into the middle of the room to be still, and wait.

Minato was back with—with a first aid kit? "Let's see that arm," was all he said. Naruto held it out, determined to be obedient, even if his stomach was crawling up his throat again. Large hands undid Sasuke's wrappings with unexpected gentleness—but then this man had always been careful, since the first time Naruto met him. And hurt him.

He managed not to move or make a sound when the final layers of gauze were peeled back, kept his eyes on the wall and waited for the inspection to end.

"I'm not sure this doesn't need stitches..." the words came quietly, but Naruto almost jerked away because every part of him was so tight with dread and guilt and anxiety that all the seconds were unbearable.

"It's not deep," he said. His voice sounded kind of strange.

Dad didn't say anything. Led him over to the desk, where he threw away the bandaging he'd just removed and set out supplies for a new one. He applied more antiseptic—a powder, this time, that made the new sterile pads not stick to the healing skin, which was good—and wrapped it in fresh gauze. It took him a while to let go of his arm, even when there was nothing left to do.

Naruto couldn't take it any more. The pressure building in his chest was pushing control out of his head and why was Minato just standing there? Why was his face just sad and his hands just gentle?

"Please," begged Naruto, and he was on his knees now, palms flat on the floor, begging and bowing, "please, can you just—just do it?"

He heard the sharp intake of breath, saw the feet stagger back, but still wasn't ready for the answer, for the choked way the words came down. "Do it? Do what?"

_Is this a test?_

"I—I was wrong," whispered Naruto. He wanted to get out more, to get to the part where he said sorry, but his throat was so tight he couldn't get any more sound out and his arms were shaking where he was braced against them and _can you let me pay please? For what I broke, take the price, take it—_

There were knees hitting the floor in front of him and firm fingers forcing his chin up and a broken
"Naruto," said Dad, "Naruto, what do you think I'm going to do?"

*What you have to,* he thought, but his chest was too tight and his throat hurt too much and no words would come, so he just shook his head a little, hoping it showed that he heard the question and was trying to answer it and it was probably disrespect and he knew his face was leaking panic but really he was ready, he could take it, just—just—

"Don't run," warned Dad, weight shifting. Naruto squeezed his eyes tight.

No blow came. Something strong and warm pulled him, wrapped warmth around him. Hands. Arms. There was a sound, rumbling through the chest his head was pressed into, like Minato was laughing or crying, but Naruto couldn't tell which, couldn't tell anything past the body encircling his. Dad said: "You got so big," and laughed or cried again, and Naruto's heart or head was splitting open and his body was shaking into pieces but there was a knee braced behind his back and another leg sprawled out by his bent knees and him in the middle, held close.

Dad was saying something, something about just one minute and a promise to let go, but the room was tilting and the only thing keeping him from falling to the ceiling was the strength holding him but then he wasn't sure he could still feel Dad's arms and then he couldn't see.

There was a moment of blind panic when the taut limbs clasped awkwardly in his went instantly limp and a sweaty head rolled loose on his shoulder, but there was a heartbeat constant and strong beneath his fingertips and the breaths Naruto kept forgetting to take stuttered steady in unconsciousness.

Had a tendency to faint, this kid.

Minato didn't mind. He'd promised to let go after sixty seconds, but maybe he'd cheat, just a little, just this once. Because twelve years was a heck of a long time to wait, and he had a chance to hold his boy again.

So he sat there and learned, all over again, just how thoroughly a heart could break.

It wasn't that he hadn't seen this coming. Naruto was a mess. A fourteen-year-old kid with a kid of his own on the way and a habit to always stay out of arm's reach who couldn't sleep in a bed and had too many scars, who hoarded food and relied on his fists and lied easily, with a big bright smile. A kid with all the normal fourteen-year-old problems plus his world inside-out and nothing solid to stand on, who had no idea what to do with all the love and need they were throwing at him. A kid who didn't know how to trust, and didn't expect to be trusted. A kid who was strong and smart and fast and feral.

His kid. His kid, who sat so tense in the passenger seat of Minato's car that if he braked too fast, turned too hard, those taut limbs might just shatter. Who couldn't step through the door of his own home without humbly seeking permission, because he'd left without it. Who knelt on the floor at Minato's feet, waiting to be struck down or beat up or—what kind of punishment would it have to be, Minato wondered, stomach churning, to make a kid as tough and fearless as this one shake just anticipating it? Because he'd seen Naruto endure pain, and it was scary how much
he didn't fear it.

Though just a hug could knock him out cold. Almost made Minato laugh.

He'd expected the outbreak. Waited for the moment when everything storming in Naruto's skin would build up and burst and take casualties with it—was prepared to be one of those casualties. He was ready to be hurt; he'd already forgiven.

(Maybe—*maybe*—the storm would come, and knock down all the things that weren't working, and when they rebuilt, things would be better.)

(He even hoped.)

So when Naruto attacked, he was ready. He was even ready for that knife. Until Naruto pointed it at himself. And then, just like now, he hadn't had a chance in hell of knowing the right thing to do.


The boy stirred, eyelids twitching, and Minato thought about putting him down, letting him come to on the floor where he'd be less embarrassed, thought: *to hell with that,* and held on tight.

"Dad," mumbled Naruto, blinking a bit as things started coming back into focus, and then there was awareness and he was scrambling out of Minato's arms and his face was flushing red and he was moving into one of those bows again. Minato let him go, glad to see that at least his limbs were steady now, and that he looked more like an embarrassed teenager and less like a too-young body with too-old eyes.

"I—I—didn't pass out," said Naruto, and Minato tried not to smile because he wasn't laughing at him, he really wasn't. "Or I—I, just for a moment, I, um, wasn't—don't tell Hinata—"

"It's okay, Naruto," was all Minato could think to say, but was surprised by the truth that came with the words because now that they were both here, sitting on the bedroom floor and not panicking, he could believe it. "Do you want to talk now, or later? Maybe after dinner?"

Naruto fidgeted, couldn't quite meet his eyes, drew up his knees and hid behind them. "Now," he said finally, sounding miserable.

"Okay," said Minato. Naruto watched him, jaw tight, hard to read. "Okay. So I'm not sure what sort of consequence you're expecting, but I'm quite certain it's not the kind I'm willing to give. Example: I'm not going to hit you. So don't expect that."

"I can take it," Naruto said, voice small. "I earned it."

There were a lot of righteous speeches burning the back of Minato's tongue, but something told him now wasn't the time. "I can't," he said.

The bits of Naruto's face he could see didn't look at all relieved. "What *are* you going to do?"

"Well," said Minato, tugging at his hair in frustration, "I really have no idea. I mean. What you did—what you did today, cutting yourself, that's not okay. You used emotional blackmail, which is pretty damn low, Naruto."

He couldn't see any bits of Naruto's face now.

"And hurting yourself is really, *really* not okay. And something we need to discuss. At length. But
not now."

The tips of Naruto's fingers were white where they pressed into his jeans. He didn't make a sound.

"But wanting to protect your mom—risking everything for someone you love—that's a good thing, Naruto. From what I can understand of the risk you took today, including what Itachi-kun filled in for me, you were incredibly, stupidly brave. You come by it honestly: your mom's exactly the same way. And I'm still freaking worried about her, by the way."

Blue eyes peaked over jean-clad knees.

"I would have stopped her, if I could have," said Minato. "But she's an adult. You're not. For all that you've been living like one, which I fully acknowledge," he held up one hand, like he was swearing to that point, "you're fourteen years old. You're a kid, my kid, and until your prefrontal cortex has had a chance to develop, I'm going to subject you to what I think is best. Want to be treated like an adult? Live long enough to be one."

Sick of talking, he levered to his feet, met the wary blue eyes that followed him. Stepped close, bent down to ruffle dyed-dark, blond-roots hair. "I'll think of some sort of punishment later. For now, go find Hinata. You scared her."

He reached out a hand, hoping his face was calmer than his heart, and breathed again when Naruto took it. Pulled his son to his feet, resisted the urge to pull him in for another hug, let him go, would have stepped back. But a bandaged arm reached out, a hand fisted his shirt at his chest and too-bright eyes met his.

"Dad," said Naruto, "Dad, I—I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm really——" and then his other hand came up, held on with the first, and as Minato's heart raced with the realization that Naruto had reached for him, for the first time in twelve hell-worn years Naruto reached for him—a forehead pressed just above it, and he couldn't tell which tears came first: the ones wetting his cheeks of the ones soaking his shirt.

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"You should have come with a gun."

"I'm a pacifist," snapped Kushina, pulling away from the wall she'd waited against, vibrating fury and more than ready to face her father. He was as tall as she remembered; she'd hoped he wouldn't be.

Her voice sounded strange after hours of tunnel-running routes she'd known blind two decades ago and had expected to change more than they had. There were two doors with security traps she'd blithely dismantled, and a third she'd understood well enough to choose not to mess with. She was well behind the Gates now, at the place only those who wished to meet the Fox went, and she had just stopped being alone.

"All the scariest ones are." His voice was deep and dry and she was pretty sure he'd just told her a joke.

He opened the door for her, not bothering to hide the process; she'd still end up electrocuted to a crisp if she tried. They stepped into a red-brick hallway and what she guessed was the foundation
of an actual house, rather than a repurposed sewage tunnel, remnants of the abandoned underground railway, or the hazardous passages carved out to connect the first two. This third door hadn't been there, the last time she'd come looking.

They were in a room, now, and there were chairs and a table and a lamp but her brain was beyond being able to count or describe or do anything but see growing ghosts of a boy she'd buried.

"He was here," she said, words all broken, and didn't know if she was asking, or pleading, or condemning.

"Yes," said Kurama. "For the first few years. Once the world accepted his death, I pushed him back into it, to learn to live. He learned." He paused for a moment, smiled a bit, added: "Poorly."

She wasn't sure if she was understanding him right. Wasn't sure she was understanding anything right. All the flesh and muscle and organs meant to keep her living were aching and echoing, and there were things she meant to say, answers to demand, but there was the vacuum where the best part of her had once been and with all the years of somehow breathing around that leeching void she knew that every reason in the world wouldn't heal the cold of a mother's empty arms.

She said nothing. He said, "Sit, daughter," and they sat.

The Fox said, "I have hurt you, Kushina. It was a choice I made the first time I held your son, and chose his life over everything else."

She wasn't sure she could speak. When the words did come, their order felt scrambled, like the dizzying intensity of helpless, hopeless anger crushing her rib cage had caught them and whirled them and pitched them out, thrown like stones at this man who was the only wall she couldn't breach. "I'm his mother," she said. Breathed. Tried to be still, when she needed to fight, had nothing to fight with. "He was—is—always—my life. I was his. Choose? What did you choose?"

Her fists were shaking; her throat was raw. Her father was hulk and shadows and rumbling voice rolling dark.

"You had a friend," he said. "When you were little. You gave her this. Taught her to use it. Swore her to secrecy."

Kushina stared at the coin in his hand. A 100 yen piece, at first glance. Something very different, if you could read the symbols etched there.

"The day you lost your son, a woman used this to find me. Told me about Naruto. Told me it may already be too late."

Kushina breathed, "Mikoto?"

"She didn't know where they'd taken him, but gave me all her guesses. I found him too late."

Jagged memories of the night her peace ended cut her raw and she dug her fingers into her thighs until the pain brought her back from the desperation of a beloved name cried out long after her frantic tongue tasted of blood.

"I killed them all," said Kurama, still dry and deep and dispassionate. "I found him on a table. One of them told me why they'd taken him, before I killed her. So when I held him the first time, I knew."

"They?" she asked. The word came out mangled.
"The Uchiha."

"The U—you can't, what, you're putting all the blame on someone else? But he said—*Naruto* said it was you—"

"Yes, I kept him," said her father, voice curling impatient. "And hid him and made you believe he was dead, because the Uchiha had made Naruto the strings they wished Namikaze to dance to, and I know your blindness, when it comes to Namikaze. You wouldn't have left him."

*I already did,* she thought, dizzy and distracted and unable to sort through the roaring tide of confused emotion to figure out what to think or do or say. *I lost Naruto, I looked for Naruto, I buried Naruto, and then I left Minato.*

*I just couldn't—couldn't be called in again, to look at the corpse of a dead child, sick to think it might be mine, sick with relief to be pretty sure it wasn't, sick because that—that was somebody's child, and then one day it was my child.*

*Just teeth. Nothing but ashes and teeth.*

*And Minato wouldn't come when we buried them, those ashes and teeth.*

"There was a balance of power, before Namikaze," Kurama was saying. "You two and your crusade for justice and change—you proved too hard too control, for those families who controlled everything. I told you to kill them, and be done with it. But you ran rallies and marched for change and infected everyone else with your foolishness instead. Gave useless people hope. Made them stand up to the ones with the power. You wanted evidence and trials. In too many cases, you got what you wanted. You and that boy—you were too smart to manipulate, and too connected to kill. But then you had a child."

*No...*

"They would have returned him to you. Returned him to you, with their ability to send his heart racing or stuttering or simply to stop it. To punish you through Naruto. It would not be hard at all, to get and keep you under control."

She could see it: see uniformed police officers handing her child, her heart, back into her arms, and the endless wave of relief and gratitude she would radiate back to them. There would be a bandage on his chest, a few stitches. *Must have taken a fall,* they might say. *A nasty scratch. We've sorted him out for you.*

But she could also see all the other scars on her child's chest and back and sides, and the way he spent nights hiding from his own nightmares, and tended to stand arm's length from everyone but the other children. Children he grinned so hard at his eyes squeezed shut, and tried so desperately to be like, and unconsciously shielded from threats only he could see.

"You hurt him," she said, and saying it hurt too. "You made him fight for everything. For food and warmth and sleep. And then you made him fight just to—just to fight."

"I taught him to live," said the Fox. "By no power and will but his own, he can live. So I could give him back to you."

"You're wrong," said Kushina, every word cut hot and hard. "We—we would have found a way! Minato and I ran a revolution, *as you said.* Took down a half a government. Our friends abandoned us, our families threatened us, but people rose up from everywhere to stand with us, and we broke down every damn wall we'd been told couldn't break. That wasn't enough for you? To trust us with
our own son? I came to you, I begged, and he was here—you lied—"

"I trusted you," said Kurama, "until you lost him."

Her face burned, her bones ached, her heart found new ways to break.

"Finders keepers, daughter dearest."

"You're cruel," whispered Kushina.

"I'm the Fox," said her father. "Now you have your second chance. Naruto came to me today, ready to give himself up to save you. I let him go."

Two sets of hard grey eyes met and mirrored, one broken; both burned. The Fox leaned forward, raised heavy hands, swallowed rigid shoulders with gentle palms.

"Prove me wrong, Kushina," he urged, low enough that the vibrations of his voice were nearly lost in the shadows of the room. "Save that child. He will not choose to save himself."

Kushina looked up at him, fury and loathing and love and fear marching hot everywhere her blood flowed, and still she felt something in the weight of his hands and around the edges his voice that had not been there, before. She said, without thinking: "You've changed," heard her words, clamped her jaw tight.

"Hmm," acknowledged the Fox. "It's a disease. You gave birth to it, now you get to deal with it."

Two jokes, she thought. And wanted, very badly, to cry.

She didn't. She pushed out from under his hands, stood brazen.

"Thank you," she said, "for finding him."


She tried to hook more words onto her tongue for what she would never, ever forgive, but words wilted weak for what she had to say.

"Stay away from us," she whispered instead. "But don't forget us. Because you're wrong, and we'll prove it."

She left him, a shadow in lamplight. Ran for home.

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He was empty and the ceiling was empty and whatever he was supposed to be—whatever Namikaze Naruto was meant to be—felt so far out of reach his arms were too weak and too heavy to grasp for so he was still and stared at the ceiling and waited for—nothing, really. Answers, maybe.

Except even when he wanted to be glum and still and just stare at the ceiling, Naruto's body had ideas of its own. So he was glum and stared at the ceiling while twitching and rolling and occasionally punching a pillow, which was the closest he was gonna get to still.

He didn't really know what to think. Find solutions without violence, Iruka-sensei always said, with his eyes all warm and believing like this was something Naruto could totally do, if he just wanted to. And he never ever ever wanted make his dad look at him like that, but if he got a do-over—what could he change? Other than planning more in advance, and having an escape plan in place that would work without violence—but he'd been trying not to think that way, about getting out, running free, because he wanted—wanted this to be home.

He would never not go after his mother, no matter how many do-overs he got. And it was all stupid anyway, because there were no do-overs. Just him and his ceiling and the person at the door.

Hinata-chan (no one else rapped on a door like they were afraid they might hurt it). He sat up fast and scrubbed at his face to make sure his eyes and nose had stopped leaking and tried to make his voice sound normal when he called come in.

She did come in, though not very far, and he sat up straighter when he realized how rigid her shoulders were, how tense her jaw was. She looked him dead in the eye and didn't even blush.

"Hina-chan," he began, uncertain, "are you angry?"

She looked at him, her bottom lip trembled, she nodded.

"...At me?"

Another nod. Naruto rubbed the back of his head, guilty and baffled, and wondered how much worse this day could possibly get.

"Naruto-kun," murmured Hinata, still with her shoulders all square, "you need to do better."

"...Okay?"

"Your p-parents," she said, red spots of color appearing on her cheeks with her stutter, "are too good to you. And you don't-t a...acknowledge them."

To anyone else he would have risen to the challenge and fully defended himself, but under Hina-hime's earnest gaze all he could do was squirm.

"Listen better," she commanded. "Don't r...run any-anymore. Don't fight them. They—they're not the ene-ene-enemy."

Naruto stared at his hands. The white bandage mocked him. "I know," he said.

"Naruto-kun," she said, and she was suddenly much closer, her voice as soft as her feather-warm
hand on his shoulder. "I'm only—only an-angry because, because I'm jeal...jealous."

He looked up, startled, was caught so fast in her pale-bright eyes it knocked the breath from his throat. "I wish," she whispered, "that there was someone... anyone who... cared for me, the way Nami-k-kaze-san and Kushina-obaa-san c-care for you." Her hand dropped. "If you don't honor them," she said, voice so low his heartbeat felt louder, "I will be angry at you for... forever."

Her eyes were so fierce his stomach flipped; he totally believed her. "Wait!" he called, because she was already halfway to the door. "Hina-chan—Hinata—I'm—"

She looked back at him, face all red, and slipped through the door, clicking it firmly shut behind her.

"I'm sorry," he said loudly, and listened carefully, because he was pretty sure she was still on the other side of that door, maybe with her hand still on the knob. "I'm sorry to everyone, okay?" There was a pause, and he tried to think of something else to say, but then there were footsteps and when she was for sure gone he flopped over, shoved his face as deep as it would go into this ridiculous soft bed he could never sleep properly in and yelled himself hoarse screaming swears into the mattress.

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.Minato was sulking with sake when Kushina came into the kitchen, cheeks flushed with running and brisk bits of autumn wind clinging. She grabbed his sake dish and downed it, exhaling as it stung her throat and spread warmth inside-out. She turned a lip at Minato's look.

"Like you were going to drink it. Come on, you big baby, you knew I'd come back. Where's Naruto?"

He gave her one of those long, wounded stares that tended to make her feel like she'd been about kicking baby cocker spaniels.

"I didn't know."

Okay, so when his voice went all low like that he was really sad, and maybe that stare had been less wounded and more... haunted. She took the chair next to his, stole the rest of his sake, sighed. "He let him go," she sighed. "Naruto did come home, didn't he? You wouldn't be just sitting, if he hadn't."

"He's here," said Minato. "I think he's crying in his room."

"EH? Cry—why?"

"Well, I grounded him. And told him one of us will be taking him to hockey practice, and anywhere else he needs to go, or he doesn't go. And that I'm considering taking up Itachi's offer of an ankle monitor."

"He wouldn't cry about any of that," she told him flatly, "and that's illegal. The monitor. Or you would've done it."

He conceded her point with a dismal half-shrug-half-smile that made her stupid heart hurt.
"And the knives?" she asked, looking over the mismatched little armory lined up next to the sake bottle.

"He did that," Minato told her. "Turned them all in like he was pleading guilty to murder or something. I've been trying to decide what to do with them."

Get rid of them, Kushina wanted to say, but she knew enough of Naruto's world to know that he would need them back. That he'd feel naked, unstable, vulnerable, even if he told himself to just be fine. She said: "Hide them where he'll find them," and smiled a little when he huffed out an almost-laugh and dropped his shoulders in defeat.

She caught the edge of a glance he stole, and yeah, he was Not Okay.

"Mina—" she started, almost afraid, but he opened his arms, tilted a face to hers that was wry and beseeching with quirked lips and weary-limpid eyes that called up warmth she'd buried so deep and guarded she couldn't breathe for the untouched intensity of it, rushing through heady and healing with ten times the strength of the stolen sake shot.

And fear, too, because—because this, the things she could feel because of him, had always been the most terrifying, addicting heat and she would get burned.

"One minute," he asked, voice so low she read the words from his lips before she caught them in her ears. There was something in the way his eyes crinkled, like he was sharing a private joke, and that could be her easy out—but she didn't want out. Blame the sake, but she wanted more than he dared ask.

Her feet wouldn't move until his arms and eyes started to drop, his cheeks coloring, and then she rushed in before his circle of warmth could fall.

"Two minutes," she countered, and her hand in his hair nudged his head to her chest, and his arms wound round her—hesitant, at first, and then clinging and desperate, and she rested her chin on his head and held him until long sighs shuddered through him and into her.

He didn't cry—hadn't cried, she thought, since before they'd lost Naruto—but there was release in the way his limbs eased and his breath evened, and it was probably more than two minutes before he pulled back.

"Thank you," he said, not looking at her. She hadn't moved, was still pressed against the front of his chair, and the only distance between them was what he'd created. She wasn't happy with the loss of warmth.

"For?"

"Coming back," he said, and less clearly: "being alive."

She sighed, gave in, stepped away, but dragged the closest chair much closer before sitting opposite him. "You didn't really think I'd take a risk that would keep me from—from my two boys, not now."

He didn't say anything. She said: "Mina, what is it?"

"He wouldn't come in," he said, when the things pinching the sharp angles of his face finally made it into words and out into the space between them. "Itachi helped me find him—forced him into my car, if you had seen his face—Naruto's face. He was sick, all the way home. White. Sweating. Waiting. When we got to the door, he stood there and wouldn't come in, and I was trying to figure
out why, until he asked if he could."

The pictures she was getting were disjointed and didn't add up to the way his face read hurt and helpless but it was enough to sink hooks into her ribcage and pull.

"His arm is—he cut his arm, when I blocked him, when he realized you were gone and wanted to go after you. I thought if I could just calm him down enough to talk, ask him to help me strategize—I thought he would listen." There was some blame in those words, for her and for him, but mostly plain pain. "So he cut himself to make me let him go. I let him go. And he came back with this bandage, and I thought: let's start with that, and then he was kneeling in front of me and shaking and begging me to just do it."

Kushina pressed her face to her hands, shoved fiercely at the mental images Budding virulent with his words and all the stories they didn't tell. Suddenly wanted a lot more sake.

"How," he asked, once his jaw had loosened enough to be able to talk again, "can he ever forgive us."

Kushina looked at him through her fingers. "Naruto?"

His chin dipped, his eyes shut tight. "Naruto... because we didn't protect him, didn't find him, he had to live—had to learn—our baby, our boy—"

This pain was old and potent under years of layered grief and in spite of all the little calluses built around her heart she had to take a few seconds just to accept that it was still there, until she could breathe again. When she opened her eyes she saw Minato with his eyes closed and she also saw her father, felt his palms envelope her shoulders, heard his words: I have hurt you, Kushina.

"What else can we do?" she asked, helpless, but also very much resolved. "But forgive. We can't be just prisoners. We have to forgive." She moved forward by centimeters, not sure if she was really doing this or not, but her body was trying to fit the awkward angles of two chairs and not-quite touching knees and his hands were coming up to hold his face so she caught them and cradled them and tilted her face and met his lips and kissed him.

He pulled back and clutched forward in two sides of the same second, shock drawing his lips away, need bringing his mouth back to hers, open, taking all her mouth in his hot and longing and her hands let his go to encircle his neck because she needed him here and his hands left hers to pull her close enough that her heart pounded just above his, her knees balanced uncertain on either side of his hips and his head back, throat bare, capturing her kisses as if he'd thirsted till agony and she was rain.

He tasted not at all of sake and too much of memory. Then his muscles stiffened slowly, some careful, rational part of his brain gaining gradual hold, and she curved down to his neck to hide and find that part of him that could not reason, could not pause, could only catch and keep and give everything to and for and because of her. She found the place where flushed skin dipped from his collar bone and swept towards his neck and took it in her mouth, thrilled hot when he shuddered.

But he pushed up, stood firm on his feet, caught her with steadying hands spread firm round her ribs as she tumbled off and down. His eyes were dark and all his words were lost but the hands that steadied her were pushing now, gently, making space so he could count breaths, and she knew she had only seconds before she would be alone, again.

She lifted his hands from her sides, folded them into her own, braved his eyes. Her mouth made his name, syllables falling between them wrapped warm in that wretched love that was always too
He swallowed, closed his eyes, could not breathe steady; when she took a step back, he took a step forward, unconsciously following.

His hesitation lost. Her limbs were already trembling with triumph and trust and she turned to lead, to reach her bed quickly, but was swept up instead. Lifted strong in hungry arms and cradled and cherished and all that he felt but couldn't say came with them.

First tournament game, and they were watching on a tiny screen in Kakashi's office instead of pressed against the boards like they should be, because Minato wanted one more (just one more, he pleaded) game where Naruto could just be Naruto instead of not-dead Namikaze Naruto and they could see it. On Kakashi's desktop monitor, but they were there, and they would see.

Minato was right. It had been a hard two days for their boy—for all of them, but she and Minato had been (blissfully, intensely, ridiculously) distracted, had allowed that distraction, because love made and unmade the family they had been and, Kushina gambled, could make it again. When he wasn't with her, Minato drilled hockey with their boy and helped Hina-chan with chemistry and she showed Naruto how to hang boxing bags in the storage room connected to the basketball room and made him talk about the Fox.

Kushina went first. "I didn't see him much," she said. "My mother told me about him when I was five, because I asked, and she decided not to lie. Even if I might have been happier, in a lie. She had another man, her husband, you know."

Naruto stopped avoiding her eyes in surprise.

"It was an open secret. I was raised in a big empty house on the other side of town. He was always kind to me—my stepfather—but couldn't acknowledge me."

"Why not?" demanded Naruto, already angry, which made her feel fond and funny.

"He's Senju Hashirama," she told him.

"The—the—the general? The first Prime Minister? The guy who won the war and made us independent and everything?"

"Glad you know your history," she said dryly. "But I don't want to talk about Senju-san. I want to talk about Kurama."

He stopped looking at her.

"Kurama went to kill him," she said, simple words silly in her own years, but embellishments were stupid. "That's how he met my mother."

Naruto looked a little sick. There could be a lot of reasons for this, but she didn't know which guess
"She decided she loved him. I guess he loved her, too, because they met until she died. Senju-san knew about it. Their marriage was kind of like a contract—they were friends, and a good match, and Senju-san had someone he loved, but couldn't marry, so he asked Mother instead, and she agreed. Then she found someone she loved, but she was already married."

It took a while for Naruto to give a response to his family history, and when the words did come they were a bit strangled. "So she had a kid with the man who wanted to kill her husband? Like, on purpose? I—I mean—uh—"

Don't worry, baby, she thought, a little wry and a little sad, there's not much left to be said in this world that could offend me. I'm old hand. Out loud, she told him that she probably wasn't planned. "But they welcomed me anyway. Mother and Tsunade and Senju-san."

"You mean... that old hag—uh, Tsunade-sensei—she's your sister?"

"Half-sister," said Kushina. "And fourteen years older than me. But you still won't get away with calling her Old Hag."

"Anyway," she said, determined to keep words marching into the hard things they had to talk about, "I think we're a lot more alike, you and I and Minato, than you realize. Your dad and I both grew up as kind of—of disconnected, disconnected children. We wanted... we promised to make the opposite for you. I'm. It hurts. Sorry." She stopped, reclaimed her right to breathe, kept going. "I told you I was in that house by myself. There was always a nanny and people to cook and manage the house and Mother dropped by, and Tsunade came too, when she found out about me, but—but I was... alone. Very lonely. So when I asked my mom about my dad, and she told me, I had to find him. To make him want me. I had this, this dream, that I'd go live with him, and Mother would miss us and come live with us too, and maybe Tsunade-nee-chan and Senju-san too, and I'd have this perfect family."

Naruto was watching her, now, from the sharp corners of his eyes, the muscles of his face pulled smooth, untelling.

"Mother told me not to meet him, off course. But she really wanted me to, because she told he was like Senju-san—Konoha's other Prime Minister, she said, but underneath. So I looked underneath. Took me years. I was eleven before I met him."

"The Fox... knew who you were?"

"Oh yes," said Kushina. "I didn't see him, but he watched over me. I knew that long before I knew him."

"It was a game," she said, to the top of his bowed head, the callused hands palm-up in his lap. "After I found the tunnels. I'd get farther and farther in, run up against things that were harder and harder to get past. Sometimes it would be someone to fight. Sometimes it would be a trap and I'd end up hanging from the ceiling or something. Sometimes there'd, there'd be a prize, like a reward for making it that far. But it wasn't easy, the game."

"I've played that game," Naruto had said, low and loaded. "Except I was going out, and you were going in."

"Game's starting," said Minato, all bright and alert and strained towards the monitor where tiny blurry figures in hockey jerseys darted in and out of view. Kushina pulled up and out of the weight
of emotion and new memory and hugged him from behind, arms around his chest and chin on his shoulder. Number 52 whizzed by, puck on his stick, passed off-screen, caught the return pass as he easily rounded the other team's defenseman.

"Go, Naru, go," she whispered, watching her son skid ice like he was born for it. He was. "This is your game, Naruto—"

52 aimed at the goal, feinted, snapped the puck to 34. Mikoto's son caught it, twisted, smashed it forward. The goalkeeper was still turning, just angling off Naruto—

The puck went in.

"Goal," she breathed, as Minato yelled, and Konoha's score board ticked to 1, and Number 52 put his fists and stick in the air, posed for victory.

"Yes," exulted Sasuke, pale face blotched victory red, and Naruto felt Sasuke's sweat drip down his collar as he was grabbed in a hug and shoved away in the same breath. "You glorious idiot. Welcome back, usuratonkachi."

Naruto grinned. 6-2: a good game. A tournament-winning game. He just had to keep it up. Keep getting the pucks from Sakura and to Sasuke. Keep filling in the holes Sakura smashed open. Keep finding the angle to slip the puck back where she could slapshot it in too fast for most goalies to track. Keep catching the passes they sent him and sending them sizzling into the goal with the neat little feint-flip snap Dad taught him.

A Yellow Flash signature. He thought he'd heard that phrase in the crowd, too, but when he turned around he couldn't guess who might have said it.

High-fives and back-slaps crowded him into the changing room, where the jubilation mounted. Nineteen sweaty boys high on victory and higher on relief—relief that their team was skating sound again, that their unofficial captain was himself again.

Or at least playing hockey like himself again.

Naruto felt like a fake. A very good fake, tonight; he'd held everything together, thrown everything out of his mind but the game and won.

It didn't make sense. Hockey was the bridge—the bridge between the violence of the Gates and the carefully sheltered world kids were supposed to live in, the bridge between who he was and who he wanted to be, the bridge between Namikaze Naruto and Namikaze Minato. It should be the place that made him feel like himself again.

Maybe I always planned to go back, he thought, tugging a shirt over his head and choking on the cloud of cologne Kiba just drenched himself in. I never really thought I'd escape for good. It was all just the game—the game to see how long I could stay away, how many times I could survive coming back.

Then he knew: he wanted the haze and hurt of a different arena. The one that was about fighting until you won or you lost—lost consciousness, lost blood, lost limbs. Life and death, not goals and
semifinals. Just thinking about it made his stomach twist sick and his heart beat with a furious want he hadn't felt in any hockey game since the first ones, when it was him and Sasuke and then Sakura, whacking whiffle balls with Itachi's old sticks in the weed-ridden parking lot near Sakura's house.

It had been months. Months since the day he'd passed out in the hallway, one arm so numb the hand hung useless and the fingers of the other still seizing so that he dropped the keys and fell asleep laughing at himself, cheek cold on the dirty cement floor. Months since he woke to Hinata's eyes dripping horror down her cheeks to splash onto his, since he'd realized that she cared—she cared that he was hurt, that he'd fought, that one of these nights he might not come home.

*I'll stop,* he promised her. *I'll be here when the baby comes. I'll be here every day. I promise.*

He stopped.

*I will be angry at you for... forever.* (She'd never been angry at him before. Even when he did things that made the others who loved him, Sasuke and Sakura-chan and Iruka-sensei, frustrated and impatient and wonder how he could be so dense, so reckless—Hinata-chan always looked at him the same way: the way she looked out the window when the sky was bright bright blue and the wind was perfect.)

"Dobe." Sasuke was looking at him, had pushed everyone else away and past him, Naruto realized, looking up from the shoes he was holding but hadn't put on and into Sasuke's frowning face. "Don't," Sasuke added, and Naruto realized that he'd turned his smile on without thinking, the smile that spread his face til it hurt and made his eyes squint shut.

"...We won," offered Naruto, unsure what Sasuke's mood-turn was about.

Sasuke just looked at him.

"Okay okay, I'm having an angsty moment, you should be more understanding about that, you bastard."

Nothing. Naruto shoved on his shoes, suddenly uncomfortable.

"I'll keep winning, you stupid Uchiha. I won't get in the way of the tournament. So just be happy about tonight, okay."

Sasuke took half a step back at that, eyes all narrow like they did when he got offended, but he didn't talk about the tournament. He looked at Naruto's fists and said: "You miss it."

Naruto glared down at his fingers, made them open. Thought about lying. Shrugged instead.

Sasuke huffed heavy, sat beside him, said very low: "I miss it."

"You won't—" he said, watching Sasuke from the sides of his eyes, hope and fear racing hot up his throat, but Sasuke jerked his head *no.*

But it was a little easier to breathe, with Sasuke next to him, with the locker room smelling like it had the very first time he'd followed Sasuke into it. It was like unwrapping a bandage from just-healed ribs—after a few days you would get used to the tightness, and the sudden lightness of fully expanded lungs was this happy surprise when the wrappings came off.

"I'm going to ask my mom," Sasuke said, and all of Naruto's muscles snapped stiff again. "You talk to yours."
Naruto dropped his suddenly aching head into his hands, gripped his hair, said: "yeah, okay."

After a moment the peace felt weird, and they stood at the same time, Sasuke watching with his usual moderately disgusted scorn as Naruto shoved his unwashed chest and knee pads into his locker, slamming it shut to keep them in. They were at the door when Sasuke grabbed his arm, held him back for a moment. Sharp dark eyes challenged his.

"Fight me," he said. "Like in the cage. Or—in the cage."

Naruto's heart was beating too hard, the elation he hadn't felt in winning the hockey game flushing hot under his skin.

The door shoved open, pushed from the other side, and Naruto skipped away in reflex, adrenaline coursing. Kakashi-sensei looked down at them, eyebrow raised. "You're both still grounded," he reminded them. "Good game. Get out."

Sasuke's face was already perfectly blank. Naruto grinned, more genuinely this time, and tried to steal Kakashi's book on their way out.

"Let's go out," said Kushina, cheeks still aching from smiling so hard while watching the game. Her baby was a star—every inch the star they'd dreamed he might be, and then some.

"Aren't we still—still like, undercover?" wondered Naruto, and his cheeks and eyes were bright too, his hands clenching and unclenching. They were in Kakashi's office, waiting for the last of the game crowd to clear the building.

"No," said Kushina. "I am never sitting out a game of yours again. I'll be right at the boards, embarrassing the shit out of you."


"Do you want to go out?" Minato asked Naruto, turning to Hinata too, including her in question.

"Like out... where?" asked Naruto.

"Dinner," Kushina told him promptly, stomach rumbling emphasis. Naruto looked uncertainly at Hinata.

"I don't mind," she said, trying to smile at him but not quite meeting his eyes. There was something up between those two, and she resigned herself to sleuthing out what it was so she could fix it. The last thing they needed was more teenage angst in the house.

Naruto's face flicked through expressions, like he wasn't sure what he wanted, until he blurted: "Can I choose the place? To eat?"

She smiled at him, caught Minato doing the same. "Of course," Minato said, and Naruto glanced at Hinata again, nervous but determined.

"There's a spinning restaurant at the top of the radio tower," he said. "Can we go there?"
"Oh—oh no," said Hinata, face already coloring. "It's too—"

"Expensive?" finished Kushina, and the girl flushed fully, looking down. Kushina realized, looking between the two of them, that it was Hinata who wanted to eat at the spinning restaurant—that Naruto must be asking for her. "I've got money, Naruto's dad's got even more money, Naruto's got lots of money he's not allowed to touch until he's twenty except I'd totally let him cheat and splurge after the goals he made tonight. We're going!"

Naruto's eyes were big. "I have money?"

"Twenty," she reminded him, leading the way to the car.

There had already been whispers, Obito told her, and much less subtly spoken speculation running through the crowds tonight. This was the Yellow Flash's home ice—hers too, though her stories had always been downplayed in the media, mostly because she was female—and even if Gaara-kun was doing a truly splendid job laying false trails in Suna, there were those who guessed this was a place to look. And there was a boy named Naruto on the starting line of the WoF varsity ice hockey team with bright blue eyes and a killer snap shot. There would be dozens of photos and articles circulating online within hours, maybe minutes, maybe they were already posted and shared and—and while nothing would be officially confirmed, their secret was done.

Might as well meet it head-on.

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Hinata told him about it the second time she talked to him—not the second time he'd talked to her, because she rode his bus all the time without any destination and it made him curious—but the second time she answered loud enough for him to hear her.

He'd asked her where her favorite place in Konoha was, and she'd blushed and maybe said here which was so adorable he must have heard it wrong, and then she said she liked to be high up, and he said that was smart because people always forgot to look up, so you could see them but they wouldn't see you and Hinata—Hinata had looked up with these bright shining eyes like that was exactly what she meant and he was super amazing just for understanding.

Suddenly he had a huge new goal in life: Understand Hyuuga Hinata.

She'd told him about this restaurant, an all-windows room wrapped around the tip of the radio tower—he knew what the radio tower looked like, and knew immediately which room she meant—but the idea that behind all that shiny glass were tables and waiters and a kitchen (did the kitchen spin around too? Did the chefs get to enjoy the view while they sauteed things?) was a little mind-blowing to him, so he'd always remembered it.

"It's supposed to be the—the best view in the city," she'd said, and then her quota for speakable words must have run out, because she didn't manage anything more than shy glances and blushing cheeks after that.

Naruto remembered.

He panicked for a moment, when they stepped off the elevator onto thick carpet and some guy in a suit asked quietly if they had reservations. Of course you couldn't just walk into a place like this.
Of course it wouldn't work, wouldn't be this easy, to show Hinata that he cared about the things she said. About her.

"I'm sorry, no," Dad was saying, rubbing the back of his head with this little lopsided smile that made the restaurant-suit-guy's lips twitch in response before he got them back in that perfect little bow that was polite and judgmental at the same time. "We're celebrating my son's hockey game—" he put a hand on Naruto's back, all proud, and as Naruto's face went hot finished with: "this just seemed like the perfect place to do it. Maybe another day?"

Naruto could see the moment suit-guy recognized them. The way his eyes went wide and his back snapped even straighter and his judging mouth rolled round, suddenly full of promises. Naruto rubbed nervously at the uncovered scars on his cheeks, tried to look like he belonged there, on the soft carpet, at his father's shoulder; hoped Hinata would stop freaking out long enough to enjoy being there, watched the idle eyes that turned to them as they walked to the window snap wide, listened as hushed voices broke out in their wake.

Bad idea, he was just figuring out now. He'd just wanted to do something for Hinata. But this wasn't it. It wasn't just the stares and the whispers and naked uncovered scars. More than Hinata's hunched shoulders, more than the way his parents flanked them, braced and polished in the spotlight, more than the unease he always felt in a place he didn't know all the exits to—very, very bad idea, said the clenching of his stomach, the cold anticipation curling up his spine. Something was going to go wrong. Very very wrong.

It took him more than a minute, once they were seated (and it was beyond awkward, having someone push his chair in for him—he just copied his mom, went with it, noticed that Hinata took her part in this high-class dance with perfect grace, in spite of her bitten lips) to finish scanning everyone he could see, divide them into categories, and choose the three best ways to run. Then he looked out the window.

Stars. Konoha city looked like a galaxy breathing light, movement and stillness and glitter spread at his feet and all the way to the horizon. "Hina-chan!" he cried, grabbing her hand before he could tell himself not to, "waahhh, you were right, this is—wow, Konoha..."

Dad laughed, little and low, and his eyes shot over to see that Mom was smiling too, that smile that was still brighter than and entire city's night-defying lights. "Worth it," said Dad. Please, thought Naruto.

He had no idea what to order. The way Hinata was sitting was easing, though, muscles dropping, lips twitching into almost-smiles as he struggled to pronounce the words on the menu. Mom and Dad made suggestions, told him to order one of everything, praised Hinata for her own choices. It felt good. Warm and strange against the taut cold anxiety banded cold up his back.

He saw his dad watching people the way he did, while they waited for food; saw the staff expertly directing attention away from their table, knew it was Rin or the security team Dad kept texting under the table, that they must be somewhere near, on standby. Huffed when Mom teased him, grinned when Hinata's eyes finally met his, made a big deal out of the food.

Told himself: it's okay it's okay it's okay

And then Hinata wasn't okay.

They'd just gotten dessert, a big glass goblet of shaved ice and sweet sauce and jellied fruit quivering untouched on the table in front of him. It was ten o'clock and new guests had been shown to a table near theirs; he'd noted the price of their shoes and their watches and the slightly
foreign accents without actually paying attention. It was her hands that tipped him off first: two thumbs pierced the soft pads of two index fingers, made two tense circles in her lap. Her eyes closed, her lips pressed firm together, and then she started shaking.

He started to say her name, but when it was still the breath of the first H she shook her head, just enough for him to see and stop; he stopped. Watched her breathe in careful sips, lift her head, pick up a spoon. His parents had noticed, and looked questions at him, but he didn't know and let that show on his face.

They ate dessert. He let himself grow a little louder than he'd been since stepping onto the posh carpet of the restaurant, made himself something for Hinata to distract herself with. It seemed to work, but her hair kept falling more and more to cover her face, and she only looked at him, or his mom, or the window. And she didn't eat. Shoveled little bits of ice around with her spoon, smiled a horrible strained smile, went whiter and whiter until there was no color left in her lips. When she slipped away from the table with a whispered plea to be excused and stumbled in her hurry to get away, he frowned and followed her.

"Let me," said Mom, "looks like she's headed to the ladies' room."

It was kind of hard to make his body sit back down. "The table behind your right shoulder," Naruto asked his dad, because he couldn't just sit silent, "do you know who they are?"

Dad pulled out his phone, which made Naruto a little angry, until he realized he was using it to see behind him without turning around. He stared at the screen for a moment, looked up with one eyebrow quirked up a little. "Ambassador from Kumo, and the other two are probably attachés," he told him, watching Naruto carefully for a reaction. Naruto didn't have much of one to offer, but suspicion mixed fluently with the dread he'd been feeling all night.

Naruto gave himself brain freeze gulping down huge bites of the sweet-ice dessert because he had nothing else to do. He saw his father's attention shift, turned in relief to see Hinata and Mom making their way back to the table, Hinata looking a little steadier, like maybe she'd thrown up and felt better for it; turned back in time to see recognition narrow the ambassador's eyes. "Hyuuga Hinata," the man's voice dripped, rising from his chair with smooth grace that did not match the way his eyes crawled down her and stopped at the roundness of her belly under the protective spread of her hands. That was all Naruto needed to know.

His father reached for him as he rounded the table but he was moving in fast hard strides that swirled aside easily to avoid the grasping hand and his hand was around the ambassador's collar before the attachés could even rise from their chairs.

"Ambassador-san," said Naruto, "I have something to tell you. Over here." He moved, dragged the man with him, tracked the faces turning their way, heard his name snapped out in hard warning, in his father's voice—didn't care.

Restaurant staff were approaching. Naruto was glad his scars were showing, now, glad his hair was still dark and jagged, glad he looked like himself and not like his dad. Glad his fists knew how to hit really hard and really fast.

The man was big, much bigger than Naruto, and it he had to brace wide to balance against the weight reeling back from his other fist's impact. He had a lot of hits to get in, and not a lot of time—had to keep the target close, make every hit count.

Ah, the dear ambassador had finally pulled himself together to fight back. Was roaring something, grasping with arms that had plenty of muscle but no idea what to do when someone actually knew
how to rest. And Naruto was all too happy to supply resistance. Slammed the man into the wall by the bathroom, cheeks stretching gleeful as cartilage crunched and blood poured, smeared that blood into the man's eyes to buy him the seconds he needed to overturn a table, throw a chair at the security staff—soon, he thought, catching a wildly flailing arm and helping the Kumo ambassador plow face-first into the carpet.

Mom was holding Dad back. Security was coming in from three sides, now, and shouts and chaos had drawn all occupants out of the restrooms.

Perfect. He threw another chair, caught the ambassador as he pushed off the floor, twisted their momentum so the man overshot him, crashed through to the restroom. Kicked the broad back all the way in, grinned at the terrorized crowd, stepped through, slammed the door behind them. It locked; there was a handy decorative table at hand; barricaded.

Once the blood was out of his eyes, the ambassador saw they were alone. Panicked eyes rolled, grasping hands found a soap jar, threw hard.

Naruto caught it. Set it carefully on the counter. It was beginning to catch up to him, now, what kind of consequences were coming.

He had something to finish first.

"I'll fucking kill you," were the first distinguishable words from the man's mouth, but his eyes were white with the panic so common in cruel men when they've lost control.

"Sure," said Naruto. "I don't die easy though. See these scars? Do I need to tell you what they mean? Since you're from Kumo and all."

It seemed the man did know. From the sounds at the door, there was less than a minute left. Naruto worked fast. The man tried to run. Naruto laughed. Leaped. Hit kneecaps, hands, jaw, solar plexus. Let the man slide to the floor. Crouched next to his ear, hand casually compressing a thick throat.

"Only dead people have faces like mine," he explained. "Have fun trying to kill a dead boy. But enough about me." He shifted, pressed a knee to the bruised chest, lifted the ambassador's head up to make sure he was listening. "You raped Hyuuga Hinata. That's the last thing you will ever do to her. She'll feel bad if I kill you, so I might need to ask someone else to do that. Not a problem."

"I'm the—"

"Ambassador of Kumo? Yeah, I know. I'm the son of Namikaze fucking Minato. Shit, no time—hold still—" how lucky, that the man had a high-quality pen in his pocket.

Finished. He rapped on his side of the door. The threats and bangs from the other side quieted.

"Coming out now," he called. "Don't shoot, yeah?" He moved the table, unlocked the door, took a deep breath, eased it open.

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Chapter 19

She was good at being forgotten. When Naruto broke her rapist’s nose and there was a that sound and fountaining blood and a running maître d’, even the staring Kumo attaché forgot her. Of course Naruto’s parents forgot her.

So Hinata slipped through the in-between parts of the crowd, heart clenching more than beating and terror bitter up the back of her throat, and watched her more-than-nightmare crumple like burned paper under a magnifying glass in the sun. Her sun.

She didn’t like the way Naruto grinned, sharp and vindictive, the way his hands stained red. She didn’t want him touching her monster. Didn’t like the fear in all the eyes staring at her Naruto, the way bodies recoiled, as if afraid this sudden savage would reach for them next.

But her horrorworld was too heavy to breathe in and she had to breathe for the other one inside her, for those tiny almost-lungs and fluttering kicks and bright-open future.

Because Naruto was there, she could breathe.

The door slammed shut. People collided with it, with each other: the other attaché, frantically calling the Ambassador’s name; a big man in a suit who must work for the restaurant; Namikaze-san. The door stayed shut. Naruto and her nightmare stayed on the other side.

She found empty space very close by, on a side where nobody was looking, and waited as Genma-san and Iwashi-san rushed in, more grim than frantic, like they knew more Naruto-trouble was coming. Watched Namikaze-san fight words with the manager of the restaurant (a special customer of ours—but I can be oh-so-special too, don’t touch my son, she heard in pieces), watched Kushina-obaa-san snap a recording cell phone from a beautifully-dressed guest and delete everything on it with a very scary face. Hinata breathed, and Hinata counted, and when at last an answer came from the other side of the door, and anticipation and anxiety rippled stillness through the not-very-effectively-dispersed crowd, she stopped being forgotten and pushed through forgotten spaces to be the very first person to reach Naruto.

It was less than a glimpse she caught of his face, but she saw that it was white and afraid and not at all repentant. Heavy hair whirled as she slipped in front him, pressed her back to him, reached behind, found wrists, held tight and it covered her face but she was not hiding and she lifted her chin and shook her head until she could see and everyone could see her but Hyuuga Hinata was going to speak and a million eyes would not stop her.

"Don’t touch him," she said. Went blank with shock as the words sounded in her own ears, free and smooth and not very loud but completely, completely clear. They were staring at her, staring and staring and staring and mouths started to move but it was MY TURN TO SPEAK.

"He—he—h-h-h-" Stop. Breathe. I spoke. You can’t keep my words forever. "He did it for me," she said. Felt Naruto’s chest catch, expand, release, imagined his unstoppable heart pounding against her shoulder blade. "He did it for me—he did it for me—he did it for me! NO! Don’t touch us! I’m—I’m pregnant, you’ll hurt my baby, DON’T TOUCH US STAY AWAY!"

Her head was hot and her cheeks were wet and her nose was running and every other part of her was shaking but her voice, her voice didn’t shake at all. They’re mine. MY WORDS. You can’t have them! Mine! I’m ripping them back!
"Hinata," Naruto whispered. She felt her name lift his chest. His arms moved, tugged against her grip, and her courage furled inward to curdle into something more poisonous. But the heat of his skin never left her, and on the other side of the same second his fingers were slipping between hers, curling their hands into warm, safe tangles.

"Don't hurt him," she pleaded, couldn't make out anything but eyes, all the eyes. "Don't look at him that way! He's only—one—only protecting."

One of the voices that kept trying to cut over hers found the space. It was one of the men from Kumo, shouting after his Ambassador. Namikaze-san moved towards them, small, steady steps that kept him between his charges and all the eyes.

"Well done, Hinata-hime," he said, voice startlingly gentle against the stress stretched jagged across his face. Someone warm pressed against her right side, and she startled and whipped her head, choked on gasped-in air only to see bright crimson: Kushina. Namikaze-san was on their other side.

"We'll take our children home," he said. "My assistant will be here shortly. All damages will be covered. If an arrest needs to be made, Nohara-san will direct any officers of the law to our location." He put a hand on Naruto's shoulder, binding and protecting. "We will fully comply."

Genma and Iwashi closed ranks in front of them, and slowly, Naruto was pulled away from behind her to walk between Hinata and his mother. One hand slipped free, but the other held tight. His head was down, jagged black bangs hiding his face. Every muscle was tense—too tense, and Hinata wondered if he would be able to walk or if he would break free and run. She must have held his hand tighter, because he turned to look at her, head still bent, and frowned, and pulled his arm out of his mother's hold, stretched its sleeve over his palm, and brushed it very, very gently over her cheeks. His eyes were wide with a thousand uncertainties.

"Sorry, Hime," she thought he said. The words were quiet and the room was loud, so she wasn't sure. She was still shaking.

There was a yell from the bathroom. The crowd surged forward. Naruto smiled.

The man who destroyed everything that used to be Hyuuga Hinata stumbled through the doorway, leaning heavily on one of his aids, the one who had shouted after him in concern and now bore the weight of the man's beaten body uneasily, half-recoiled.

"What—" said Kushina-oba-san, twisting further to get a better look.

"Naruto, you—" said Namikaze-san.

"Spread the word," said Naruto-san.

"CHILD-RAPER"

That label echoed through everyone the restaurant managers hadn't managed to disperse, whispered with shock from too-red lips to jewel-heavy ears. Mouths made words, and eyes turned set by set and all of them turned to her. To her shaking shoulders and too-round belly.

All her strange-smooth words and heedless heart-first courage had blown her bigger than she'd ever
been and now Hinata could only burst.

_Pain_ and _fear_ and _sick_ and _hide_ blew down in tattered pieces and she stumbled, almost fell, wrenched herself away from Naruto when he tried to catch her.

"Hina—" Naruto was saying, sounding scared—but Hinata was shivering into pieces and wanted only _only_ to be very very alone someplace not-dark but with no eyes. No eyes at all. And she didn't want to be in her body or able to think and who needed words anyway? What could words do?

She recognized Kushina-oba-san's perfume so she let those arms stay around her and together they made it into the elevator where she tried to do nothing but listen to Kushina's voice because she sounded like a mother and the only thing in the whole world that could help Hinata right now was her own mama, her mama whose face she didn't really remember (just how she looked in the photograph she whispered good morning to every day) but she remembered a voice and arms and how it felt when as long as Mama was there everything would end up okay.

Hinata was not okay.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Naruto was saying, stricken and confused, and some far-away part of her brain that was still making thoughts and not the memories the rest of her was fighting and failing wanted to comfort him, but for once she had absolutely nothing to give, not even for Naruto.

They were in a car. They were outside the house. Namikaze-san was asking if he could help Kushina-oba-san carry her up the stairs. She let them. She saw Genma-san and Iwashi-san holding onto Naruto, saw his eyes big and distressed following after her, heard him swear to everyone that he knew the police were coming and he wasn't going to run, wasn't going to run, wasn't going to run...

"Now you're fighting? Oh, good girl, good girl. Where will you run, where will you run-" OUT OUT OUT "-to? To your Daddy? What will your Daddy say when he sees what you really are, my sweet stuttering baby girl? Don't fight, don't fight, we're almost done..."

_No_, was her only word, the only word Hinata had left. _No no no no no no NO NO NO—_

"Hey hey, sweetheart, Hina-chan, I'm here, you're safe, I'm here," someone was saying. Someone who smelled sweet, smelled safe like her words promised, someone who was soft hands smoothing her hair and drying her cheeks and almost-Mama as she shattered.

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Dad had his head in his hands. Mom was with Hinata. Hinata's bedroom door had been closed for a long time.


He had a lot of answers but what was the use in giving them? He saw Hinata react to something, figured out what (who? No, what, for a man-monster like that) she was reacting to, and had to do two things: 1. Get it away from Hinata. 2. Make sure it never came near Hinata again. Or looked at her. Or talked about her. Or maybe even breathed air because Hinata needed to breathe instead.

He could say that. And hear all the reasons why this was wrong in every freaking way and to talk
to adults and trust them to handle things and most definitely not do the one thing he knew he could do. Because fame and cameras and police and everyone else's reputations.

If his reputation was enough to make sure no one ever touched Hinata again without her wanting it then he really couldn't care less about fame or cameras or the fact that they were sitting in the front room waiting for someone to arrest him.

Getting arrested, though, that could be a problem. Naruto didn't have any delusions about how easily he could die. Hours weren't things he could take for granted. He also knew that if he was locked down under Konoha Police Department care, hours was all he'd have.

The holding cells in KPD Central would be okay. Itachi was there. If Itachi could keep him from being transferred before someone could post bail—Gaara would do it, had even told him to think of him first if he ever needed—if he was allowed to walk until trial time—that would buy him time. A little more time.

If he'd done his job right, though, and his gut said he had, he wouldn't need the time. There'd be no trial because there would be no defendant.

"Talk to me," Dad was saying. "Please, Naruto—just—talk. At least talk. I'm—angry. I need – I need to understand."

Naruto looked at his hands. He had his arms half-folded, had scratched a little furrow into the crook of his left elbow with his right pointer finger, had started to draw blood. There wasn't blood anywhere else—first thing Dad had him do when they got home, while Hinata and Mom disappeared behind that door, was change his clothes, get the ambassador's blood off his hands. There was a hooded sweatshirt next to him on the couch, but he wouldn't put it on until he needed to. He was already sweating.

Dad's breathing wasn't getting any calmer, so he tried to do as asked and talk. The words sounded stupid as he said them. "He hurt Hinata."

"Okay," said Dad, "So you saw a man that you suspect of raping Hinata, so you had to beat him up. Right away. Right there."

Naruto shrugged, sullen.

"Do you have any evidence?"

That had Naruto looking up, face flashing hot with anger. "Evidence? Hang evidence. Her face is evidence. The way he looked at her was evidence. Her freaking pregnancy is evidence. What you want, a freaking rape kit? Damn cops never look at those anyway. Witnesses? A predator like that knows damn well not to leave witnesses——" then he noticed the change on his father's face, the connection clicking into place behind those blue eyes, and slammed his head into his hands, cursing.

"Her... pregnancy? You mean..."

Naruto peeked between his fingers, wondering if there was something, anything he could say to undo the realization on his father's face, knew immediately that there wasn't.

"...it's not yours. You didn't get her pregnant."

Naruto went very still. Wanted to hope his father wouldn't do something to make him hate him. Was afraid to. Knew he couldn't hate him anyway. Wanted to feel nothing.
"Well." Namikaze sighed. Ran a hand through his hair. Opened his mouth to speak, clicked it shut when the doorbell rang. Looked Naruto hard in the eyes. "Don't move," he commanded. "Whatever the officer tells you to do, you do it. Don't resist. Don't talk. I'll stay with you."

Naruto didn't move. Wondered if he was wrong, if he'd misjudged the depth of a rapist's cowardice, wondered how many seconds were left.

Namikaze came back in with slumped shoulders and uniformed officers and Naruto closed his eyes because he couldn't look at them and not run.

"Nice labeling, Gatekeeper."

Naruto's mind went blank, eyes flew open, took in pale handsome faces and weary black eyes. "Itachi? Sh-shisui-san? What—" he sputtered and stood, felt his father's hands clamp warningly over his biceps and forgot not to flinch because this could be the best or the worst possible news—


Itachi smiled at him. "We're officially here to deliver a warning, but I thought we'd make sure your parents could breathe again. There's no warrant. You can sit down."

Namikaze's breath left him in a rush and he slumped into the sofa like his muscles weren't listening to him anymore, dragging Naruto with him. Naruto's chest went all warm and achy, because the man looked so much like Iruka-sensei would every time Naruto would show up to school after disappearing for a few days. He shoved the feeling aside, focused on Itachi. Could only meet Itachi's eyes for seconds before bowing his head, thankful and sorry.

"No charges were filed. The restaurant agreed to an outside settlement and the ambassador chose not to give testimony. The responding officers didn't connect Namikaze Naruto to any of the aliases we have on file for you, and since you're still listed as dead in the registry the paperwork is currently impossible to complete. I believe I can keep it stalled in bureaucracy long enough to keep this off the books—depends on you, though, Naruto."

Dad—Namikaze—Dad (detach detach make it Namikaze) shook himself together and looked up, eyes and words sharp. "Depends on what?"

Itachi had his calm Master-of-the-Universe face on. "On if Naruto can stay out of police custody," he told them. "One interview with the wrong person, any sort of fingerprint analysis, even just an accurate description, and he won't be protected-victim-Namikaze-Naruto anymore. That name kept unfortunate connections from being made tonight—several witnesses described the assailant as blond, because that's what they think Namikaze Naruto looks like, even if that's not what they saw—it won't work twice. Naruto cannot afford to be arrested again."

"Again?" said Namikaze.

"It was only two times," Naruto mumbled, rubbing the pad of his thumb over the ridges of his fingertips and imagining how bad it would hurt to burn them off.

"Only two—"

"It's more than the arrest record," cut in Shisui, cheerful face grim. "He's not safe in police custody. The ID match is inevitable—he's too famous, you're all too flipping famous. It's media gold, all this dark dramatic traumatic past shit, and someone's gonna find it. But keep him where the law can't reach him 'cause there's old scores to settle and Itachi and I can't block everything."
There was a cold silence pressed so thick with Namikaze's building questions Naruto couldn't quite breathe. He could see the man thinking, weighing, prioritizing. It was almost like the Fox, all cold calculation in a perfectly settled face, and it made his throat burn dry. The question Namikaze asked next was smart and pointed and just as awful as all the other ones he'd have to ask.

"Why didn't the ambassador press charges?"

Shisui actually snickered. "Guess he wanted to go home and wash his face," he said, and gave Naruto a thumbs-up that Itachi slammed right back down.

"That doesn't make sense," said Namikaze. "I don't know the man personally, but everything I do know makes me think this will be a long, loosing battle for us to fight. He can charge Naruto with battery, assault, defamation, traumatic injury—there will be video evidence—"

"He won't," said Itachi. His voice was almost gentle.

"He's a career diplomat," argued Namikaze, face and voice flat. "If you believe a vindictive prank is enough to silence a man with his entire country's reputation to uphold and decades of skill in speaking his way into what he wants—it just, it doesn't make sense. I want it to, but—"

"But I'm a Nine-tails," said Naruto, quiet and maybe mocking. "We're big and bad and scary. I made my first kill when I was twe—well, I thought I was twelve, but I guess I was only ten, wasn't I?"

"Naruto," said Itachi.

"The cruelest men are the most afraid to die," said Naruto. "Now that I know who he is—who did that to Hinata—he'll die. He knows."

"No," said Shisui, tall frame stretched straight, bright eyes hard. "That's not you, Naruto."

"You're not the Fox," said Itachi, words quiet and so certain Naruto wasn't sure if he wanted to laugh at Sasuke's nii-san or hide behind him. "But what's done is done. It was effective. I don't believe anyone will be hearing much from Ambassador-san."

From the corners of his eyes Naruto could see his father looking sick. Maybe he knew better than to say what he'd said. But if everything with Hina-chan and Baby-chan was going to fall apart he might as well throw himself in there too. Let go now, before there was nothing worth holding on to. He'd hold onto Hinata instead, find a way to—*If you don't honor them, I will be angry at you forever. Don't run anymore.*

No, no, that wouldn't work, and her could see her so taut and fierce in the door of the bathroom trying to cover his body with hers and all he had done mess things up more even more.

"You've been officially warned, Namikaze-kun," said Shisui, mock-stern. There were other words. A brief hand on his shoulder. Namikaze showing them out.

"Naruto?"

He didn't look up. Couldn't.

"Itachi-kun told me to tell you—tell you that you didn't kill Haku."
He opened his mouth to speak, gasped in air, realized he hadn't been breathing.

There was a long silence. He could see his dad's slacks and shoes, awkwardly poised two feet in front of him."One more thing," said Namikaze. "Everyone I know who knows you—the real you, the one you think you have to hide—tells me to be proud. To be proud to have a son like you." Knees in tailored dress slacks bent, and before he could twist or turn, intent blue eyes caught his own.

"I don't know you," said Namikaze. "I'm your father, and it hurts like hell, that I don't know you. But I am. I am proud. I know there are things you don't want me to know. I know I won't like them. I know you're waiting for me to send you away. I'm won't, you can't make me, I won't. I know what life is like without you, okay? I need you. So give me a damn chance, Naruto, before you die or go to jail or run away some other way."

The please Namikaze didn't say stuck in Naruto's throat, painful and hard to make his own words. "You always say the right things," he said. "You're really good at that. That doesn't mean you're right." He pushed to his feet, moved careful steps away as Namikaze stood, too, felt his stomach curl in when he made himself memorize his father's face. "Someone like you can't be a father to someone like me," he said. "Jail or dead is what's coming for me. I can't keep pretending I can be who you need me to be."

He couldn't be still or listen or look at blue eyes anymore. Couldn't keep all his demons wrestled down inside without showing the fight on the outside. Couldn't think of any other way to say: This isn't going to work. So he ducked his head and mumbled sorries and made a promise that he'd be in his room.

Namikaze let him go. He didn't think the man was breathing.

But he would. His lungs would force in air even if he didn't want it, and they would all start being the people they needed to be.

Want had nothing to do with it.

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Sasuke didn't really say much to his mom, and what he did say was usually some form of "thank you". For food, for clean clothes, for signed permission slips, for being alive.

It was kind of like he had two moms. There was the one he thought of as Mother, who was quiet and calm and sad and spent her whole life making a picture-perfect house no one but Sasuke and Itachi ever saw. And there was Mama, from Before, who did have shadows but was mostly gentle smiles and warm words and perfectly planned parties that were somehow really important to Father's career. Then and now, Sasuke couldn't think of a single thing his mom did for herself.

(He wished she would. Wished she had friends.)

"Mom," he mumbled, "did you have a friend named Uzumaki Kushina?"

She went still. There was what looked like a tiny sleeve dangling from her crochet hook. "Three days," she said.
"What?" said Sasuke.

"Three days before you asked your question," she said, and met his eyes finally, lips soft and smiling a little. "Am I that scary to you, Sasuke?"

_The scariest thing in the world_, he didn't say. Shrugged.

"Yes," she said. "Uzumaki Kushina was my best and closest friend."

It was hard to imagine. They were so different. He and Naruto were different, but the darkness they found each other in was the same.

Did Naruto's blinding-bright mom—did she have darkness, too? But— "So—so it was—Father—"

Deep dark eyes met his. "No," she said. "Your father played his part, but it was out of his control. What he did, he did for you. For Itachi."

Anger rose so fast it knocked Sasuke dizzy, sick. Words came with it, but if he let them out they could come out like the fists clenched tight at his sides and he would not, could not hurt his mom. (Sometimes he saw just Mom—the woman she would be, straight and sharp and proud, if it weren't for her sons, and he didn't understand why those moments always came because of him, not in spite of him.)

He said nothing.

"There are no 'good guys' and 'bad guys' here, sweetheart," she said softly. "Don't try to make your father into one or the other. There are families, struggling for power and place and protection, and everyone made mistakes and everyone got hurt."

Sasuke thought about the boy he met minutes before his first round in the cage, thought of blue eyes and bloody hands clutching the bad leg Sasuke kicked worse and the way those lips tilted brave and bold and broken. "He was three," he said. Could hardly make out his own voice over the rush of blood in his ears.

"I know," said his mother.

"Why," said Sasuke. A million more _whys_ ground his throat red. _Why Naruto. Why us. Why then. Why now. Why didn't you tell his mom, if she was your friend—why didn't you tell everyone, stop everything—why didn't you tell me—why—WHY—_Mother's shoulders were caving in, that one _why_ hooked and dragging arms and chin and the corners of lips and eyes in falling parallels. Sasuke wished he hadn't said it. Wished he'd said all of it. "Mama," he whispered.

"I can't answer that," said Mother. "There are so many answers—what Konoha used to be, what Kushina's revolution shook it upside down and into, what control of Namikaze might have meant for the Uchiha. But it's never that simple. Everyone has something they feel is theirs to own, to protect, even to kill to protect. There are always more people to be hurt than you expect."

"Do you know," said Mother, "it's been more than two years, now, that I have wondered if I failed you or saved you, when I tried to save Naruto. Ever since you made that small mistake, one day, and said the name of the friend you were so careful to hide, and I thought maybe, maybe I did help Kushina's son... I know it's selfish..." her words trailed off after the raindrops chasing down the windowpane, and for a moment there was only the sound of breath and rain in the room. He got caught in her eyes again. "But if saving Naruto means losing you, Sasuke, I would sacrifice even Kushina's son to prevent it. To save you, instead."
"Mama, no," tumbled out of Sasuke, and he had folded at her feet, put his hands and head in her lap, looked up at her and thought he hadn't really seen her, that the picture he kept of her face in his mind was mostly shadow and not the fair curves of chin and cheekbone he wondered at now."If it was you—if you really saved him—without Naruto, I would be dead. I wanted to be.

He heard his own words and shuttered back into himself, fell away from warmth but was caught by gentle cold hands that threaded through his bangs and held his head and sent shivers down his spine and grew an ache in his chest. "I know," said Mother, and smiled and cried in equal silence. Sasuke's arms wanted to put themselves around her, to feel if she was really so much smaller than she had been the last time he'd let himself touch her.

He let them.

HvovH

"What's wrong with your Dad?"

"Sakura?!!" Naruto squinted at her upside-down, then flipped out of his headstand. He suddenly felt very aware of the sweat tracks staining his singlet and the way his hair must be sticking up and hoped it was just his face, not his eyes, that were red.

"He just waved me up here when that bodyguard dude asked. Like he didn't even smile at me. He's not really mad at you for punching that ambassador scumsucker, is he? He totally took your side in the video—hey—are you still grounded? I thought I'd have to cause a diversion and get Hinata to help me sneak up—"

"You know about the ambassador?" asked Naruto, gut sinking.

Sakura gave him a speaking look, then pulled something up on her phone and stuck it out for him to see.

"Ino and I have been working on it," she said. "The videos with the highest hits are the ones we edited. We set up a forum, too, where other victims can post their stories, anonymously or not. If enough girls speak up, people might be willing to press charges."

When a Pedophile Targets the One You Love read the tagline, and Naruto watched a tiny face-blurred image of himself smash the ambassador into the wall, break his nose, and faceplant him into the carpet. Suzuki Kosui, esteemed Ambassador of Kumogakure, flashed across the screen, along with a closeup of the man looming over Naruto, fists swinging wide and face twisted grotesquely. Confirmed Rapist, neon letters announced next, followed by the fat glistening face with Naruto's handwriting sprawling CHILD-RAPER across blanched cheeks.

He watched, sick and unsure, as a creepy silhouette of a menacing shadow reaching for a girl flashed across the scene. Words scrolled: He thought no one would know. He'd done it before. He had reputation power. There were no witnesses. No one believed her. The image changed to boy comforting the girl. Except one person: the one she loved more than her own life.

When adults don't listen, we solve things our way. Naruto watched him drag the ambassador, hit him again and again and again. Final words scrolled: ARE YOU READY TO LISTEN? Click here to read accounts of other victims and add your own.
Naruto had a hard time finding words. It seemed ridiculous, separate from the crunching give of cartilage he could still feel in his knuckles, and he couldn't help but think that people would see it and laugh, would laugh, call it fake, write horrible things about Hinata.

"Hina-hime. Be okay, Hina-hime...

"I know it feels kind of... too much," said Sakura, "but Ino told me to trust her, and she was right. We posted four very different videos. This one has three times the views any of the others have. Most importantly, it's eclipsed the original clips we edited to make these. And you can see you and Hinata in those, and your mom and dad and everything. Like that will come out eventually, but we just need to bias people towards you before your name gets pinned to this."

Everything inside was buzzing around and he'd been so up and down today and he didn't even know what he was feeling and this— "Who—how—"

"Well, me and Ino, obviously," said Sakura. "And she roped Shika into helping with tags to make top five search engine hits, and someone must have told Kiba cause he showed up all frothing at the mouth and Ino genius-ly directed his righteous hate into scavenging internet archives for anything about the ambassador that'd been buried, and he totally found a sexual harassment case that was filed in Kumo like nine years ago and got denied a hearing on technicalities so I emailed the defendant and we've already got two anon posts in the forum—"

"Two—like posts from other people he—he—"

"Yep," said Sakura, brows grim and lips twisted, disgusted, but eyes triumphant. "Statistically, there would be other victims. Predators who target high-profile people are confident enough to have gotten away with it before. I was right."

"Will it be enough," mumbled Naruto. "Like will he go to jail—"

"If there is any fair process in any court between here and Kumo, he will," she said. "they might be able to drag it out, but Hinata is underage so all it would take is a prenatal paternity test to prove statutory rape, at the very least. And if the public has already condemned him—"

"He should still die," whispered Naruto. "He still deserves to fucking die."

Sakura punched him. "But you don't deserve to be a murderer," she said, words hard and eyes soft, and then spat, looking positively evil: "this will be worse then death. We can't let him off that easy."

He was still cradling the shoulder she'd socked him when her arms went around him. "Hell, Naruto," she said, and her voice caught. "Don't you ever do this to me again. When Ino first called me about those clips—you're so freaking lucky she was like one of the first twenty people on gossipnet to see them—I was so sure you'd be arrested. I tried to call Sasuke but he didn't answer—and of course you didn't even have you stupid phone turned on so—"

"Forgot to charge it," murmured Naruto, and gave up his hesitation to expose more of his dripping post-workout body to her to wrap her in close. Damn, he'd missed this. Missed being one of Sakura's boys. How had he lived so many days without holding her?

"So you're lending me a clean shirt, and your shower," she informed him flatly, not letting go. "You stink. Now I stink. But not near as bad as you locked up stinks. So."

"Am I interrupting something?" came a low, pissed hiss from the door. "Shall I close the door and come in two seconds later, to have an even better reason to punch in your unbearably stupid face?
Because I have enough reasons to swell your stupid blue eyes shut for a year."

"Bastard," greeted Naruto, suddenly in very real danger of crying, and held out an arm. Sasuke gave him a look designed to melt the skin from his bones, shoved between him and Sakura, and socked him in the gut.

It didn't even wind him, though, so he counted it for what it meant and love-punched the bastard right back. Sasuke didn't bother to block.

"If you had made my brother put you in jail," grunted Sasuke, but Sakura shoved them apart with a hand on each chest.

"Do your angsty lovespat later," she snapped. "Naru-no-baka here seemed to think he got to do this all on his own. Good thing no one listens to him. So, Namikaze-Miracle-Boy, now that you've made your grand debut, let's see if we can finish up this crazy crash-course into surface civilization we've been forcing down your stubborn throat for the past two years. And then let's figure out how you can start making it up to Hinata for shoving her in the freaking spotlight in a really horribly traumatic way, yeah?"

They were looking at him. Sasuke really was angry, but there was something else; something that made his shoulders spread broader, easier, but tightened his mouth when he met Naruto's gaze, something he needed to say. And Sakura, sweet and smart and sharp and shielding, three steps ahead and willing, always, to reach back and give him a hand.

*Don't forget,* Iruka-sensei liked to say, *you're not actually alone. It's okay to feel that way, everyone does but—it's not true. Naruto is not alone. So you can do anything. And be anything. Teachers say that a lot but it's true if you let it be.*

Namikaze looked like Iruka-sensei, when he looked him.

*Maybe I can try again,* he thought, and couldn't swallow again, like when his dad looked at him with his eyes full of please. *Maybe it's not okay to give up yet.*

"Focus, dobe," said Sasuke.


He looked at Sakura, looked at Sasuke, felt their breath and their warmth and their solid presence in his mostly-empty new bedroom. Felt his lips shifting, lifting, spreading wide.

He was still on Team Seven. Team Seven had a motto. It went something like this: Go on, try to fuck with us.

Double-dare.
Who is Namikaze Naruto?

It was the face that made my mother cry. There’s something awful about looking at chubby baby cheeks dimpled in smiles next to blaring headlines promising the gruesome infanticide. Knowing that somewhere, some human was depraved enough to do unspeakable things to a child too small and too young to defend itself. Makes you a bit scared to be human, doesn’t it?

They said Namikaze Minato was crazy, that grief broke his brain along with his heart, but I was glad he never stopped looking. They called him the brightest mind of three generations. He must have realized something no one else did, some clue even the experts missed, some sign that his son lived. He was going to swoop in, beat all the baddies, bring back his baby, and that wobbly new future he and his revolutionary wife set Hi no Kuni on would flourish just like they promised it would. I believed.

The years piled up. As I was graduating from high school and packing for my first year of uni, I came across that face again, plastered to a notebook from a first journalism class. I looked into big bright eyes and thought: poor baby. Poor dead baby.

I packed my hope in heroes away with the rest of my childhood.

Fast forward five years. I’m the rookie journalist with a new job and ridiculous dreams, and just like the dark days those dreams grew in, there’s one name in every headline: Namikaze Naruto.

Namikaze Minato has found his son. Or at the very least, a pale, broad-shouldered, awkward-limbed teenager who looks a hell of a lot like the man who claims him. Is it time to believe in heroes?

Or is this a lesson in broken hearts and broken boys, all over again? Uzumaki Kushina and Namikaze Minato built a revolution on wrenching away the walls of privilege and power shielding criminal secrets of the upper class. What will they do with the secrets their son brings home? No kid who fights like the kid in that video fights comes without secrets. They introduced him to the world with smooth cheeks and clear eyes, but by this time we’ve all seen the scars.

There are a thousand and one theories about the years Naruto lived missing. Actual facts are few: his girlfriend is disowned and pregnant. His school record is riddled with unexcused absences. He plays WoF hockey. His teammates refuse to speak of him. So adamant is their silence, once might think they keep it for fear of their lives.

And, just in case you may still be under the illusion so carefully constructed for Namikaze Naruto’s return to life on national television, he never lived in Suna.

His face says he survives a monster. How? No one’s talking. No one.

Maybe he didn’t. That angel baby my mother cried for? He didn’t survive a monster.

He became one.
"SNOW!"

Minato jerked out of a half-sleep, brain barely piecing thoughts from fractured dreams and bleary reality. Kushina was drooling on his chest. His bedroom window was barely brighter than the night shadows crowding the rest of the room, and his clock confirmed that really, no one should be shouting right now. They should be decent humans and wait until 6:00. At least until 6:00.

Naruto was, however, still bellowing.

"SASUKE'S WEIRD COUSIN! DID YOU SEE? IT'S SNOW! SNOW!"

Minato felt a groan grow into a chuckle. At least Obito would suffer too.

He found the Uchiha in the kitchen, growling into a mug of very strong coffee, eyes fixed on the window and the entirely inappropriately clothed clown throwing, yes, snow. Outside in suddenly winter.

Winter that hit him head-on when he pushed open the door, stealing his breath and waking him up faster than any coffee could. "Naruto!" he cried, something in his chest seizing gladly at the face split wide in gleeful grins. "Where's your coat? Put on a coat! Are you—are you barefoot? Get inside now—"

He got a face full of ice powder instead.

"HA! It's sticking, it's sticking!" crowed Naruto. "And I don't have to drive in it! OH, THIS IS BEAUTIFUL."

You're beautiful, thought Minato, blinking through slush at red cheeks, darting eyes, mischievous mouth. Went to fetch a towel, Naruto's coat, two pairs of boots.

Sasuke came to Big Breakfast. Just breathing in Kushina's kitchen made his mouth water, but once everything was served and everyone was sitting and he was shielding his plate from Naruto's exuberant elbows, it was hard to swallow.

It was later than usual. When he arrived the halls were empty and the courtyard was mauled. Only Raidou-san was there to answer the door, and Sasuke figured it was only the cast on the man's leg that saved him from the devastation of the epic battle that had somehow gone down in less than an inch of snow.

Naruto made that kind of thing happen sometimes.

He'd watched Hinata carefully, when no one would notice him watching, because Sakura had explained some side-consequences of Naruto's beatdown of the Suna ambassador and he'd actually listened. Not like he knew what to do if the Hyuuga wasn't okay, other than be aware, and maybe tell her Naruto's brain could never quite keep up with his idiot heart.

Now everyone was thawed and showered and Kushina-san was filling up any remaining cold
corners with piping hot food. Hinata was eating. Even smiling a little, watching Namikaze cluck over Naruto for running around barefoot. Sasuke snorted. When Naruto was this hyper, he generated enough energy to melt anything he contact with. As if winter even had a chance.

"He's an Uzumaki," boasted Kushina. "We can run around naked in blizzards and come out perky and refreshed. Have more French toast, Naruto. The syrup is delicious."

Hinata and Namikaze both blushed.

"Can we talk somewhere," Sasuke said, when Naruto leaned back and groaned about eating too much and looked like he might crawl under the nearest piece of convenient furniture to nap.

Sharp blue eyes met his, all the soft bits of Naruto's face suddenly angled. "Mmmkay," he said, stretched and yawned and curved like a cat, and led the way to the storage room tucked into the wall of the basketball court. Sasuke noted that all the walls had been padded. Because apparently three punching bags wasn't enough.

Naruto shut the door behind them. Those eyes again.

Sasuke opened his mouth, stood still as cold dread leaked down, gut to toes, couldn't make any of the words he'd stayed up all night practicing come out, felt the weight on his chest sink him to his knees.

Naruto was on him in a second, swearing and trying to tug him back up, asking over and over what was wrong. Sasuke shoved him off.

"Just—back off, dobe, shove off for a moment, and freaking listen," he said. His throat was still tight. He really hadn't been able to swallow much breakfast. "I asked my mom."

Naruto fell back a bit, hands dropping from Sasuke to hang empty at his sides. He stood still for a second, head tilted, and Sasuke wondered if he had any idea how much he looked like Namikaze in that moment, blue eyes narrowed and small mouth a tight line. "So?" said Naruto. Dropped into a crouch at Sasuke's level, flat on his feet and elbows on his knees.

Sasuke could feel the words heavy on the back of his tongue, his fingers scraping into fists on the cement floor. Short sentences echoed round and round his head for thick seconds before he could push them out.

"It's because of us," he said. Maybe said. He couldn't feel his mouth. "You. We. The Uchiha did this to you. My—my father. Maybe his father. I don't know who else."

Naruto's face hadn't changed. Had he said the words out loud? His mouth had shaped them—"I didn't know," he said. "I swear, Naruto, I didn't know—"

"Sasuke," said Naruto, voice strange and old, "yeah, you didn't know. It has nothing to do with you."

Sasuke closed his eyes, saw a small hand grabbing an outstretched lolly, remembered that the candy was orange and that huge smile was just like the one he'd seen in a kitchen crowded with family just minutes ago. Snapped his eyes open.

"No," he said angrily. "It is about me. I didn't remember. I should have remembered."

Naruto huffed out breath, shifted from his squat to sit flat on the icy floor. "Rule One: don't get
screwed over by adults," he said. "In this case, don't try to take responsibility for the screw-ups of big people when you were freaking three. It's stupid, Sasuke."

"Screw up?" echoed Sasuke. "You mean your fucking abduction. They put a remote-control bomb on your fucking heart. Don't act all saintly and forgiving, idiot. We shouldn't be forgiven by you."

Naruto's lips lifted, lopsided. "Damn, Sasuke," he said. "I know you're into being a genius and all, but giving yourself credit for major heart surgery as a freaking toddler is some kind of record."

"Why?" hissed Sasuke, not sure if he was more angry or sorry or desperate. "Stop being—why are you making this into a joke? I got on my freaking knees for you—"

"Yeah," said Naruto. "Don't do that. I've lived three years just—just keeping up with you. Don't go falling now, you bastard."

"I just told you my family—"

"I KNOW," yelled Naruto, and his shoulders jerked, like he was hurt by his own voice. "I—I know, okay? The Fox told me. Like two weeks after I met you. I've known for a long time, Sasuke."

Sasuke couldn't think. His eyes burned but kept staring.

"Told me to see if I'd off you," Naruto said, words dropping from his mouth like a suggestion to play video games or practice slap shots against the garage door. "All this shit about justice. I said no. We fought about it a lot."

He could see Naruto on the days he barely made it to school, remembered dragging the then-scrawny kid into the bathroom, forcing his shirt up, how rage burned his gut hollow at the map of abuse he saw there because he knew the fight schedules now, and Naruto couldn't convince him he got those marks in the ring. Remembered almost breaking his months-long silence with Itachi, because he'd been pushed into promising not to tell the teachers but hadn't said anything about his brother.

Remembered Naruto running away to live with Gaara for a while. Wasn't sure when he came back, but when he showed up at school again he had a homemade splint on one arm and a whispered boast that he'd learnt to make homemade guns, too. Only three or four shots before the shaft warps, but I can make that be enough.

Then there was Sasuke's fight with Haku, and Itachi not letting him out of sight ever, and he didn't see Naruto again until he showed up with Iruka-sensei at the WoF registration office.

And now he stared at the storage room floor and wondered how many of those marks had been Naruto fighting for him.

"Listen, Sasuke," Naruto was saying, voice still unbearable casual, "forget this blame shit. I make room for a lot of angst in this best-friend-ship because I am awesome that way, but this—no. No no no. Let it go, you emo bastard. We can just punch each other instead."

"I invited my dad to the hockey finals," Sasuke whispered. Still couldn't quite form sentences out of unraveling thoughts or figure out what he was feeling right now, other than that he was glad he hadn't eaten breakfast because he would probably be vomiting.

Naruto shrugged. "Let him come. I don't give a shit about him."
Sasuke finally met his eyes. "You're a fucking mess, Naruto."

A small, twisted grin. "Yes. I win everything."

Sasuke shoved the guilt down, deep deep down, held the hand Naruto offered. Fists gripped wrists, and they hauled each other up.

"Did you know," said Sasuke, as Naruto pulled the door open and flattened into a silhouette against the light flooding in, "that my mom—it was my mom—she tried to save you? That's how—the Fox."

Naruto's head dropped. He was very still, shoulders caved in. Sasuke couldn't hear him breathing. Then he laughed. "Moms," he said. "Like a freaking army of badass."

"Badassery," said Sasuke.

"That too," said Naruto. He turned back into the storeroom, grabbed something off the rack by the door. Sasuke caught it by reflex, looked down, raised an eyebrow from the basketball to Naruto.

"I've been practicing," said Naruto. "Let's go mop the court with your face."

Sasuke's guts were all twisted and his chest was too tight but the ball felt rough and real under his fingers and his mouth tilted into a smirk on its own.

"Try," he said, and pressed all the broken bits of himself back together and into the game.


Sakura balanced somewhere between awed and awkward and kept glancing away from the ultrasound technician's hands and the transparent gel they were squirting thick over Hinata's bare belly. She still wasn't sure why she'd been invited here; didn't know if it was okay to look at Hinata when her jeans were undone and her shirt pushed up to her breasts. Hinata had her hands over her eyes. Her fingers were trembling.

Sakura hadn't known what to think, how to answer, unsure she'd heard the words right when Hinata's question came quiet and calm over the phone. *I was supposed to have an exam and an ultrasound today. I decided not to cancel or reschedule. Things aren't g-going to q..quiet down. Will you come with me?*

She didn't know what to say, so she said yes.

She thought Naruto's mother would come, or even Naruto; even if he hadn't caused this baby, he'd done everything in his power to take responsibility for it. Shouldn't he be one of the first to meet it? Or sort-of meet it, whatever you called seeing a wriggly mass on a grainy black-and-white screen.

But it was just Hinata, waiting at the bus stop she'd texted Sakura directions to, so fully covered by her hat and scarf that Sakura wouldn't have recognized her if she hadn't known to look. All Sakura could see of Hinata were her eyes, and her eyes were different.

"I r...read everything you and Ino-chan and...and... the-the others put on the blog," Hinata said, instead of a greeting, and while the words came low, they weren't whispered.
"I hope it was okay," Sakura said, too quickly, "I mean I—I've never done something like that before, but I read a lot about advocacy, and we tried—"

A mittened hand touched her arm. Pale eyes were a little too wide, but under her scarf, Hinata was smiling. "Thank you," Hinata said.

Sakura smiled back, took in everything she could of those eyes, and let the conversation go at that.

It took two buses once to reach the block housing the clinic Hinata had in mind. "Neji-nii-san paid them off," she explained. "Or maybe th-threaten-ed them. I think that's...why... he and Naru-kun get along."

Sakura snorted, and then wondered if she'd ever heard Hinata attempt humor before. "Hina-chan," she said slowly, picking her way around slushy puddles of half-melted snow, "why am I here?"

Hinata looked down at her rounded belly, looked up at Sakura, and laughed.

Sakura stared at Hinata, a little dazzled by that unexpected laugh, then flushed red. "I—I don't mean why I was born," she protested. "I mean, why me? Why aren't you with Naru, or Kurenai-sensei, or Naruto's parents, or—no, no, I didn't mean—I'm glad to be here, I really am! I'm just sort of... astonished."

Hinata watched the sidewalk for long seconds, choosing her steps carefully. When she looked up there was that difference in her eyes again—a little wild, a lot free. Like the words that came next, slow but smooth. "Because you listened," said Hinata.

Sakura remembered bleachers and dark ice, shock exploding to rage. Was that listening?

"And-d I need-d... a... a break," added Hinata, looking flushed and guilty, and they were paused in front of the building that housed the clinic, now. "Naruto and... his family... they love too—too loud."

Sakura opened her mouth, got caught in the perfection of that explanation, closed it.

Hinata head fell; Sakura stared down at the pom-pom on the other girl's cute winter hat. "Also," said Hinata, "I'm... not b-brave."

"You are," breathed Sakura. "Oh, Hina-chan, you are."

Pale eyes peeked up. "No," she whispered. "No, I'm not. I love my b-baby b-b-b-" she stopped, shoulders heaved, tried again. "But I... I d-don't want-t t-to s-see... him."

Understanding hit Sakura's gut and took half her breath with it. What could she say, what could she say?

"I'm... scared... that somehow the child will b-be like—like—like—and what if, what if I h-h-hate it—"

"Hina-chan..." whispered Sakura. A trio of businessmen brushed by, barely sparing an irritated glance for the two teenaged girls blocking half the sidewalk.

Then she knew. "What about Naruto?" blurted Sakura. Hinata's face tightened a bit, maybe hurt, but Sakura plowed on. "You know what most people see when they look at his face—something they hate, something they fear," rushed Sakura. "But you never saw that. And you know how he gets scared of himself sometimes? You probably know why better than I do, but something inside
Naruto really is scary, and it comes from things he didn't choose and can barely control but he has to live with it anyway. You know what helped him live with it better than anything I saw in the three years I've known him? You. You, Hinata."

"The only thing I think is stronger than fear is, well, love," said Sakura. "and if there's one thing I'm absolutely sure Hyuuga Hinata can do, it's love. Maybe how you love your baby will change. Maybe you'll love him or her by choosing the best parents you can find. Maybe that's the best thing for the two of you. Or maybe you'll be that parent. But you already chose love over fear, so many times, Hinata, so many freaking times, and if there's any baby in the world more loved than yours, it's the one Naruto and his crazy family loves, loudly. Oh hey, that's yours too."

Hinata laughed, kind of a choked and wet laugh, but definitely a laugh. She tried to say something, didn't quite get it out, shrugged helplessly, but lifted her chin, reached for Sakura's hand, and led the way through the door.

Now they were in small a dark room with a woman wearing a medical mask and scrubs pressing a transducer into the soft roundness of Hinata's belly, and something white and indistinct was moving on the screen.

"Here we are," said the technician. "The feet and the legs—right there—do you want to know the gender? I'll wait for you to uncover your eyes. Oh there's an arm coming around—head's up here—there's the brain—another turn from this wiggly one and we should see the other hand. We'll zoom in on the heart first and check each of the four chambers, then get to measurements."

Sakura tore her eyes from the screen, which looked mostly like a bunch of white blobs of differing sizes moving too fast in a curved black space, and looked worriedly at Hinata, who was breathing too fast.

"It's not just... what I s-said b-before," Hinata had confided, watching floors tick away in the elevator. "I... haven't been to a doc...doctor yet."

They didn't have time for Sakura to hear more, but Sakura was already guessing what could keep Hinata from keeping the regular doctor's appointments that were supposed to come with being pregnant, and she would bet all her savings that apathy and irresponsibility were not part of the possible reasons. The rest left her cold.

"All I can see is a bunch of blobs," said Sakura loudly, "but they're undeniably cute blobs. Er, blob?"

Hinata shuddered in a breath, peeked through her fingers. Sakura caught the look the ultrasound technician sent her, full of all the condemnation the woman was professional enough to keep from her voice; stepped deliberately between her and Hinata's face.

"This is the heart," said the technician, in her perfectly professional voice.

"Oh," said Hinata. Oh, thought Sakura, and watched a tiny heart pumping strong and fast in black-and-white on an out-of-date screen, and felt the place in the center of her chest that all of her least manageable emotions grew in explode awe huge and strange right through her middle. "It's so fast," whispered Hinata. Her hands were gone from her face now, gripping the sides of the padded table, and her mouth was open in wild wonder.

"It's perfect," said the technician, mouth a little softer. "That is exactly what a perfect fetal heart looks like. All four chambers are functioning beautifully."
Sakura's cheeks were wet. The movements of the ultrasound wand slowed, now, and there were pauses to capture screenshots as tiny kidneys, stomach, and bladder were checked, measured, and declared perfect. She was able to follow the descriptions of the pictures a little better, now; they followed the spine back up to the brain, there were pauses to measure the skull, and there—most definitely—was a little mouth, opening and closing, and above it the most tiny, perfect, beautiful nose she had ever seen.

"Baby-chan," sang Hinata, eyes huge as they took in the screen, cheeks flushed and face full of so much hope Sakura looked away, aching. They witnessed tiny hands, saw fingers open and close, and then there was another pause.

"Are you ready for the gender?"

Hinata shifted to look past Sakura to meet the woman's eyes. "Yes, please," she said, firm and easy.

"Congratulations," said the woman in scrubs, and whatever she had heard in Hinata's voice had changed something in her own. "You have a kicking, wriggling, perfectly growing, twenty-seven weeks-old—"

Hinata's hand reached for Sakura's; their fingers fumbled and fit, clasped and held.

"-girl."

Hinata's phone rang. And rang and rang.

"Hina-chan?" it was Naruto's voice, always loud, and Sakura could hear clearly, saw the phone trembling with the rest of Hinata as tears ran into her smile. "I'm sorry—I—my dad—and your dad —your father heard that you're staying with us, and he talked to my dad, and he's—he's coming here. Do you want to wait somewhere until he leaves, or do you want to see him? Do you want me to come? Where are you? Can I come—"

Sakura's guts jumped into a heart still bursting with the strange joy of believing new life and it all tangled up in her throat. She looked at Hinata, half forming frantic and half still rejoicing because —because that perfect little girl—and Hinata, quite suddenly, was very, very still.

The technician pulled back her hand, and the image on the raised screen disappeared with it. The woman turned to the computer, turned so her back was mostly to them, and began typing labels onto screenshots. Sakura turned back to Hinata, saw her free hand hover over her stomach, her shoulders pull straight, her chin come up.

"It's okay, Naru-kun," Hinata said, words spilling free, and that smile was back, even though the screen was empty now. "It's okay. I'm coming home. I have the best news, and I'm coming home."

The technician handed her a wad of paper towels to wipe the gel from her belly. A packet of printed pictures came soon after. Hinata pulled them out in the elevator, and Sakura leaned close to marvel over them with her.

"Sakura-chan," whispered Hinata, cheeks still dimpled from smiling, "she's real. We saw her. Her. And she's p-p-p—"

"Perfect," said Sakura.

"Yes," said Hinata, face full and free, "perfect."

At the bus station where they'd met that morning, Sakura hugged Hinata goodbye. It was awkward,
but it was warm. Then she watched her walk away, and put her hands on her own belly, and for the first time, wondered about babies, about the futures her own body might hold. There was a memory stuck to the back of her eyelids, four chambers of a tiny heart: pushing-pushin-out-in, strong, fast, sure; she wrapped herself in that miracle, smiled all the way home.

VxOxV

Hyuuga Hiashi caught a glimpse of his hands on the steering wheel and made the fingers loosen until color came back to the knuckles. A glance to the side showed no reaction from Neji; his nephew's face was still turned slightly aside, every muscle perfectly smooth and controlled. Hinata's face never learned blankness.

He had been so sure she would return home, the day of the ultimatum, the day she forced his hand and then fought and ran. She surprised him, but he still expected to wait mere hours. Hinata was a docile child, overly obedient, and intelligent enough to know the impossibilities of surviving on her own. He waited, and calmed, and amended his earlier attitude; promised himself to take a gentler approach, to give her time for reason. She would see reason. He would fix this.

She never came home.

She appeared four days later, to sit her academic WoF exams. She did not seek him out. She filed her resignation from the figure skating program. Her mentor, Yuuhi Kurenai, had come to his home to beg his signature on an application that would allow her to continue the WoF academic program until she graduated. He gave it, along with hard words he didn't mean, but when he tried to pay her tuition fees, every penny was refunded.

Neji had asked him, bowed before the grand desk in his home office, to leave Hinata alone. "She's happy," he whispered. That Hinata had never been happy—not since she was a tiny child curled in her mother's arms—did not need to be said.

Hizashi had always succeeded where he had failed. In despair and his brother's absence, Hiashi listened to Neji. Chances were high, he knew, that when she needed help, Hinata would turn to her older cousin. He did not want to give Neji a reason to keep him out of the loop. He was aware of the furnished apartment Neji had rented, located in an orderly neighborhood close to the WoF campus and Yuuhi Kurenai's home. Was glad when Hinata moved into it, and dismayed when she moved out after a matter of weeks.

Better that she be less lonely, Neji explained. (An unwed mother at fifteen? His daughter would always be lonely. She brought it on herself. He would have saved her. She would not let him.)

A pleasant sentence from his GPS system informed him they were fast approaching their destination. Walled mansions blurred by the windows, and the gate they parked near was the most forbidding of all.

Hiashi approved.

"Please allow me to enter first, Uncle," Neji said, carefully avoiding his gaze as he stepped from the car. "I don't know if Naruto is anticipating your arrival, but he can be very... protective."

Hiashi raised an eyebrow. "Am I to expect an attack such as the one our lawyers are working so
diligently to remove evidence of from public access?" Diligently, indeed, as those hired would find it very difficult to find work in Konoha if his daughter's face continued to appear in online videos.

"No," said Neji sharply, and Hiashi thought drolly that perhaps Neji's previous warning should be turned a little more inward. "You may, however, have found yourself emerging from this gate with far less dignity than you had going in."

Hiashi was wise, and chose not to ask. He would willingly die before showing it, but he was deeply out of depth, and equally grateful for his nephew's unyielding companionship.

A uniformed security guard opened the gate. "Hyuuga-sama," he greeted respectfully, nodding to Hiashi and Neji with equal courtesy. Unexpected trepidation rose as he followed Neji down the walkway, over the threshold. Few men had earned the regard Hiashi held for Namikaze Minato, reluctant though it was. He could determine no clear response to the knowledge that Minato was harboring his wayward daughter. His thoughts lost themselves too quickly in alien fears and vulnerabilities, and pride demanded that these things not be felt, and so the thoughts were left incomplete.

He did know that he needed to see his child. And, in that part of his mind that may actually have been his heart, feared her.

She was not in the entrance hall. Minato was, along with his mini-me, and the latter looked him over with eyes far too hard and cold for a child of fifteen.

He wondered what Hinata's eyes would be like.


The younger Namikaze contradicted his father's words by staying stock still in the center of the hallway. Hiashi raised a brow at the child's impudence, Neji looked resigned, and Minato turned to his son with a sigh. Whatever communication passed between the two remained nonverbal, but it seemed that Minato had some modicum of control over the boy because his head dropped and he stepped aside, relentless stare following Hiashi from beneath dark bangs as Minato ushered him past. He didn't follow them into the sitting room, but lingered in the doorway, openly scowling.

Minato politely offered a chair. "This will be a difficult conversation no matter how it begins," he said. "Please speak freely, Hiashi-san."

"I have come to apologize for the intrusion of my family's personal matters into yours," began Hiashi, smooth voice stiff even in his own ears. "For every inconvenience, I sincerely apologize. I will, of course, recompense any expense my daughter has incurred."

"Expense really isn't an issue here," said Minato. "Do you intend to take her home?"

The figure in the doorway went rigid.

"Because," continued Minato, and while his voice was pleasant and his face difficult to read, Hiashi thought he saw both empathy and condemnation there, "as long as she wishes, this will be Hinata's home."

His entire body went stiff."I acknowledge and express my gratitude for your generosity in seeking to help an errant child," he began, "but do not overstep your bounds, Minato-san. Hinata is my daughter, my responsibility—"
"Really?" interrupted the boy in the doorway, voice and posture impudently fearless. This child was as brazen as the scars cut across his face. "Cause Hina-chan was under the impression that she could do what you told her to do or stop being your daughter. Guess her choice is pretty clear, huh?"

Hiashi turned a slow stare from the teenager to his father. "Perhaps we should move this conversations to a more... appropriate location, Minato-san," he suggested carefully. While his trust in Minato remained mostly-intact, he knew enough about Namikaze Naruto to be very, very wary.

Namikaze Naruto stepped fully into the room. "Somewhere I'm not, yeah?" the kid laughed, dark and low. "Let me tell you why I'm here, old man. Why we're all here. Hinata. Just Hinata. I was there when she couldn't stand on her own. Now Hinata, she's fucking strong, and she made a choice knowing she'd end up crawling, and she would have survived without me. But I'm a lucky little bastard and I was there.

"Where were you, Hyuuga-sama?"

Flame-blue eyes in a mockingly tilted face; his clan name ringing profoundly, absurdly foul in his own ears.

The boy was coming nearer; it took a small, conscious effort not to rise to his feet or sink back into his chair.

"You know who's not here? Hinata. I mean, she'll totally join us, if she wants to. She doesn't."

To remain still was no longer an option; Hiashi rose, towered over this fearless child, sent the look down the elegant curve of his nose that made Hyuuga Corp. interns cry. "I will excuse your parents of your rudeness, Namikaze-kun," he stated very clearly, "and will attempt to extend my sympathy for your family's tragic separation to you, as well. Your informal manner of speech, however, I cannot excuse."

The boy just grinned, hard and mean. "You would be the master of 'tragic separation'—"

"Be careful, Naruto," said Neji. Hiashi had the strange understanding that it was not his own sensitivities Neji spoke to support. Was no one on his side?

"Did you ever stop, and wonder," said the boy, "why Hinata ran away from that—from getting an abortion?"

Of course Hiashi knew. With Hinata, he always knew. Everything his daughter had ever done was motivated by fear. His method had been too harsh, had triggered her fight-or-flight response, and Hinata had a lifetime's practice in flight. He had not allowed her time to understand what should be feared, from what she should run.

These were things he could not say in front of this half-tamed creature. They were empty words, after all; it was too late.

He said: "Am I to hear your assumptions, or shall we be spared?"

"Oh no," said the boy. "This definitely isn't something to make assumptions about. You have to hear it from Hinata-chan. If she ever talks to you again."

It was difficult not to make room for the self-loathing anger that boiled up hot from bits of himself he expected to be perfectly controlled; he worked to keep his face calm, his breath even. The entire
exchange had taken less than two minutes, and he was unsettled in ways he could not account for, and he still had not seen Hinata.

He had doubted the rumors about where this boy had been, when he was "dead".

He did not doubt them now.

"Minato-san," he said clearly, holding mocking eyes for one last breath, turning sharply. "My daughter cannot remain here. Bring her here, or I will search your home myself."

Minato met his gaze evenly. "Hinata-chan," he said, addressing no one, "it's all up to you. Just like we talked about."

Hiashi's shoulders tensed painfully. "She—Hinata can hear us?"

"What, you think we'd talk about her behind her back? Like how you—cover your ears if you want, Hina-hime—arranged a forced abortion behind her back?"

Enough. "Minato," Hiashi warned, tight and low, "control your son."

The man just... leaned back a bit, into his chair. "Not my strong point," he said, "but I'd be more inclined to try if I didn't agree with him."

"If you think I will allow her to remain in a household with this uncouth teenage boy—whom you admit to being unable to control—"

At last, Namikaze stood. "Do not," he said quietly, "accuse Naruto of being dangerous. Not to her. You know of the risks he took to defend her. You have seen the videos. If you hadn't, you wouldn't be here. You may or may not have the chance to work things out with your own child; do not attack mine."

"I likewise demand that you desist interfering in my own family," snapped Hiashi, embarrassed and no longer bothering to pretend not to be angry. "The irony of you, Minato, hiding a child from its father—"

"That's NOT what's happening—" barked the younger Namikaze, at the same time and with exactly the same flashing eyes as the elder, who said calmly: "No one is hiding anyone. Hinata is entirely free. Whether and when she comes or goes or appears or not is up to her, only her. I defend her right to choose; nothing more."

"Yeah," said the boy, tone cut between snark and belligerence but relief opening his face, making it younger, more vulnerable. "But that's just him. The one you should really worry about is my mom, 'cause Hina-chan's with her right now. Dad made her promise to stay out of this and she agreed, but only because Hinata needed her next to her more. But I can totally switch places, Mom, Hina-hime—"

The threat would have come across as childish, had Hyuuga Hiashi not been far too well acquainted with Uzumaki Kushina. But the image of Hinata nestled behind a mother-figure, however terrifying that mother may be, shook free enough anger to let his original purpose refocus his energy.

A deliberate turn from the Namikaze men, a slight nod of embarrassed encouragement from Neji, and Hiashi abandoned what tattered shreds of pride remained and spoke to whatever invisible recorder was set up in the room.
"Hinata," he said, syllables falling heavy, "I wish to speak with you."

He paused, caught between his own definition of self and everything faulted and human that could not be contained by those smooth walls, not without a price he had discovered himself to be unwilling to pay.

Hinata, his tender Hinata, was too precious a price.

The muscles of his neck and throat and around his lips were as unyielding as cold stone; it took some effort to force one more word through.

"Please," he said.

Tense, painful silence, then: "So, Naruto," said Namikaze, words quiet and careful and unwilling to disrupt, "let's go."

He didn't watch the father and son leave. Neji nearly followed them; Hiashi caught him by the shoulder and asked, without speaking, that he stay. It was suddenly unbearable to be alone.

He didn't think she would come. What Hinata feared, she fled; until far-too-recent hours, he had believed himself to be what she feared most. Had he protected her as a father should have, that truth would never have changed.

She came.

He had tried to prepare himself for the sight of his fallen, pregnant daughter; braced himself for a body distorted and swollen, eyes blank with fear and pain and exhaustion; cowed spine bowed over parasitic weight. Until she came through the doorway, and all he could see was her mother.

Beautiful.

Hiashi looked at Hinata (Hinata?), his little girl, and saw a woman. A woman with head high, proud chin, steady eyes, strong shoulders, firm steps. His heart and breath caught, then came too fast; if only she smiled, he would be sure, devastatingly so, that she was her mother.

Her name left his lips; more unsure than any syllable she had heard from him, he knew. She looked at him and her lips trembled a little but—but with the beginning of a smile.

"Hello, Father," she said. Glanced down. Looked up, really smiling. "I—I missed you."

He wanted to fall to his knees. Wished, now, that he'd let Neji go, so he could so do. "You look—are you—are you well?"

He had stalled more, in a single sentence, than his stuttering daughter. He dared not look at his nephew.

"Yes," said Hinata. "I—it's a girl."

Hiashi looked at her, and looked and looked, and waited for his heart to catch up with all the incalculable things his brain was telling him. There was the swell of her middle and somewhere, something in his brain was exploding into small fireworks around the alien thought of granddaughter, but it was the way she stood, the balance of feet and shoulders and set of her jaw and—and the joy curled into her lips.

"I s-saw her, to-today," said Hinata, and if the stutter was familiar, the warm determination
breathed through each word was not. "The doc-doctor said she...she's perfect."

He was aware, peripherally, of Neji coming to stand beside him, pausing, stepping past him; Neji’s mouth turning up seemingly of its own accord, Neji’s hands taking his daughter's small ones, Neji’s voice offering low, heart-spoke wishes.

"You're not coming home," said Hiashi, his own voice exceptionally distant.

Hinata's smile faltered, fell; he was looking at the top her head again, far more familiar to him than her face.

Her words, though, came free. "No," she said. "No, Father, I am not leaving with you. But if I c-could... if I could, I wish—I wish—to see Hanabi." She raised her head, with her sister's name, and her pleading eyes brushed aside every sensible thought in his brain. She still looked like her mother.

He should not let her see her sister. Hanabi was young, too impressionable, should not see that babies could come at fifteen when she had no way of knowing the ruin a baby at fifteen brought.

*Ruin* and *granddaughter* collided in his brain. Became words, given gruffly, with more of his heart than he wished to show.

"See her," he said. "After you see me," he added. *Come, he hoped she heard, even for a minute's visit—come.*

Hinata was smiling again. "Yes, Father," she said, her voice too young, her eyes too bright, her future too bleak. She stepped tentatively past Neji, touched the back of his hand, withdrew her own fearfully, featherlight though it was. "I will see you."

He drove home an empty car. Neji humbly explained that he would stay behind, call a car later.

Hinata, it seemed, was already home. *In a few days, let's talk more,* Minato had said, trying to make amends and end things well as he saw his guest to the door. *I expect we will understand one another too well.*

Too well indeed, thought Hiashi, angry again, hopeful again. As if he had time. He had a daughter to protect.

His walls, the walls of his home and the walls of his heart, had not protected Hinata. He wanted to force her behind them again, build everything thicker and stronger, prove himself and his strength and his worth as a father.

He would not. (Walls, it seemed, no longer held Hinata.) But he was not done. He was a Hyuuga. And all the weight of the Hyuuga name would be brought to bear, to protect—to protect no-longer-Hyuuga Hinata.

*Granddaughter,* celebrated his least reasonable bit of brain, and in spite of himself, Hyuuga Hiashi smiled.

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HuUuH
Chapter 21

Someone who didn't want to be heard was moving outside his door.

Naruto's eyes broke wide to stare unseeing at the support slats underneath his bed, mind still snarled in heavy shreds of grey not-quite-nightmare but lungs and limbs still and ears strained, counting.

\[Two—three—five? \text{ More?! Who—} \text{ not trained—} \text{ no, maybe—} \text{ almost dawn—} \text{ four seconds to the window—} \text{ was that—} \text{ what—} \text{ WHAT—}\]

There were people outside his door, many sneaky people creeping around and attaching something to his doorframe and pressing against his walls and he needed knives and that—that really sounded like—like a giggle.

Naruto bit his lip to see if he was really awake: he was.

Rolling out from under the bed was silent and quick but with the way his heart pounded felt awkward and noisy. He didn't have any knives in the room (he'd dreamed, the night the Fox sent him home, of waking to hot wet hands and Hinata's frozen-empty eyes and then woke again, shouting, and nearly cried to find his hands dry, his room empty. He did cry when he realized the knife was real).

"He is awake by now," came low from the other side of the door, followed by shushing and whispers too hushed to catch and more... giggles.

Naruto recognized that voice. He knew that giggle, too. The tightness along his spine was easing, but the anxiety spinning his head dizzy just grew thicker with confusion.

"Ready to sing?" someone—Mom?!—said.

"I'll stand here," said the first voice, "in case he—"

Naruto opened the door. Several small things exploded.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!"

So he was ducking out of an instinctive leap-for-cover when the shout came, and the shout broke into singing, and all around his door were a lot—a lot of people, and glittery stuff was swirling everywhere, and there were curled shiny ribbons plastered all over his doorway, and his dad looked like he might cry and couldn't quite pretend to sing and his mom was waving sparklers and Sakura-chan was clapping her hands and cheering and Hinata was smiling at him and Gaara was there, helping him up with his strong dry hand that Naruto clung to a little helplessly, brain hopelessly off-track and heart still beating too hard.

"-RUTOOOOO, HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU!"

Kakashi-sensei was there, with Rin-san leaning on one shoulder and Obito trying to make him sway along to the song on the other; and Raidou-san and Genma-san, the first grinning and the latter finishing off the last note in baritone opera-voice; Iruka-sensei stood a little to the side, looking a little awkward but just beaming.

Sasuke—where's Sasuke?
"MY BABY'S FIFTEEN! Come here, you adorable little piece of chaos-causing sunshine—" was all the warning he got before his mom was all over him, hugging so tight his lungs were jarred into breathing again. He almost pushed her away just to get space to think and see and breathe for a minute, but then he realized it was her voice and her hands that were shaking, just a little bit, and wrapped her up in his own arms instead. "Oh Naruto, if you knew—to see you grown up like this __"

She broke the embrace herself, then, and pushed him towards other arms as she leaned into his father's waiting ones, face bright with a hide-my-heart grin Naruto knew far, far too well.

Sakura hugged him, kissed him on the cheek; he was still realizing what had just happened, blood rushing hot to his face, when Hinata's arms wound around his neck. "Happy birthday, Naruto-kun," she whispered, soft and sweet in his ear, round belly warm against his, and slipped away as suddenly as she'd come. He fended off hair-mussing from Kakashi-sensei only to get noogied by Obito, and got a harder-than-necessary congratulatory back slap from Raidou-san. Rin shook his hand, with all this gentle dignity like he was all grown up, but then Iruka-sensei was standing in front of him, smile soft and eyes a little wet, and suddenly Naruto was twelve-or-ten again, and very much in danger of crying.

"Hey," said Iruka-sensei. "I told you this a couple years ago, but—happy fifteenth, Naruto. I'm—I'm so happy for—" the sentence kind of trailed off, and Iruka-sensei ducked his head a bit, and Naruto wanted to reach out and hug him for being the first person he could remember being hugged by.

"I—um—good morning, Sensei," he managed, and felt stupid. Iruka-sensei looked back at him, one hand scratching self-consciously at the back of his head, caught his eyes for a moment, and split into a grin. Big warm hands descended on both of Naruto's shoulders; eyes brimming care met his.

"Keep growing, Naruto," encouraged Iruka. He might have added more, but glanced behind them and stepped away instead, leaving a quick, bright smile full of things unsaid. Naruto whirled, found himself face-to-chest with his dad, looked up still uncertain that he wasn't somehow dreaming.

One arm opened in humble invitation, and Naruto kept his eyes up, bit his lip, took a hesitant step forward. He was instantly wrapped tight, cradled close, a second heartbeat filling his head for seconds; then he was let go.

"You okay? Sorry, this, this is probably too much, but your mother—"

Okay? His throat was too tight, his chest ached, his head spun in shock and questions, his hands twitched, still wishing for something sharp and safe; his heart sang. "Happy," said Naruto. "I'm happy."

uiHiu

uiHiu

"Why are you here?"

Sabaku no Gaara met sharp blue eyes evenly. "To wish you a happy birthday, Naruto. Also, to step in should you respond with natural violence to a large number of people doing secretive things outside your bedroom door at an ungodly hour."
Naruto speared sausage and pancake and laughed, all with equal lack of mercy. "You haven't slept yet, have you?"

"I am generally nocturnal."

Naruto wasn't going to let him off the hook that easily. "You didn't come to Konoha just for my birthday."

"Who says I did not?"

Naruto was right; Gaara had been in Konoha two days already, and intentionally avoiding his friend, until the realities he found in the underground had him seeking out Uzumaki Kushina just to know that her son really was as alive and protected as he'd promised to be. An impromptu invitation to a surprise birthday breakfast ("It's tradition!") was more than he could resist.

Naruto, he told himself, didn't need to know this: not about Shukaku's disappearance, or Matatabi's near death, or the rumors that the Fox himself had been wounded.

The Nine-tails were being hunted, culled, bodies publicly displayed: casualties of a silent war fought out in minutes-short assassin-to-assassin battles, with all the odds (and local police and media) favoring the hunters. Akatsuki reaped revenge twelve years in the making, sewed along the fault lines of the Fox's crumbled underground empire, and Naruto was worrying about a hockey tournament and fitting into a family he was scared to belong to and preparing for a baby that wasn't his; also accidentally smiling more than Gaara had ever seen.

"Your faith in my friendship is underwhelming," Gaara said, allowing fond irritation to break his cadence. "Haven't I shown enough appreciation for my life for you to see that my gratitude is sincere?"

As predicted, Naruto blushed and turned away, stabbing at his breakfast and mumbling about debts long settled by mooching.

"I want to hear this story," announced Kushina, materializing in the abruptly-vacated seat on Gaara's other side. Her Uchiha assistant—Obito, if Gaara remembered right—yelped in resigned indignation, stealing a handful of strawberries from Naruto in retaliation for his losing his spot. "I mean, I asked the first time we met the Prince, but Naruto had this fixation with getting dressed before we could discuss anything, which just makes it all the more interesting."

"When I said I wanted to hear the story, I wasn't referring to some indeterminate future telling," she told him, eyes a familiar hard grey under dangerously lowered lashes.

Gaara carefully set down his fork. "Then I shall begin. May I assume that you are aware of my...darker history?"

"Sure, but let's hear it in your own words, Prince."

Gaara glanced around the room, uncomfortable with a possible audience; under the direction of Kushina-sama's assistant, however, everyone within earshot was suddenly finding other things to do. Namikaze-san was a notable exception, but Gaara could allow Naruto's father some rights to this history.

Best to put things in the briefest, clearest terms possible. "I descended into the depths of substance
abuse early in my teenage years. When those who were supplying me in Sunagakure were caught and cut off by my family, I came to Konoha to feed my addictions. A member of the Nine-tails gang became my new supplier." The mention of Shukaku brought back awareness of the hollow dread he hadn't managed to swallow much breakfast around; beside him, Naruto made a sound that was almost a growl.

"He wasn't supposed to," grated Naruto, so low the words were hard to understand. "We don't—we don't deal that stuff. Not Kyuubi."

"Indeed," said Gaara, forcibly calming himself, amusement tugging at the corners of his lips. "That is how I met Naruto: he came to deliver a rather strong...message...to my supplier, on behalf of Kyuubi-sama, and I happened to be present. I needed what my supplier found himself unable to deliver, and half-crazed, took on Naruto myself."

Gaara remembered very little past that point. Everyone he knew was frightened of him; he'd never learned to hold back, and didn't account at all for the slightness of the boy or the oddity of a thug like Shukaku deferring to him. It made no difference. He struck out with habitual unhinged brutality, let loose with the wild wickedness that had earned his own family's wary hatred. He remembered his own crazed screams, the shock of hard blows driving him back, relentless determination flickering behind blank blue eyes.

Then there were those eyes again, and he was bound tight to a makeshift bed, and the boy he'd tried to kill for drugs took care of him, quiet and unpitying, while withdrawal ravaged. He cherished the echoes of small-scarred-gentle hands wiping sweat from his forehead and sick from him cheeks; drew them from memory when darkness seeped deepest and he needed to know, as his world had reeled and realized then, that he—Sabaku no Gaara—could be someone who was cared for, just because he was.

(He'd never been a prince in those blue eyes; even less a monster.)

"Naruto beat me up, then made me better."

Kushina looked from Gaara to Naruto, face tilted, hard to read. Namikaze watched silently, mouth proud and eyes sad. "Sounds heroic," remarked Kushina. "Sasuke, Gaara, Hinata—who else have you saved?"

"Don't," said Naruto. He was tilted away from all of them, fringe shaken forward, hiding his eyes. "I've hurt more people than I've helped."

Gaara interrupted the sharp following silence. "I tried to take him to Suna with me," he said, hoping to save his friend from the steel of a stare he recognized all too clearly, now, as very much like that of the Fox. "But he wouldn't come. I've had to frequent Konoha instead, a burden he so blithely bestows on me."

"You're always trying to give me stuff," grumbled Naruto. "It just gets worse when I live with you. Which I did. Two times, if you count a month ago."

"When was the first time?" asked Namikaze, with that quiet, encouraging voice Gaara imagined made people instinctively want to answer him. It didn't work all that well on Gaara, but he'd seen the look on Naruto's face when the man reached for him in the aftermath of the too-early Happy Birthday song, and he believed, now, that this was someone Naruto needed. And needed to be understood by.

"The first time was more than two years ago," he said, keeping Naruto in the corners of his eyes,
speak slow. "He was much smaller then. Super short and all eyes and bones. My sister thought I'd become some kind of perverted predator and tried to rescue him from me."

That made the adults shift uncomfortably, but Naruto laughed. "I love Temari," he declared, grin shifting wicked. "She can rescue me anytime."

"Yes," deadpanned Gaara. "You didn't do much to prevent being rescued, once you understood her intentions. She sent you a birthday gift. I believe Kankuro contributed as well."

Naruto's birthday had been a convenient, easily verified excuse for his presence in Konoha, a thought that settled with a curl of guilt to the gut.

Naruto looked a little overwhelmed. "More? More presents? But—" he shut up with a fond smack to the head from Kushina-sama, who admonished him to just say thank you and get over it already, and Namikaze-san rubbed the back of his head in an unsettlingly familiar gesture and explained that Naruto wasn't quite sure how to respond to getting actual birthday gifts.

"And he hasn't even seen the one from his mother, yet," continued Namikaze, mouth tensing unhappily. "Which is a good thing, I think. Kushina, sweetheart, please—"

"Nope," said Kushina. Her arms crossed triumphantly under her breasts, her jaw set smugly. "Took me forever to think of it but I finally found the perfect gift. Spent hours working on it too."

"You crocheted something for me?" Naruto asked, alarmed. "...Do I have to wear it outside of the house?"

"That would have been the perfect gift," moaned Namikaze. "Let's go with that. I'll crochet it myself."

"Wait—but—hey, Dad knows how to crochet?"

Kushina-sama huffed. Namikaze grinned. "I'm way better than she is."

"Best student I ever had," said Kushina. "until he started designing his own patterns and got all uppity about it."

"It's a very relaxing hobby," said Namikaze, folding his hands behind his head, eerily echoing his son's favorite nonchalant pose. "You'll learn. Pretty sure you have no choice after this. He jerked his chin at his wife, who had a speculative gleam in her eye, like she was scheduling intense one-on-one crochet lessons into a mental calendar.

"I wish to learn," blurted Gaara, trying to dislodge the sudden lump in his throat. The three of them—things had changed, since Suna, where Naruto was so stiff and awkward and overbright, where Gaara wanted to put himself between his friend and the stranger-parents, just so Naruto could be himself again. But now, with the three of them, he was the intruder; a welcome one, with the other boy's shoulder warm against his and easy smiles falling generously from both adults, but very much on the outside.

So family can be... this. It's... so warm.

"Your wish is my command," said Kushina grandly, and that was how the Prince of Kaze no Kuni signed up for crochet lessons.
A motorcycle.

It stood in the driveway with a huge orange bow between the handlebars, black and grey and gleaming, and Naruto reeled back and blinked and looked at his mom hopping up and down beside him, certain he wasn't actually seeing what he thought he was seeing.

Mom's gift was a motorcycle. A real motorcycle. It probably went really fast, if Dad's colorless face was anything to go by.

"Happy Birthday, Naru-chan!" cheered Mom, and Naruto was glad she kept going even though he hadn't managed to make a sound yet. "Technically you're not old enough for a gas bike, so this one's a custom hybrid. There're no age laws for e-bikes but I didn't want you getting stuck somewhere with no juice so you got the back-up gas tank and starter. Also it's faster. Other than that it's almost exactly the one I had. Best bike in the world."

"And it's so pretty," said Dad, trying to joke even though every word was strained. "So pretty you should just look at it. Perfect décor for your bedroom. I can buy you a stand for it. I haven't bought your gift yet."

"Don't listen to him," Mom said blithely. "Bike equals freedom. Just wanted to make sure you know you have yours."

Naruto looked uncertainly between them, sudden fear curling through the shock. They'd—they'd been getting along so well lately, even started sleeping in the same room, which was what he thought married couples were supposed to do, and he'd felt so bad, when he first started staying with them and they carefully never touched, and the want for that bike and everything it meant was burning hot in his belly but if it was going to drive them apart again—

"Hey, hey, Naruto," said Dad gently, and his hand landed firm on his shoulder, as warm as his eyes. "It's okay. Really, it is. I'm not exactly at peace with it, but we can have that talk later. This isn't about me. Give your mama a hug, she's spent most of the past four days covered in grease from tinkering with that thing and just about burst from the pressure of keeping the secret at least twice."

"I—" Naruto looked between them again, saw things unspoken meet in the middle, felt air rush in with the relief that they really did seem okay, that he wasn't going to drive some wedge between them by accepting his mother's gift. "Thank you," he whispered, and then the excitement rushed upwards, brushed aside the last clinging bits of reservation, and he let the gentle push his dad gave him towards his mom send him right into her, arms wrapping tight. "Thank you," he said again. And it wasn't about that gleaming motorcycle, not really, the huge welling burst of hope washing gratitude over him. "Thank you—Mom—Dad—Thank you—I—thank you—"

"Happy Birthday," said Mom again, getting a little choked up. She pushed him off. "Come one, I gotta show you all the specs. But you can't ride it yet. I promised your dad not to let you even see the key until after hockey practice, when he gets to take you shopping for all the protective gear his precious little heart desires. Which will be his birthday present to you, though it's more for him, the selfish bastard."

The last bit was set with the biggest, sappiest, most lovey-dovey eyes Naruto had ever seen.
Sasuke will be at practice, he told himself, and let his last worry float somewhere back and high in his head, and set out learning that his mom was, in fact, more badass than he already knew.

Motorcycle-level badass.

TvUvT

"I can't tell if you're faking," intoned Itachi, frowning at his brother's back, "but I am concerned. Either you confess, or I take you to a doctor, against your will if need be." He'd confronted the lump in the bed once already that morning, come in with his insides wrung out, nothing but paperwork and a short drive and a shorter shower between himself and last night's gruesome crime scene. Hadn't slept in twenty-two hours, didn't see sleep in his future for at least another six.

Sasuke hadn't even pulled back the covers when he'd told him to get up if he didn't want to miss Naruto's birthday breakfast. Had had some very vulgar things to say about pre-dawn birthday surprises. Growled that he needed sleep.

Itachi was tired, and Sasuke never had made peace with mornings. Itachi left him with orders to get another two hours' sleep so he could pull himself together for morning hockey practice. Had stolen some sleep himself. Was finally rested enough to start seeing red flags he hadn't wanted to see.

"It's the 10th," he pressed, tamping down the irrational panic that bubbled up too quickly whenever Sasuke wasn't where or when or how he should be. "You'll miss a tournament game tonight if you miss practice this morning."

"Get out," said Sasuke.

Itachi said nothing. Did nothing. Out-waiting Sasuke was never very hard.

"Mother knows I'm sick," grated Sasuke. He did sound sick; the fact that he somehow believed that this would drive Itachi away rather than bringing him closer was Red Flag No. 2. "She'll call Sensei. Please, Itachi. I just want to sleep."

Please. Red Flag No. 3. Mother most certainly did not know; Red Flag No. 4.

"Sit up," said Itachi. Watched the lump of covers go stiff, clenched tight in protective fists. Ugly premonition swooped low through his gut; he'd been on-site well into the night (another dead Ninetails; another grisly display, and any remaining doubt that it was the work of Akatsuki obliterated), had only checked on Sasuke's gps signal twice, but both times Sasuke appeared to be where he was supposed to be. Now that his internal alarms were firing, adrenaline building, he blamed exhaustion for having comforted himself with empty reassurances that that was enough.

His self-destructive baby brother had learned a few tricks to cover his tracks, it seemed, and months of improved attitude and behavior had lulled him into false security.

Stupid. And they call me genius.

In seconds he'd crossed into the bathroom; was sadly unsurprised to find the mouthwash bottle left open on the counter, a little more horrified to discover the had-been unopened bottle of prescription pain meds left over from Itachi's wisdom teeth surgery stashed between folded towels in the linen closet. The shower curtain was still damp. The toilet had been hastily cleaned, the floor recently
wiped. Everything smelled of pine-fresh tile cleaner.

Sasuke used mouthwash for only one thing: to mask the stench of alcohol. He must have sweated it out pretty effectively in the shower, because Itachi hadn't caught on until now, but the game was up.

He was nearly to the bed, ready to confront the tense linen-covered lump there, when a second, darker thought sent him back the way he'd come. He'd noticed a lot of crumpled white tissue in the waste bin; a little shaking showed ripped bandage wrappings and blotted blood, but not enough to signify the kind of damage he feared, and the tightness in his belly eased a bit. He watched the comforter stretch upwards until the only part of Sasuke he'd seen today—messier-than-usual black hair—disappeared.

*Hide, little brother,* he thought grimly, *you have less than three seconds to live.*

He was reaching for the foot of the blanket when something he'd registered subconsciously rang into present thought: the laundry hamper was too full. Two steps back; reluctant hands peeled back damp towels, sopping jeans, lifted a shirt that shouldn't have been red but was—red, red, reeking red. Fear spiked so intensely he couldn't remember, for breathless seconds, if Sasuke had spoken to him; if there had really been movement there because his brain was making this image of pulling back sheets to see skin that was too white and too cold. No, whispered his poor overworked voice of reason, *he's there, he's breathing, touch him, talk to him, your brother is not a corpse. Not a corpse.*

"I know you're hurt," Itachi told the bed. "As I don't know where, I am hesitant to touch you and possibly make an injury worse. Sasuke. I—I'm counting to five."

For half a second, he was afraid he would actually have to start counting.

"The bleeding's stopped," mumbled Sasuke, and slowly, slowly, peeled back his covers.

His face made Itachi's insides seize, and before he could breathe again he was there, kneeling on the bed to brush aside matted hair with stuttering fingers, throat closing and overtired brain racing. Mottled purple skin swelled the left eye into a pained slit; the right eye met his, wide and misery-glazed, before snapping shut, jaw grinding. Stained-red fingers held wadded gauze to the left ear and temple.

"Where else," breathed Itachi. Apart from the black eye and whatever was under that gauze, Sasuke looked okay, but he was is no mood to take chances. He'd noted the swollen knuckles. "Otouto. Where else."

He could see the pulse jumping in Sasuke's throat, the distress streaking taut through his jaw. It took several tries for Sasuke to get the word out. "Ribs."

Itachi had to tug the blanket from the clenched right fist, but Sasuke offered no other resistance as he peeled blanket and sheets back, gently lifted the sweat-damp T-shirt, took in a torso's length of boot-print bruises. He knew that pattern: had seen it most often on victims of school-gang violence, kids who knew only to curl up and try to keep their arms over their heads and wait for hell to end.

Sasuke didn't do that. Had never done that. (He'd give hell, never take it.) *(Shukaku, staked out and split open, had taken at least one of his attackers with him, but only the Nine-tail's body was left behind; they didn't mess with Sasuke because that meant messing with the KPD and a Nine-tails and—)* "Sasuke," he said, voice cut too harsh but control was slipping and he had to stay in control, had to *think*— "Sasuke, otouto, tell me, in exact detail, what you did and what was done to
you. *Now.*

Sasuke's jaw worked. Maybe his one good eye tracked the way Itachi gripped and twisted the sheets, though, because he started talking.

"...Just wanted to get drunk." The hand he held to the left side of his head trembled. "Just—just needed to—to get out—out of my head. I bought some beer. ...And some vodka."

It was a stupid detail, but—"*How.*"

Sasuke turned away petulantly, flinched painfully. "Your old college ID."

Itachi closed his eyes. "And then."

"Wanted to get drunk, but be able to get home without anyone knowing. So I just went to the park. The one with the founders' statue."

"And you got drunk."

"Yeah."

"That's not the end of the story, Sasuke."

"...Vodka's worse than I thought. Threw up on the way home."

Itachi waited.

"Some kids I knew in middle school saw that happen. Recognized me."

"They started it, or you did?"

"They used to beat up Naruto," said Sasuke. "He used to let them."

"You attacked them?"

"No," said Sasuke. "Was so drunk."

"They attacked you."

Sasuke looked away. "He used to just get hit. Could've smashed all their faces."

Itachi tried to catch Sasuke's eyes, tried to believe what he was hearing. Had Sasuke just... taken a beating? Because he was drunk, because Naruto used to never hit back when bullies targeted him, because he didn't feel like a fight (did Sasuke ever not feel like a fight)?

"Sasuke, did you—did you want them to hit you?"

"No," said Sasuke. "But when they did, I didn't care. It was... it was funny. 'Cause they were so shit-scared of me at first. Couldn't even walk straight, and they were so fucking scared."

"Your head. What happened to your head?"

Sasuke flinched. "So I... fell over," he said, one visible eye unfocused, confused. "Tripped me, maybe. They'd... run up and kick, jump back... like... they just wanted to see... if I was that drunk. They got brave, grouped up. Kicked and stomped. Five. Maybe six. Six of them."

He grimaced, moved his free hand to hover gingerly over his ribs. "I think I was laughing."
"Your head," whispered Itachi.

"Then they said something about Naruto," Sasuke said, voice vague, low, almost dreamy. "So I got up and tried to kill them."

Itachi sucked in air, counted down, breathed out.

"Don't worry, 'Tachi," said Sasuke. "Was too fucking drunk. Didn't get 'em that bad. So two of them got away, got a piece of—don't know, maybe a fence? Felt like metal. Swung it at my head. Split me open and I started bleeding everywhere, 's when they ran, I guess. Couldn't really see."

"Show me," said Itachi.

Sasuke looked at him. Looked away. Pulled his left hand and all the wadded up bandaging away from is head.

Itachi stared at Sasuke's ear, that mangled bleeding bloated stump of ear, and thought of Mother and the final two boxes packed up in the room across the hall and Father's return and Sasuke alone, here, getting drunk in a park five blocks away and ending up slashed across the head with something that could have blinded him, killed him, if it'd hit just an inch higher or closer or harder, and how the only reason he knew so much about what had happened was that Sasuke was still intoxicated.

Or high. How much codeine had the kid swallowed?

"Otouto," he groaned. Had so many things to do, steps to take that were reasonable and practical and were about getting medical care and making contingency plans and letting Shisui know that he needed someone to cover his shift and it couldn't be Shisui because Itachi needed Shisui, needed help. Didn't take any of those steps. Gathered up his brother, his sweating trembling brother, held him as close as he could without hurting his ribs, bloodless fingers knotting up the back of Sasuke's shirt.

"Ears bleed a lot," said Sasuke, muffled against Itachi's chest.

"Yes," Itachi managed. "They do." Not a corpse, said his brain, oh-so-helpful as always. Not a corpse, not a corpse, not a corpse.

"...I'm bleeding again...on you..." said Sasuke.

"Definitely not the worst thing you've done today," complained Itachi, and held on a little longer, just to breathe, and then he'd have to get up and fix things.

Whatever was left to be fixed.

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"Hey."

Sasuke's one good eye squinted painfully, letting in enough light to register a blurry figure by his bed and the idea that opening it really hadn't been a good idea. The groan escaped before he realized he'd made a sound, but Naruto didn't tease.
"So your brother's not talking," he said instead, and through the everything-hurts-haze Sasuke heard the hard undercurrent to Naruto's voice that cut cold through his insides. "You and hockey, bastard—you expect me to believe this wasn't on purpose? You, like, sabotaging the tournament just 'cause you found out some stuff about your dad? So there's nothing for him to come to—"

"Shut it, usuratonkachi," Sasuke managed. Damn, but did Naruto have this all wrong. Probably.

Naruto, of course, had zero intention of shutting up. "Was it kids? From school. Or one of those wannabe street gangs. What'd you do to get them to hit you—"

"Didn't do anything," snapped Sasuke. Vomiting into the gutter didn't count. "Don't make stupid guesses. Stupid."

He managed to open his eye enough to see Naruto leaning back in the desk chair he must have dragged over to the bed, arms crossed irritably over his chest. "Whoever you let hit you is someone Itachi thinks he should protect," he said, flat and stubborn. "So, kids our age, or bored rich boys trying to taste actual risk. Otherwise he'd give me enough of a clue to hunt 'em down. Now you'll give me the clue instead."

The urge to laugh fizzed up Sasuke's throat, surprising and relaxing him. "Didn't cross your mind, moron, that you're the one Itachi thinks he should protect?"

"Uh-huh. 'Cause I totally need protecting from someone who wanted to hurt you but didn't have the guts to kill you. Don't even pretend you could've stopped them if they'd gone for it, bastard, not with your ear torn up like that—"

Sasuke let his eye fall shut, any good humor drowned in the rising tide of pain. "You don't get it," he said. Naruto never got it. "It's not about you taking them on in a fight, it's about the consequences of you being in that kind of fight—they could identify you—they'd tell their parents —"

"It is kids from school," growled Naruto. "I bet it's that streetlicker Hisui—"

_Shit_, thought Sasuke. Tried to find words to express that sentiment more eloquently. "Naruto, dumbass, you're not the scary neighborhood gang member anymore," he explained with, he felt, exemplary patience. "You're Namikaze Naruto, you're—"

"AND WHAT ARE YOU?" Naruto shouted, and Sasuke hissed curses under his breath, head ringing. "You think you can just die, you bastard? You think you don't need to fucking fight anymore, or hockey anymore or—or—why—"

_I scared him_, Sasuke realized, with sudden cool clarity, and remembered the way his laughter had sounded, weird and detached, hiccuped around kicks to his ribs that robbed his breath, the sudden rush of _hot_ and _red_ that was his first hint that the skin over his skull was split and gushing. Remembered blacking out, there on the frozen concrete, and wondering if he'd wake up before his blood ran out.

_I was drunk_ suddenly stopped filling in as an excuse.

"Hey," he said into the silence, looking awkwardly to the left of Naruto's shuddering form. "Why are you in my house?"

There was a pause. "To drag your ass to the game," said Naruto.
Sasuke frowned. *You've never been in my house before.*

"It's pretty cool in here," Naruto said, stilted after awkward seconds. "Should've crashed this place ages ago."

Sakura came to Sasuke's house, and Sakura and Sasuke went to Naruto's house—his apartment, before; his mansion, now—and both boys went to Sakura's house, but Naruto had never set foot in Sasuke's house.

*There is nothing I hate more than an Uchiha,* the Fox's grating voice echoed.

"...Your parents bring you here?"

For a moment Naruto didn't respond, stuck still and tense on his chair. Then he shook it off, mouth spreading in a grin Sasuke first interpreted as affected and then—then couldn't be sure.

"Drove," said Naruto. Flashing a hand into his pocket, dangled something too close to Sasuke's eye. A key.

Headache pounding, Sasuke tried to make sense of what he was seeing. Couldn't.

"My mom gave me a *motorcycle,*" said Naruto, words gushing out faster and faster, the last of the anxiety lining his shoulders dropping. "For my birthday. And my dad—my dad, is, well, trying to win me over with freedom or something—it's almost killing him but he got me this jacket and this super badass helmet and there're gloves and chaps and everything—it's *fast,* Sasuke. And Gaara gave me a gaming console, and Temari and Kankuro gave me with rock band game to go with it, it's *awesome* and we gotta play with Sakura-chan, and there's this ninja game, and Sakura gave me a notebook where she wrote all these things to do and say to get along with parents and of course it's all super smart stuff and Iruka-sensei gave me ramen coupons and Kakashi-sensei got me new skates, which is weird but they're the ones I wanted, like yours, and—"

"In the bottom drawer," Sasuke cut in, staring resolutely at the ceiling. "I got you your stupid birthday present, stupidhead."

"What? No! That's not—"

"Open it," said Sasuke.

There was another useless pause, and then, finally, the sounds of Naruto opening the drawer.

"...Is it this lumpy thing wrapped in a dish towel?"

"Yes. Open it."

"You mean unswaddle it? 'Cause I kinda became an expert on opening gifts today, Sasuke, and this is the stupidest wrapping job—"

He sounded utterly delighted. Sasuke closed his eye, pretending his heart wasn't beating hard enough to hear.

He knew the moment the towel was unwound.

"It's not new," Sasuke said. "But it works. The lenses are in perfect condition. Take pictures with your family and stuff."

He listened to Naruto fiddling with the camera, movements slow, cautious. Heard the shutter snap
before it occurred to him that Naruto might figure out how to actually use it. Eyes snapped wide, or
tried; hissed at the stabbing pain throbbing through the left side of his head. Naruto's face swam
into focus, lips curled up, just a bit.

"Got you," he said. Looked at the whatever he'd captured on the little screen. Let his smile grow.

"I take it back. You don't have a birthday present anymore."

"NEVER," said Naruto. "I'm framing this—"

Naruto's phone rang. He shut it off, but looked back up at Sasuke with a frown. "Game's starting in
thirty," he said. "Guess we're both missing it."

I slept all day, Sasuke realized, the dull desperation he'd tried to drown last night sneaking back
steadily. I missed his birthday, and the game, and the team will—

"Sakura's gonna kill us."

Oh. "Go to the game," he asked. "Go and take pictures of her killing the other team as practice for
when she kills us."

Naruto laughed. "Think she can win the tournament by herself?"

Sasuke scoffed. "Of course she can."

"Yeah," said Naruto. "Yeah. Okay, I'll go. Don't bleed anymore."

"Go away."

"Going. Hey—bastard—" the voice drifted across the room, now; he really was going. "—don't
die."

Don't die."

There was that laugh, again, short and a little twisted, and Naruto was gone.

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Hello, Konoha. Masked and muffled under helmet and body armor, Naruto peeled corners, devoured city blocks, swallowed pavement and neon light and let it out in hoarse shouts that fogged against his visor for quick-quick heartbeats before evaporating, no match for the polish of washing-up soap Mom told him to coat the glass with.

He was messed up inside—like Sasuke's ear looked, bloated and bleeding. But also and happy. Maybe he was taking a bit of the long way to the stadium but—but this beautiful machine was fast, and he needed just a few more seconds to breathe, and for a few quick breaths his city was his again.

There were things his brain was telling him, puzzle pieces fitting together, back in the corners the things he didn't want to think about but did anyway went. (Itachi's warnings and Gaara's grip, the awful things-too-much-to-feel eating Sasuke's guts and staring out through Sasuke's eyes.)(Go home, Naruto.)(Dad's hands, lingering a bit after making sure Naruto had strapped on his arm guards right, Sakura's lips barely touching his cheek. Hina-chan's wide eyes. The new skates in the new leather bag slung heavy across his back.)(The almost-smoothed out line between Mom's eyes, the way she was holding on to Dad when he came back from his first circle around the block on the motorcycle-freedom she'd gifted him; he'd waved, and took off for Sasuke's house, catching half-a-second of pain on her face in the right rearview mirror.)

Two blocks from the stadium, now, and Dad was right: they knew, the whole freaking world knew that not-actually-dead NamikazeNaruto played WoF hockey and there was a championship game tonight and they probably also knew that it was his birthday (even though it never even crossed his mind that he had an actual birth date, since being found—) and What, he wondered, throat closing, brain racing, excited for the challenge of getting through this morass of cameras and cars undetected, are they really looking for?

He shut off the manufactured whir built into all ebike engines by law but made optional by his badass mom; ghosted through back alleys with the lights off and just a whisper of rubber over concrete, glee lighting up his blood. This—this bike, this magnificent, magical motor-monster, was the most perfect, most beautiful, most too-good-to-be-true thing-of-possibilities ever and he was gonna try so, so hard to make sure his parents never regretted letting him have it and he wasn't going to do all the things he wanted to do with it. Even if it could go really fast and turned like Hina-chan doing a pirouette and could probably leap whole flights of stairs and come down smooth —

No. Nope. He was going to be boring and careful and really super safe. That was good. That was what he should do. He wouldn't do anything the Sakura- and Iruka-sensei voices in his head told him not to do. Now he coasted behind a whole line of impatiently-in-line-to-park cars and not a single honking driver looked at him; not a single head turned to see him slip through the gates and into the WoF Ice Rink lot and past two camera-crew trucks and all the way to the Zamboni (1) garage, where UchihaObito was waiting for him.

"No problems?" Obito asked cheerfully, laughing at him as he got stuck in his helmet for an embarrassing dozen seconds before he realized he'd have to get the gloves off first.

"This thing's stealth magic," Naruto beamed, finally free of headgear and running reverent fingers over the leather seat before wrestling his way out of the arm guards. He'd been glad to have every bit of protective gear Dad had insisted on while cutting through wind so cold it stung, burned, then numbed. His fingers were stiff and clumsy even though Dad had covered them in the best and
warmest gloves he could find.

"Your folks have got all the reporters busy up front," Obito was telling him. "We've got a clear shot through to the tunnel. Get suited up as fast as you can."

"...I won't be playing though," Naruto said, or maybe asked, keeping his eyes on the task of stowing his helmet, guards, and gloves in the seat compartment, then rubbing awkwardly at the back of his head when there was nothing left to keep his hands busy and he had to turn to face his minder.

"You scared of the crowds?"

"No! Er… some. But it doesn't matter. I missed warm-up. Sensei doesn't do exceptions."

"Well, you're getting one," Obito told him glibly. "The Inuzuka kid is taking your spot for the first period, but after that, you're going in."

"Eh?! Why—"

Obito turned around from where he'd been leading the way to the tunnel, and suddenly looked very much like an Uchiha "You'reNamikaze," he said, dry challenge in his eyes and a bit of a sad smile around his lips. "Hockey's part of your heritage, and this is a chance to prove it, and get some control of your story. This is one way you are exactly what they want you to be—you're a damn good hockey player, punk, and that's something you want to show more than the other things you're a little too good at."

Naruto thought of the headlines other people kept trying to hide from him, pictures that showed grainy close-ups focused on his scars, with captions about secret gangs and decades-old murders. It didn't bother him the way everyone seemed to think it should; that identity, at least, felt authentic. Honest.

The things they wrote about the—about his grandfather, he had more complicated issues with. There were no pictures of Kyuubi—no camera had ever caught his face—so it was usually Naruto's face that went with the stories, blood-splattered and viciously grinning, screen-shotted just seconds after he'd broken the Kumogakure ambassador's nose.

Most of it was true, what they wrote. What they didn't know would be more condemning, not less. But the Fox—the whys and the whoms beyond the trail of slashed-cheeked victims—that was something they would never understand, because they didn't want to. They wanted a villain to play their heroes against.

What they didn't get—didn't want to get—was that there wasn't a hero.

Never was.

*If I still got these scars but also win all the games*, Naruto wondered, flinching at the roar of a crowd he had yet to see,*will I still be their monster, or like if I make enough goals—then I'm their hero?*

"Ah-ah, you look genuinely deep in thought," said Obito, ushering him through the door to the changing rooms with a clap to the shoulder. "Makes me a bit worried, honestly. Do I need to go in there with you to make sure you don't escape through an air vent or something?"

Far, far beyond caring, Naruto simply shrugged. "Come if you want."
Maybe Obito really was worried, because he did come. Let him be, though, slouching in a corner with his face glued to his phone, though it took less than a glance for Naruto to see that every one of the man's muscles was primed to leap. Naruto ignored him, shook his thoughts free, set about suiting up—quickly, just as commanded.

Hockey gear felt good-familiar, after all the stiff tailored leather he'd raced off on a motorcycle in. (Not that he loved the leather any less for it.) He paused over the new skates, his gift from Kakashi-sensei, ran a thumb down a gleaming blade. He'd worn them for practice this morning. Hugged Sensei after.

Tonight, though, he'd wear the old ones, with their dingy laces and insoles perfectly molded to his feet.

"How's Sasuke?"

Obito's question was unusually quiet, but startled Naruto anyway, and he stared up for a moment with his mind all blank, layers of thought all chased away by one silly question.

"...Bad," he said, not really finding it in him to lie. Not like Obito wouldn't find out from Itachi or his aunt anyway.

"Physically or mentally?"

Naruto hesitated, focused on tugging each lace tight, winding the ends around the back his ankle before tying the final knot. "Tore up one ear." He did the other skate, twisted each foot a bit to test the ankle support, stuck his gloves under one arm, grabbed his stick with the other. "Head's messed up. Mentally. He gets like that sometimes." He didn't say that Sasuke tended to do things that were pretty obviously suicidal, when he was like this, but from the set of Obito's lips, he already knew.

"I'm thinking of heading over there, after the game," said Obito, something in his phrasing that Naruto wasn't sure he was interpreting right. "See if I can help out a bit, talk to Aunt Mikoto, give Itachi a chance to rest—" there, in his eyes, that was a question.

"He's asking my advice," Naruto realized. It kind of—filled something up inside, brought a bit of warmth and a lot of confidence back, seeing that someone really—really wanted to know what he thought.

"Yeah," said Naruto. Felt a smile tug at his lips, stopped a step from Obito on his way to the door. "Yeah, tell him all about how Sakura-chan kicks Amegakure's ass. And don't let him have anything sharp. Make sure you check his mattress and between his bed and the wall. And tell Itachi-nii to get some freaking sleep for once."

Obitoreturned his smile, a bit brokenly. "You'll be extra good at home tonight, yeah? Not try to take advantage of a staff short its most awesome member?"

"Most awesome? Rin-san's not going anyway, is she?" teased Naruto, pushing through the door to clump down the tunnel. "I'll be good."

"Holding you to that," warned Obito, twisting past him to lead the way to the box, Genma and Iwashi falling in from guarding tunnel entrances to march at Naruto's sides.

"Sure, sure...watch Sasuke, yeah?" begged Naruto.

He thought he heard the beginning of a reply, but then there was only lights and blaring music and the roar of a crowd that filled every single seat and spilled into the aisles, and two steps later someone noticed him and shouted about it, and the first camera flash blinded, and all he could do was duck his head, grateful for the helmet he already wore, and glad for the hand—Genma's—that
reached for his arm, supported him the last few feet to the box, with Kakashi-sensei there to pull him in. He found himself on the bench between a protective Moegi and grim-faced Shino, and it was all he could do to make himself stay. To sit and be stared at under a cacophony of clicking shutters, and then the whistle rang shrill and Sakura had the puck and the game was on.

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By the time the buzzer rang out the first period, Sakura's throat was dry and her face wet, eyes stung by dripping sweat. She'd never played so hard, so well; had put absolutely everything she had on the ice, and the weight of two periods left to play made her eyes glaze with tears.

She was winning. They were just six points up, though, and the tide could turn in a few dozen seconds. But she'd get some water, and rub down her face with a towel, and do her best to believe Kakashi-sensei when she told her she could do this, and then she'd come back on the ice because no one else on their team stood a chance against Amegakure's goalie and defense line and she was gonna win the whole blasted game for her stupid, stupid boys.

"Damn, Sakura," crowed Kiba, hitting the boards next to her with panting breath and raw awe in his voice. He met her inquiring eyes, grinned, shook his head again. "Dayumn. So you're Team Seven's secret weapon."

"How're you holding up?" asked Shikamaru, appearing on her other side, looking exponentially more awake and agitated than she was used to seeing him. He was her other temporary wingman, and he'd been in the right spot every time she'd won the puck and needed a quick pass. She'd thought only Sasuke knew how to do that.

Sakura just shook her head, worked off her helmet, grabbed the water bottle someone shoved in her face and downed half of it in one go. When she looked up, Naruto was there, face tight and eyes wide and wary, and she was at once too tired and too aware of the tiny flinches of his shoulders as what felt like a thousand cameras zoomed in on them to remember the left-behind anger she'd spent the afternoon boiling in and—click click click-click-click-click-click—

"Hey there, blondie," she said, voice rough from a throat rubbed raw with hard breathing, "you gonnaget your butt on the ice and help me win this thing?"

He pulled her in by the forearms, sat her next to him on the bench, fisted his hands in his lap. "You don't need me," he joked, though his smile lasted barely half a second before his face shuttered closed again. His words stayed warm, though. "Seriously, though, Sakura-chan, you're always freaking sick on the ice, but that was—like if you don't get offers from every single university scholarship program after this I'll eat my new skates—"

"No one's here for me, not tonight," she said, made sure the voice landed gently, though she had to raise it to be heard over the crowd. Watched his eyes skitter over the packed stands, his shoulders hunch. "How's Sasuke?"

A pause; he was deciding how much to tell. "Everything," she said flatly, "tell me everything—" loud in his ear because they'd pumped the music up for intermission and the crowd certainly wasn't getting any quieter. Naruto grimaced.

"Got drunk in a park," he said, checked the faces around them to confirm no one could listen in,
continued: "by himself, that asshole, and then some kids from our old school found him and—"

"No—" said Sakura, anger and dismay and pity for their broken boy burning up adrenaline she didn't know she had left. Naruto mirrored her, face twisting.

"Don't think he fought back, but he definitely pissed them off. Got something like a pipe or baseball bat to the head—"

"What?" demanded Sakura, hoping it was because it was loud and hard to hear that she was getting this, but—

"They bashed him with a metal pipe. Or a cane or something. Ear split, eye's shut. Must've bled awful. Itachi didn't take him to the hospital, though, so it can't be that bad."

Then they sat for a moment, staring straight into the rink as the last player came in off the ice and the bigger corner gates swung open, letting the Zamboni in.

"Hey," said Sakura after a moment, a long moment of turning over everything that meant Sasuke to her in her mind. "Hey, Naruto, let's win. Let's win this damn game, and make sure we keep winning, until he's back, and we can win this stupid tournament together. I know he wants to."

Naruto grin back. Sat with one knee bouncing, head down now, hands limp fists between his knees.

"He does," she insisted. "He tries not to care about winning, you know, but he doesn't know how to do anything else. He's Sasuke. He has to win."

That won her a smile, small and twisted up sideways, as much in his eyes as on his lips. "Does it hurt," he asked, and she wondered where on earth he was going with this— "Does it hurt, Sakura-chan, being right all the time?"

She huffed out a laugh, bumped her shoulder against his, finished off her water bottle. "Most when you two idiots ignore it."

"Heh. Yeah. Hurts us more, believe it."

She took the new bottle he handed her, guzzled down, wiped her mouth on her sleeve. "Right," she said. "Right, 52, let's do this. Don't you dare get distracted by the crowd or the cameras or your proud parents or even that giant-ass Happy BirthdayNamikaze-kun banner with all those bouncingfangirls over there, just be there when I need the puck, yeah, and we'll do this."

Blue eyes on hers, warm and aching and grateful. His lips moved, words lost in the pounding bass of a new song.

"What?"

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you, Sakura-chan."

She smiled at him, knowing it came out dazzling, and then everyone was standing and it was time to split up and head to the changing rooms. She moved out of the way so the boys of the team could close ranks around Naruto, be something of human shield as they moved en masse back to the changing rooms. She trailed after the last of them, looping an arm over Moegi's shoulder when the younger girl bumped up next to her, all glowing smiles and hero-worship.

Twelve minutes. Twelve minutes and she'd be back on the ice, and Amegakure would rally, she'd seen it in their faces when they'd pulled up at the buzzer, leaned back and circled around easy to
reach opposites ends of the boards. She sat down on the bench in the storage-closet-turned-girl's-
changing-room and scrubbed at cooling sweat with a dry towel and scraped damp hair back out of
her face and set herself to getting over the ache of her tired legs and tired heart so she could return
to the ice and do it all over again.

This time she'd have Naruto with her, and even two-thirds of Team Seven was more than the sum
of two parts. They knew each other and they knew the ice and there was something—something
built of lawless games played with whiffle balls and splinterly sticks on broken pavement, one
sputtering street lamp for light and two boys with scars she could and couldn't see coming back
again and again. They relied on her then—on Sakura, barely thirteen and horribly, embarrassingly
moon-eyed and so, so naive to everything life had already bruised into them that they could pretend
and even if her head was wise enough to know that lots of things didn't add up, her heart let them
pretend.

They relied on her now. For all that she was no longer innocent enough to believe that all children
had parents who loved and annoyed them in equal parts; that a welcoming home and mostly-
functioning family was something that could be taken for granted, she was their bridge, or maybe
their buffer, to what everyone else expected.

Not that her family was perfect. Sakura had her own heartbreaks. They hurt. But she could love
those boys and she could bridge invisible borders for them and she tried her damnest to keep up
with them and that was (usually) enough.

(Usually.)

*Get up,* sighed her heart. *You'll never stop loving them, so get up and win for them.*

*Win.*

*I'll win for me,* her brain whispered back fiercely.

*Same thing,* said her heart.

HToTH

.Hinata didn't watch the game. She tried; sat alone in the living room with the largest screen,
watched first Sakura and then Naruto-and-Sakura lead their team and destroy Amegakure's. Let
herself admire their speed and force and occasional, breathtaking grace even though she always lost
track of the puck. She loved Naruto, loved Naruto-playing-hockey by extension; but the game
itself just seemed like a misuse of ice and skates and that cheating-gravity feeling that came when
you could just glide-stop, she whispered, you'll get on the ice again. Someday...

That was when she hit the mute button and set herself back to work balancing chemistry equations
in the flickering light of the silent screen.

If she'd gone to the stadium, she'd have fit right in with most of the crowd. So many spectators
weren't even pretending to be there for the hockey. Not even the announcers were really trying to
make the evening about anything other than NamikazeNaruto. And Naruto-Naruto was playing
hard and playing his part, except for how grim his face looked every time the cameras zoomed in
for a close-up. So focused, so serious, they praised. Just like his dad. The strong and silent type.
Not one for the crowds, they said. Just there to get the job done, they said.
Except Hinata's Naruto liked crowds. He loved trick shots and starting fights that got spectators pumped; made a fool of himself dancing to the music that blared while refs set up for a face-offs, did silly stick-waving victory loops when he scored goals.

Hinata's Naruto wasn't on that ice.

She hadn't given him a birthday gift. She had one, but-but none of the courage she needed to give it. What can I give, after all? What can I offer that he wants? That he doesn't already have?

She'd-she'd been there for him, as much as she could, because she loved him and he needed someone there for him and-and he was there for her, like knight-in-shining-armor there for her. He talked her into moving into his tiny apartment and she'd barely convinced him to stay there with her; he'd meant to his home—the home he must have worked and probably fought so hard for-to her, without a second thought. What kind of gift—what kind of birthday gift could one possibly give, after that?

She really tried, tried to give back. Scrubbed callouses into her hands making his rented rooms feel and smell and look like a home, like her mother's home; like the pomelo peels she remembered in the refrigerator and the grapefruit rinds Mother used to scrub counters with. She washed the windows until all the sunlight made it in and put together meals with groceries she was shocked to learn the price of but paid for, gladly, with all the birthday and pocket money she'd saved all her life, found in a fat envelope Neji-nii-san had hidden in the bottom of her backpack while she sat her WoF exams.

She spent a lot of days cramming through double coursework while waiting for Naruto to come home from hockey practice at noon and then from wherever he went that he came back from, laughing, beaten, and bleeding, long after midnight. Sometimes he came with a wad of bills he'd won, offered proudly. It hurt him when she wouldn't just-take them. They'd gone grocery shopping together, once; Naruto's solution to an argument over whose money should buy their food (because even though he made her sleep in his bed while he slept on the floor he still couldn't see that she had to do something, anything, to justify what she took-) and her heart had beat so hard with him walking next to her and making ridiculous faces at vegetables and filling their basket with ramen and trying to buy a bouquet of cheap, dyed daisies he'd caught her smiling at that she nearly fainted. She looked ill enough that he'd banned her from all future grocery runs, and she had to draw pictures of what fresh egg plant and green beans looked like so he could understand her shopping lists.

(He loved to cook and he loved absolutely everything she cooked so her heart exploded in a happy cycle of making good food for him and eating with him and for a while—for those few hard, precious, surreal days—she'd been utterly happy.)

(So happy she feared it; she'd known it would end.)

She was nothing like Sakura, could never be Sakura—Sakura was what she'd always believed she'd need to be, to be close to Naruto. Sakura: smart, strong, sassy; independent. Sakura played and joked with and beat up the boys. Was proud to obliterate traditional girl-boundaries, never afraid of raising her voice—or even her fists. And Hinata was everything that wasn't that: meek and shy and weak, unable to even speak normally, trained to be exactly the kind of demure, elegant, subservient woman her mother had been. But just that—maybe that could be something, she hoped, for a boy who seemed so in awe of anything warm, anything gentle. It meant something—it did—because he started coming home earlier, staying home more; because he looked at the food she made with real wonder in his eyes, ate like he'd never eat again; because he promised to stop fighting, even for money—and like everything else he promised, he did as he said.
Hinata was glad. And proud. Proud to have meant something to him, because he meant everything to her. If only… if only there was something still to give.

He had so much, now, and so much good; anything she could give, someone else could give better.

She had one thing left. One favor, just for him; nothing left to offer, but there was still one thing—one thing left to ask.

...My condolences,” murmured the officer—Uchiha, Uchiha Itachi, someone Naruto trusted, so Gaara forced his chin to nod in thanks, though gratitude was not something he was currently capable of feeling.

Shukaku was dead.

Was this grief—was he grieving? The man was a thug, and a heartless one; a manipulator and an opportunist, quite happy to take full advantage of a runaway fifteen-year-old addict with no inherent morals and far too much money. Still, Shukaku had taken him in, had protected him—even after Kyuubi cut off the drugs and Naruto made him fight past his addiction, Shukaku protected him.

What Gaara had needed most was identity—identity that wasn't the wreckage of his abused-and-indulged royal life, skin to step into that let him wear his scars and still move forward, live and fight back at this horror of a world because he couldn't live and not fight back. Naruto gave him hope but Shukaku gave him something—someone to be. Shukaku made him a Nine-tails.

Naruto had never forgiven Shukaku for that.

Shukaku—is dead.

"Thank you, Uchiha-san," Gaara murmured. "It has been… difficult to communicate through my usual channels. I appreciate this confirmation."

That they both wished the facts were not what they were filled the following seconds, and they sat in weary silence. With nothing left to say, Gaara rose; inclined his chin in courtesy, thoughts blank where they should be racing, plotting, planning, protecting—evading.

"Your Highness," began Itachi.

"Gaara."

The Uchiha tilted his head, expression softening from blankness to something more—human. "Gaara. I ask selfishly, though my concern is genuine: what can be done to—to keep the remaining Nine-tails…alive?"

Gaara met his eyes, looked past them, stared at blank grey police-station wall. If the other man knew anything of Gaara's hidden role as a Nine-tails, he made no sign of it, nor did it matter. Here was a man who had protected Naruto before, and if he could do so again—

Shukaku is dead. Fu is dead. Han, Kokuo, Matatabi are dead—
"By you? There is nothing, Uchiha-san. Your own life—"

"I know," said the Uchiha, and for once he looked like what he actually was: a boy on the wrong side of a war. Traitor, trusted, liability, targeted—Uchiha Itachi wouldn't be protecting anyone much longer if he couldn't shield himself.

*If they can kill Shukaku, who can't they kill?*

"Of all the Nine-tails," Gaara said slowly, wondering why he felt the need to comfort this man when he was so far from comforting himself, "the one closest to you—whom you seek to shield—has already the most dangerous defender. He is well protected. Please look after yourself, Uchiha-san, and leave us to do the same."

Gaara stood, moved to leave the private meeting room, leave the Konoha Central Police administration building, leave Konoha. Itachi stood with him, walked him back through the secure area he'd been escorted into, apparently impervious to the open distrust fellow KPD officers showed as they passed by. He offered a perfect bow as they paused before the entrance. On impulse, Gaara stepped close, close enough to be heard at a bare murmur.

"Be at ease, Itachi-san," he said. "To get to Naruto, one must first go through Kyuubi himself. We are wounded, but we still have the Fox."

Itachi's lips quirked. "I devoted the better part of three years to taking Kyuubi down. It was to be the glorious capstone to my studies in criminology."

"Yes," Gaara said gravely, and then smiled back, "and your degree of success…?"

"Couldn't even catch the mini-fox," Itachi returned easily, though tension he'd hidden with his words remained in his gaze. Gaara looked the man over and made a clinical estimate that it had been several dozen hours since Itachi had had a chance to sleep.

"If the genius of the Uchiha couldn't do it…. Please return to your day off, Uchiha-san, with my apologies for taking time you clearly needed to yourself."

"When a prince walks into my precinct seeking confirmation of facts associated with my most critical case, I attend," the Uchiha replied, eyes warm and voice dry. That this prince was also an avowed member of the gang of killers someone was very successfully killing remained unspoken, apart from what sounded like genuine concern guiding his parting words: "Be well, Gaara-san," he said. "Be safe."

"Of course," promised Gaara. Gave his farewells and his thanks. Moved briskly to his waiting car, already chilled by brisk Konoha wind.

*Be safe.*

*Of course.*

*I'll try.*

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IqupI
Hinata was asleep on the sofa in the living room when they finally made it home, and Naruto and the ridiculous number of adults with him switched immediately to hushes and tip-toes but she woke anyway, unfurling from a thick fuzzy blanket and blinking sweet, sleepy eyes that made something warm and soft unfold inside him, and he could finally breathe deep enough to let the muscles in his shoulders relax.

He glanced sideways to see what everyone else would do, but they were disappearing into other rooms, whispered conversations fading as lights came on in their wake. He endured a hair-ruffling from his mom as she wandered past in the direction of the kitchens and then he and Hinata were alone and he let his bones give; flopped gracelessly into the opposite corner of Hinata's couch.

She smiled at him. "Did you win?"

She almost never stuttered when just waking, and that warm feeling inside him spread wide with the silly thought that he was probably the only person who knew that. "Yep, but Amegakure's good, nearly got us. Shika was on point though. And Sakura killed it. Pretty sure those guys are gonna have nightmares 'bout her for yeeeears." He looked up with a grin, just in time to see her face fall, just a tiny bit.

"I them try to start a fight," she whispered. "Sakura fought them instead of you. Th-th-th-that was… brave."

Left-over anger and frustration tried to boil right back up, but he shoved them down. "Yeah, they got pretty desperate at the end there, and kept saying stuff about—about my family, my mom. Stupid stuff. I knew they were trying to get me to foul myself into the box so I was trying to ignore it but… but it's a lot harder than I thought, I guess, once your mom's a real person. I woulda punched 'em if Sakura-chan hadn't."

Hinata held his eyes for barely a second, but he caught so much care and sympathy in that one heartbeat that his breath hitched.

"It—it gets-s easier," she said, low and sincere. "But it…doesn't go away."

"That wasn't the worst part, though. The crowd—the crowd was crazy. Sneaking in was easy, but getting out was—it took us nearly three hours. Our security team had to escort each team member to their cars, one by one, 'cause the press people wouldn't let 'em through otherwise. Everyone's parents were freaking out. And I was just sitting in the changing room, waiting for the place to clear out so I could—I could go home. But the press didn't leave. They waited as long as we did."

Hinata made a little sympathetic hum, tentatively held out one small hand. Relief and joy bubbling up into a grin, Naruto scootched closer, and with a careful check of her face to make sure this was okay, slid down until his head was just about in her lap. Then she smiled, and the hand she'd lifted in invitation settled softly in his hair, and at last—as last he could let the rest of the day go, loose the tension in his neck, and he closed his eyes and nearly purred in contentment.

They stayed like that, breath-light touches of her hands in his hair, until Naruto could breathe—really breathe. Then he pulled himself together with stern internal commands to stop being selfish, though his voice groaned without his consent as he pulled himself upright.

"That," he said, "was the best birthday present."

Her cheeks turned bright red, just as he'd hoped. He stood, reached out a hand.
"C'mon, Hina-hime," he said, words coming out more tired than he'd intended, so he compensated with his brightest grin. "Sorry for waking you! Walk you to your room?"

She took his hand, still blushing, and actually leaned into his support as she pushed to her feet, a little off balance from her ever-growing belly. He helped her fold the blanket she'd cuddled under, drape it back over the couch. Mom kept extra blankets and pillows on all the couches. And under some of the beds.

He almost reached for her hand, again, but lost nerve and followed a half-step behind as they went up the grand double stairs. Hinata looked like she wanted to say something—he could almost see the words building, the way she braced her shoulders to bear them. They reached her bedroom without a sound passing her lips, and he backed up another step, to give her the space to find her voice. Waited; smiled, wished her sweet dreams, turned to leave.

Today was too much. Good and bad and roaring crowds. He was so—so tired.

Tentative fingers gripped his sleeve, and he froze, twisted to catch Hinata's eyes, felt his stomach drop.

"W-wait," she said. "I—I have—something for you. For your birthday."

"What? No, I, I got too much—"

"To ask," she said. "Wait—" She turned, darted into her room, returned a moment later with a thick, square envelope, pressed it into his hands. "Naruto—"

—she was there, a hand reaching up and around to cup the back of his neck to press soft and warm and pull them closer and—and sparking ripples of light and good were just rolling over him, right from that spot where her skin touched his, and then her lips touched his.

It was delicate and fleeting and he'd stopped breathing before he could give it a name.

Kiss. That was a kiss.

Was his heart still beating?

"H-h-happy …day," she stuttered. Fled.

Naruto stood very, very still, staring at Hinata's door and wondering why he felt as desperate and high as he ever had after any life-and-death fight.

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VioiV

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Minato collapsed into bed, beyond grateful that everyone seemed to have survived the day.

Fifteen. Naruto. Naruto was alive, he was here, and in just a few minutes Minato would drag himself up to go check on his child because it was always a little too big a stretch of faith, to believe that Naruto was here—but reason told him that yes, Naruto was here, and at least for now, he was safe.

He'd made it—he'd made it to fifteen. Not three, or four, or five—the boy they'd buried was here, and well, and fifteen.
Now to get him to fifty. Seventy. Could Minato live long enough to see his son turn eighty? It was really the only reason to live that long—.

"I'm so proud of you," said Kushina, words and body loving as she snuggled into bed beside him.

"What you decided—how you went through with it today—I'm so proud, Mina, I really am," she whispered, nestling arms and legs until there was very little space left between them. He rolled onto his side, took her in his arm, banished whatever distance was left. "You really—you did it, you let him go. I know it's twisted all your thoughts and your whole huge heart up, but just—just give it a chance, keep giving it a chance, and you'll see."

He'd never hated doing the right thing more than he had the moment Naruto disappeared in a roar of motorcycle exhaust. It was what she'd been trying to tell him from the beginning—that Naruto only knew how to survive on his own, that burdening him with their constant protection would lessen his chances, have the opposite effect of the shield he wanted to be—but she was right, of course she was right. Didn't mean he had to like it.

No denying he liked these kisses, though.

The uncertain knock on the door interrupted the press of her mouth to his throat, and Minato remembered with a sudden pang of loss and humor all those long-ago nights when little Naruto seemed absolutely hell-bent on preventing any chance of a younger sibling. Kushina didn't slow down in the slightest, but Minato managed to disentangle himself with whispered apologies, wondering if he was right about who waited at the door.

It was Naruto, eyes that startled, blown-wide blue that made him look even younger than he was. One fist hung in the air, undecided about a second knock; the second clutched an open envelope. Minato reached out to him, worry rising as he noted how bright his son's eyes were, how whatever he needed to say seemed stuck in his throat.

"Hey, hey, you okay?" The boy had flinched when Minato raised his hand, but he knew now that it was reflex, not intent, and let it land gently on his shoulder.

Naruto's mouth closed, his adam's apple bobbed. "Dad—Mom—I—"

Kushina's shoulder bumped into Minato's as she joined him in the doorway. "What is it, baby?"

Minato watched that endearment write itself out in Naruto's too-wide eyes, blossom into sudden tears. "Thank you," he whispered. Dropped his head, hid behind his shaggy black fringe, forced words out that sounded like they weren't really ready to be heard. "For being my mom and dad, thank you," he said. "For giving birth to me, thank you. For finding—finding me, thank you."

The words were still processing, getting stuck on each individual heartbeat, as Minato tried to pull their boy into their arms. But he ducked down instead, fell on his knees, pressed his forehead to the floor.

"I—I'll try," he begged, "I promise, I promise, I want to be who you need—I'll do better, I, I will —"

They'd dropped to the floor to try to pull Naruto back up, but now they just pulled him forward instead, becoming a messy reaching puddle of family hug, sprawled across the doorway.

Kushina wiped her nose on Minato's shoulder. "Damn right," she hiccupped. Kissed the top of Naruto's head. Started crying again.

"I'll do better," Naruto said again, voice breaking. Twisted a little, so that Minato was afraid Naruto would try to move away and he really wasn't ready to let go of him yet—but he was just shifting to pull that envelope out from between the three of them, like he was worried that it would get crumpled. Minato wondered what was in it—if there was any tie between what was written there and this sudden, glorious opportunity to have his whole family in his arms at once, all their hearts kind of poured out into the middle, where they all could what held them most.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you, Naruto—" and Kushina looked up, caught his eye and beamed. They both pulled their boy a little closer. "Thank you for being born," she said. "Thank you for making me a mother and Minato a father, thank you for—for being—"

She couldn't say it. Didn't need to.

*Alive.*

OuYuO

Zamboni—the machine that drives around an ice rink smoothing out and laying down a new layer of ice. Just can't bring myself to call it an "ice-resurfacer", the only non-branded alternative.

*A/N: Song of the day: Ghosts That We Knew – Mumford and Sons*

Will trade 500-word omake on a scene of your choice for fanart! I wish I could illustrate this story SO BAD—but lopsided stick figures just don't do it justice.

I'm justenzhe on tumblr, if anyone wants to follow me there.
The trip from his parent's house to Sasuke's was startlingly short by motorcycle, and Naruto felt half-prepared when he rang the bell, shuffling awkwardly on the doorstep, wary of facing Mrs. Uchiha. He'd been making himself stay properly in bed all night, every night, even though it made it nearly impossible to sleep, and he knew he'd come off tired and twitchy.

The first two times he made his limbs lie (mostly) still between the sheets on top of the too-soft mattress of his own bed in his own room all night long, Naruto didn't really sleep.

The windows were too big, their angles leaving too much exposed, even with the bars built in by the paranoid man who designed the house in the first place. It would take Naruto eighty seconds, working from the outside, to get around them. He knew people who could cut that time in half.

Worst of all was how far away everyone was. If something went wrong he could never reach everyone in time—the house was too big, the corridors made too many turns, there wasn't enough cover—he wished, at the very least, to hear Hinata breathing.

On the third day, he shut himself in the basketball room and punished his way through his most intense kata on repeat until his joints turned to jelly and over-stressed muscle collapsed in on him and even the parts of his brain that were most difficult to shut up couldn't fathom beyond the burn.

That turned out to be a really stupid move, as he realized during the hockey game they lost later that night. He waited to be home to shower and spent most of it huddled on the floor cussing out every fiber of muscle he'd lost in this soft new life.

He slept nine hours that night. Right where he was supposed to (I'll do better, I promise—) and woke up to his dad shaking an aching shoulder; blinked into consciousness as the man's face melted from worry into this helpless growing grin, shoulders caving in relief.

There would be another game tonight. Sasuke would be there this time. Had to be, because it was the quarter-finals, and if they lost this one they lost the championship.

But they'd be okay. There was no way the bastard would not let them win. Not with the way he moved in practice today. Even Sakura had been impressed enough to look like maybe, just maybe, she was ready to start forgiving.

It was just that there was something else he needed help with, and he couldn't wait any longer, and now that Sasuke was going to insist on playing hockey, he was definitely well enough to help with the scariest thing Naruto had ever done.

(Okay maybe not the scariest. Maybe not even top-ten scary. But STILL. So very important, and therefore so very, very scary.)

(It involved books.)

The door creaked open, and Naruto straightened, shifting foot-to-foot, but it was only Sasuke, looking pretty tired and twitchy himself. Naruto huffed in relief.

"I saw you thirty minutes ago, dumbass."

"Forty! It was at least forty. I planned in time for you to do your shower routine after practice and everything. I need your help."
Sasuke straightened. "What kind?"

"Eh..." Naruto rubbed the back of his head, helplessly awkward. "'S something... for Hina-chan... gotta find... just come with me, you bastard." It ended up sounding a lot like begging. His cheeks went kind of hot, but he wasn't about to leave now.

"...Fine." The door closed in his face. Naruto did a small victory dance.

Mingled awe and jealousy over the wonder that was Naruto's new motorcycle had distracted Sasuke enough that he hadn't paused to worry about where Naruto's motorcycle was taking him.

"Dobe... this is the library."

"Yeah, I know," huffed Naruto, not letting up his insistent tug on Sasuke's jacket sleeve for even a moment. "They got tons of books here, yeah? Even—even—"

"Even what?"

Naruto blushed. Actually blushed. Curiosity barely beating out annoyance, Sasuke picked up the pace a little.

The security guard looked disappointed when they passed through the metal detectors just beyond giant wooden doors without sounding off the alarm, and stared after them with eyes narrowed in disdain. Sasuke stiffened, but Naruto just grinned, bright and disarming, and kept going until they were stood under the stained-glass cupola of the Konoha City Library atrium.

Sasuke watched Naruto squint at the signs leading the way from the atrium—Reference, History, Non-fiction, Children's, Young Adult, Fiction, Fantasy/Science Fiction, Romance, Foreign—watched his shoulders slumped.

"Neh, Sasuke...do you know where..."

"What kind of book are you looking for, usuratonkachi?"

"...Names," said Naruto.

Sasuke just looked at him,

"Baby names," mumbled Naruto, then straightened, chin jutting out, fists curling. Defensive. Committed.

Sasuke sighed. "Why'd we come here, then? You can find something like that online."

Naruto's eyes flashed, overbright. "No! I want a real name, not some stupid trendy one that doesn't even mean what some stupid webpage says it means. It has to be—be a really good one. A perfect one. From a book."

Swallowing the sarcasm biting at the back of his throat for his best friend's sake, Sasuke looked at the signs too, waiting for his bruised brain to deduce which category baby name books would be kept in.
He gave up.

"Ehhh? Wait up—hey—bastard—Where are you going? You gotta help me—"

Damn, but this was really, really important to Naruto. "To find a librarian, dumbass. Like I would know where freaking baby name books are kept."

They better find the best damn name. For Naruto's kid—but not Naruto's—no, still Naruto's, Sasuke decided, and even let the smile creeping up one side of his lips have its way.

TuYuT

Senju Tsunade stared across a massive expanse of desk at the anxious, unfortunately too-VIP-to-piss-off patient referred to her, and tried to pretend patience in the face of the fears the man refused to surrender, regardless of the many qualifications of both doctors already called in to offer very sound reassurances.

"Tashimodo-san, this is the world's most advanced model—an MRI-conditional pacemaker. While older models could be sensitive around extremely strong magnets such as those found in welding tools or MRI scanners, newer models have proven unaffected by just about anything you'll encounter in daily life, so please set your fears to...rest..."

"...Doctor? Are you all right?"

Tsunade stared, not at the patient seated anxiously in the VIP consulting room, but at every memory of every medical treatise on pacemakers and internal fibrillators she'd ever read. Which was a great deal, as she'd devoted every spare moment to little else in recent months.

It might work. It might work.

"Excuse me," she whispered, and the door fell shut behind her before any reply from her stunned audience could register. "Shizune—get Shizune," she ordered at the nearest nurses' station, strode away, doubled back—"Not to my office, tell her I'll be in cardiology—no, wait, get me the number of that woman, the head of cardiology in Sunagakure or whatever—NOW! What are you staring at? Now—"

A chance. Months of testing and prodding an awkward and unbearably brave boy who was all wired up to die and nothing but dead ends to show for it but now—now—How did I not realize sooner? Immediately? There are risks—but—

Everything she once would name family was in pieces too shattered and jagged to ever set back together. She'd never been much of a sister to Kushina, had less than nothing to offer, then and now. But there was something about Naruto (her nephew—her nephew) that'd wriggled past all her walls before she'd even realized what had happened, and the moment she did realize, she'd begun mourning.

She couldn't save him.

But she could.

She would. She would.
Team Seven owned the ice that night.

Kakashi had worried, watching them fit their raw edges back together in practice drills so tense the rest of their teammates flinched and swallowed swears and kept wisely out of the way, that too much had changed. That nothing would fit the way it had just three months ago. That it was time to break up his private little dream-team, disperse the three of them into more stable partnerships, and not hear a word of protest about it until the end of the season.

Maybe they were on to him, or maybe they were just Team Seven, and busting expectations was kind of what they did, and no amount of life-rearrangement would stop the perfect steal-pass-pass-SMASH SMACK INTO THE GOAL (take that, Kumogakure!) they had going on just so, so beautifully.

He kind of loved them.

Not that the rest of the team was slacking off. With packed stands and more cameras than should really be allowed at a junior league game and a decades-old rivalry to rise up to, there wasn't a kid on the ice not skating their hearts out. Chouji was an impassable wall. Shikamaru was everywhere Kumo's offence didn't expect him to be, and all his passes sailed true. Moegi was pulling off full-power Sakura-impressions with alarming accuracy. When Shika switched out with Konohamaru, the two youngest players tag-teamed a defensive line so relentless Chouji had very few shots left to block.

He'd have to treat them all to ramen or something.

Final score: 12-8 for Konoha.

Naruto was laughing. Sakura was hugging her boys, one after the other, dragging them together into one big sweaty lump, disentangling one arm to loop it around Chouji as the rest of the team joined in.

He caught Sasuke jerking free, probably not even aware he was grinning.

Asuma appeared at Kakashi's shoulder, red-faced and a little disbelieving. "We're in the finals," he said.

"We are," said Kakashi.

"After that last game I thought-what with everything-well, damn. These kids. These sick, sick kids. And you know what kept coming to mind? I'm glad I'm not the one playing against them. We were good, Kakashi, but we weren't this good."

"Sure," said Kakashi easily, something warm curling smug in his chest. "They'll surpass us. But not yet. We're not done with them yet."

"Cheers to that," Asuma said, grin tilting wicked.
That night, Minato dreamed what he'd dreamed for years.

The dream where he found Naruto.

It started as it always did—in the mundane re-living of everyday life that might be called a stress dream; Minato had never learned how to stop work just because he fell asleep. Sometimes he'd be at a desk, filling out the endless paperwork that had been a far bigger part of the PM position than any of the advisors who'd egged him on in campaigning for it had ever let on. Sometimes he'd be cleaning out the locker rooms, as he'd often done in as a teenage WoF star, because no one else was willing to do it. Sometimes he'd be travelling from any given Point A to Point B, always with his phone to his ear or a laptop open on his lap as he chipped away at Very Important Tasks that, he always knew, meant very little in the grand scheme of things. Once he'd been cleaning the kitchen after an angry Kushina had stress-cooked an entire feast that was both too large and too burnt for any one man to eat, no matter how desperately said man wished to reassure his wife that he really, really loved her even when they had very different goals in life—not that he hadn't tried. It was always so terribly real, down to the details of finger-cramp or stomach-ache, and then—

Dad! Dad-dad-dad-daddy! DAD! DAD—

Naruto.

He would realize, with sudden gut-dropping panic, that Naruto was gone. Had been gone for a long time. That Konoha's best had exhausted their resources looking for him, that Minato himself had screamed himself hoarse roaming the woods behind their home calling for him—

DAD! DAD!

It's just a dream, his dream-self always realized, despair dull with familiarity. But the voice, the voice was real, it was real—

I'M RIGHT HERE! RIGHT HERE! DADDY FIND ME DAD-DAD-DADY FIND ME DADDY—

And Minato would be running, dream or no dream, even for just a second longer of hearing that voice, even for a glimpse of bright eyes and bright hair even if it was just a phantom made of grief and his most desperate desires—

And Naruto was there.

Naruto, he cried.

A little face would turn to him, tear-stained cheeks spread wide in that hero-worship smile he'd never been enough to deserve, short arms would reach for him—I knew you'd find me! Daddy!—

In the breath that his arms would close around his boy, Minato would wake, clutching nothing.

He knew it, knew it like he knew it was a dream, but just like he'd always done everything in his power to come when that voice called him, even if only in dreams, he ran and reached and—

—and for the first time, the first time in twelve years of dreams, solid cloth and warm flesh met his fingers.
I'm not dreaming, he realized, sky reeling in wonder. He's here, he's real, I've found him, I've found him!

"Dad," whispered Naruto. His voice was deep. His body was big—scarred skin and hard muscle and long limbs that spilled out of Minato's arms. There was a hole where his heart should be.

"No," said Minato, staring at his own fingers through the gap in his son's chest. The limbs he cradled were stiff. Naruto couldn't have spoken, couldn't have been warm to the touch, because he was dead before Minato found him.

"No," gasped Minato, "no, no, it's not true, no, Naruto no—" and the thing in his arms wasn't Naruto anymore, not really, but Minato clutched the cold dead thing to his heart because it was all he had, all he'd ever have, and he wondered if a hole had been ripped through his own chest, too, because the pain was—so much—and to die too—would just be a relief now—Naruto—

Cold shock splashed him awake, and he sat up drenched and wheezing and clutching nothing. The shapes of his bedroom walls pulled themselves together, tiny details like the blanket folded over the back of a chair and the towel hanging from the hook on the bathroom door registering, calming, shifting him back to reality. Kushina's face loomed large and white, eyes too wide and jaw set grim, the glass of water she always set next to her bed empty in her hand.

"And now the bed's all wet," she grumbled. "I tried to wake you, but you were so far gone, and clutching your chest like—. Mina. I thought you were having a heart attack, Mina," and were she any other woman, she would have started crying. What few tears did leak through were dashed away angrily, and then she was hustling him out of bed and throwing a dry shirt at his chest and stripping the sheets (though there were really only small spots of damp) and before Minato had managed to really start breathing normally again, he was in a freshly-made bed with an angry wife wrapped around his chest.

She wasn't really angry, he knew. She was scared. Which made two of them.

"The same dream?" she asked, when the shadows had swallowed enough silence for both of them to realize they weren't going back to sleep.

Not the same. Minato thought about nodding, about leaving it at that, but the pain in his chest and throat was real even if the corpse he'd had in his arms was not. He lay still and let her hold him, tried to cover the image of empty half-open blue eyes with the Naruto he'd watched win tonight's game, bright and grinning and practically glowing with victory and—

"I found him," he whispered.

Kushina nudged against him, arms reaching further, to hold tighter. "And then he disappeared," she said. She knew this dream. "But he didn't, Minato, he's upstairs, asleep, maybe even his own bed —"

"Not the same," he said. His voice twisted around the lump in his throat. "He was—he was how he is now. But he. He was dead."

Kushina stilled.

"A giant hole right through his chest, and his eyes—"

"Stop," she said. Pulled away from him. He regretted immediately, wished he'd just nodded, hadn't confided. She was warm and the skin of his palms kept feeling the rigid cold of a cadaver that wasn't even real.
"Come on," she said. Took him by the wrist, pulled him up. "Come on, we're going to see our boy breathing."

They went. Crept into their child's room, found him well and whole and quick to wake no matter how quietly they moved. "Eh, just you...didja see the goal I made?" Naruto mumbled, blinking unfocused sleepy eyes at them, then flopped back onto the little puddle of drool on his pillow, and snored again in seconds.

If Minato cried, in their own room and with Kushina once more wrapped around him, no one but Kushina would ever know.

"You know," sighed Kushina, "I've been waiting twelve years for you to let go and cry. You better let them all out now. All the fear and tears. All of it."

While Kushina slept, Minato wrapped himself around her and counted her breaths so his could follow along and stared into the dark and wondered how his palms could possibly still crawl cold.

Kushina stared at her sister, sat awkwardly at her kitchen counter, and tried to understand what she was hearing.

Minato seemed to be having similar problems. "Tell me... tell me one more time. Please. Please, Tsunade."

"There are still some risks involved, Minato, but I really think this is our solution. The device we're dealing with is custom-made, but Chiyo-san and I both believe it to be modeled after a particular pediatric fibrillator that was first manufactured nineteen years ago. Shizune is still conducting every test she can think of on that model and the three most similar prototypes we've been able to get ahold of, but all four have been too disrupted by the magnetic waves emitted by our MRI scanners to send any significant electrical charge down their leads. So we put Naruto in the MRI room, operate with the scanner active, find the location of the second battery—which the MRI scanner could certainly help with—, and remove both while they are actively impaired under magnetic resonance.

"And then... and then he's free."

"Free," repeated Kushina, not quite daring to believe. She'd become accustomed to watching hands, to breathing against the constant fear of a finger tap sending her son's heart into spasms before any of them have time to do anything about it.

"Until now, the risk of one or both fibrillators responding to any tampering by overwhelming Naruto's heart before both could be removed outweighed the chances of success of any surgical removal," Tsunade said. Eyes over-bright, words coming a little too fast. "But the highest probability is that the batteries we are dealing with don't stand a chance against the kind of magnets they'd be up against, and as long as they are in range of that active magnetic field, will be unable to transmit any electrical charge."

She paused, but seemed to understand when her audience remained speechless.

"There's still a lot of work to do—I can operate using non-ferrous titanium surgical instruments, but
we'll have to find alternatives to some of the monitoring equipment, as an active magnetic field could interfere with or impair it. But I think we'll be ready in a matter of days, no more than three or fours days but hopefully just two, and I give my strongest recommendation—as a doctor and as —as Naruto's aunt—that we proceed immediately. I can't tell you the nightmares I've had, knowing what that fibrillator could do to him. What I couldn't do if someone used it against him."

Minato had gone still, the skin around his lips drawn tight. Kushina reached for his hand.

"We've had our share of nightmares, too," she said lightly, then looked up at the woman—the woman baby-Kushina had so adored and admired, from that carefully-kept distance, and put her whole heart in two words: "Thank you."

Tsunade held her gaze for barely a heartbeat before glancing away, eyes suspiciously bright.

"Not yet," she said quietly. "Wait until Naruto is whole and healed and safe from—from one kind of trigger, at least, and then we can all give thanks."

"We trust you," said Minato, words a little rough, raw with sincerity. "We trust you, Tsunade—you were the one who confirmed who he was. You always believed I'd find him. You'll save him. If it was anyone else—"

"—but it's you," Kushina finished for him, smiling at her sister. "And we're going to win—you're going to save his heart, and whoever or whatever we're fighting, Naruto is going to win!"

VoIoV

Something was up. Naruto knew it the moment his parents stepped into the changing room, where he was waiting just like he was supposed to, showered and changed and feeling satisfied with a well-run morning practice. Sasuke was waiting with him, and moved closer, shoulders shifting, chin lifting.

"What happened?" asked Naruto, standing, bracing.

"We should wait until we're home to talk," Dad said.

"I can't wait," said Mom. There was this big smile pulling at her lips, and Naruto was suddenly uncertain that he'd read the tightness around her eyes right.

"Then at least until we're alone—" Dad and Sasuke were starting a stare-off, but Mom just kept talking.

"The thing attached to your heart," Mom said, "Tsunade found a way to get around it—get around it and remove it. She's going to take it out. You're going to be free."

What?

"What?" whispered Sasuke. "The—the fibrillator—and the back-up battery—both of them?"

"Yes!" said Mom, and—

"We have to keep this completely classified, completely secret, we're not telling anyone, not even Kakashi or our security people—just in case—but yes, it's real, Naruto, she found the way—" said
It was like gravity let him go, just for a moment, and he was floating somewhere up around the ceiling and he couldn't feel the floor his feet were touching or think in anything like words.

Sasuke sat down heavily on the bench behind them, hands going up to cover his face, and for a breath Naruto was confused about what was wrong with him and then thought gratitude and then thought no, what?

He realized his parents were hugging him, and he kind of lurched back into his body, his body that was strangely calm, still mostly feeling the good-tired of hard skating plus the kind-of nice, kind-of uncomfortable tightness of a double hug. He felt the need to calm everyone else down.

"Okay," he said, and wriggled free, but let them each keep an arm around him. "That's good news, right?"

"Good news?" Dad was laughing, this kind of disbelieving, giddy laugh that clashed with the anxiety lining his eyes. Naruto wondered if those lines would go away if the surgery thing happened. "This is the best news we've had since Kakashi said he thought he knew who you were. Since we knew he was right."

"Oh. Okay," said Naruto. "So, um, when? After the hockey finals, right?"

Sasuke's head snapped up. "What do you mean, after the hockey finals? That's another nine days. Can't they do it sooner than that?" the last question was directed to Naruto's parents, and they were both nodding along.

"Tsunade says she can be ready in two. Four at the most."

Two days? That was... that was really fast.

"Don't be an idiot, dobe," Sasuke was hissing, standing now, grabbing at his sleeve. "It's not like hockey matters when you're dealing with the literal line between life and death. Take this chance, take it—"

"But I've lived all these years already," said Naruto, and didn't really mean it as a protest, because if he was feeling anything it was confusion, not defiance, but everyone tensed up like he'd said something intolerable, and right, I was gonna get everyone calmed down, yeah?

"Eheheh! Don't worry! It's not like I'm scared of the surgery or anything! Sure sure, let's do it... it's just that I really wanted to play in that final..."

He let the last few words be swallowed up in another crushing hug, though he thought Sasuke heard him from the way the hand on his arm tightened.

"You're going to be safe, you're going to be okay," Mom was saying, and Dad was sighing—almost shuddering—in agreement, and Sasuke finally let go him and shuffled awkwardly backwards, because the hug was going on uncomfortably long. "You're going to be okay, Naruto, everything's going to be okay—"

Is it? Naruto wondered, still not quite sure gravity had fixed its grip on him. ...Am I?

.  

vuHuv
It was unlike any surgery Tsunade had performed. Increasingly frustrated with the equipment and
details that could go wrong in an active magnetic field, she turned to field guides for military
medics operating under adverse conditions for a more applicable how-to guide. In the end, that was
what it most resembled: billion-yen technology and sterile hospital conditions aside, she had an
unconscious boy strapped to a cloth gurney, her most basic set of titanium surgical tools, and only
Shizune to attend, standing by with a crash cart in case it all went wrong.

It wasn't going wrong. The primary fibrillator showed every sign of being scrambled or shut down
under the interference of an active magnetic field. They hadn't found the back-up battery where
they expected it to be, lodged under pectoral muscle as the primary one was; but she'd allowed for
that, too, and found it in Naruto's left thigh, just as inactive as the first.

Extraction took some careful carving; there was twelve years of muscle growth and assimilation to
cut through. She stopped breathing as she cut the first lead, with Shizune's gaze fixed to the mobile
heart monitor, but the mechanical beep held steady. Some muscle was stitched back together, some
left to regrow on its own. There would be two small patches of permanent nerve damage, but
nothing that would interfere with this boy's dreams. Careful, careful sutures, warm rising certainty
that this young, strong, survived-so-much body would heal quickly and fully and leave barely a
scar to show the death-threat some faceless villain thought he held in his hands.

*Let them try, just let them try,* Tsunade thought savagely. *My sister will catch them. Their trip to
hell will be short.*

The leads would have to stay; they'd grown into artery walls. Without the fibrillators they were
useless. Harmless. A little extra metal paving the way to a firmly beating heart.

Tsunade was always careful. Exceptionally aware—one of many gifts that made her an
exceptionally capable surgeon. But she'd never taken more care in the final touches of what
amounted to two simple surgeries, swift fingers finishing deft work on the second incision and
extraction as Shizune read off vital stats, a hint of triumph seeping through her quiet, confident
report.

They'd done it.

Naruto's face was slack, easy under the forced peace of anesthesia; apart from the scars slashed
down each cheeks, he looked just like the boy he should have been. Young. Free.

They were done. Shizune helped her disrobe. At Tsunade's nod, she slipped out the door and into
the MRI monitoring booth, started the scanner's shut-down sequence.

In their insulated receptacle, two bloody fibrillators buzzed.

Naruto slept peacefully on.

The first thought that came, when he was awake enough to know he was awake, to think it words,
was that he was surprised.
A face loomed over his, a little blurry, and it wasn't until there was a voice too that he recognized her.

"M-mom?"

"You made it," she said, smiling and crying. "You made it, baby, you made it."

Everything whirled: the heart-bomb, the surgery, the secret certainty he'd been afraid to admit: that once they put him to sleep, he wouldn't wake up.

He twisted his head, a little nausea rising, tried to see if it was there—if the blue envelope was there. It was the only thing he'd asked for. The only thought there had still been room for, under the panic he'd had to hide when they were planning and prepping and telling him to get dressed in nothing but sterile paper and to breathe deep, deep, the poison that would put him to sleep.

The last thing he'd seen was his parents, saying they loved him; he'd been glad for that.

But he woke up.

Still here.

"What are you looking for, baby?"

"Envelope," he managed, after a few tries. Mom gave him water instead. He drank it, because his throat hurt, but he needed—needed—

"I've got it," said Dad, and Naruto turned his heavy head the other way, surprised to see him, but glad, and he started to say so, but Dad was taking Hinata's blue envelope out of his inside jacket pocket and putting it in Naruto's hand and folding Naruto's fingers over it and then holding them while Naruto held the envelope, slowly registering the thick paper under still-numb fingers.

"Welcome back, son."

"Love you," Naruto said, and let his eyes slip closed again.


In a thick blue envelope on purple paper wrapped around black-and-white ultrasound pictures:

*This is Baby-chan. See her cute nose?*

*I have so much to say - Happy Birthday! - and a million other things.*

*I'll try to say what matters most.*

*This baby comes from the worst thing that ever happened to me but she is only good.*

*I had a lot of bad days in my life. There was the day my mother died, and they kept coming after that. But the worst were the ones between when I got pregnant and when I knew that I was pregnant. I didn't know what to feel so I didn't feel anything. I couldn't see and I couldn't think and I couldn't cry and I kept wondering if dying would make it stop or if it would be exactly the same.*
I thought it was probably worth the risk. Dying. Hoping for death was the only hope I could feel.

When my body started changing and I realized that I might be pregnant, I was angry because it made dying more complicated.

In the end, I chose her life, and that meant choosing my life, and I don't know what kind of life I can give her, but I will give her everything I will ever be. I can feel her moving. She's so real.

I'm scared.

My daughter's life is starting out unlucky-unlucky because she's mine.

Because Naruto-kun exists, I had enough hope to fight for this child's life. Your life is unlucky, but it didn't stop you from shining. It didn't stop you from loving. It didn't stop you from being the best person I know.

On my birthdays, my mother taught me to bow and say, "Thank you," because my parents gave me life. And Mama always said, "Thank you for being born. Thank you for being mine."

Naruto-kun, thank you for being born.

Thank you for being good even when the world is bad.

Thank you for being safe when nothing in the world was safe.

Thank you for being you.

These are the things that are most important—the things that I want to give the one I love most in the world: the little heart beating under mine. She is unlucky but she is loved and now I know that some stars can light up any kind of night. I want her to know that every day. Every single day.

When my child is born, will you give her her name?

Every time I say that name, I will think of light and love—you. I will teach her how precious she is, how she can overcome anything, do anything, be anything, be bright and brave and good and kind, and she'll know she can because she was named by someone who is and was and did.

Maybe it's unfair that I'm asking something from you when I should be giving something to you? Of everything I am and have, I have nothing more precious to ask.

Love you.

Happy Birthday, Naruto-kun! Thank you for being born, Naruto-kun! I will celebrate your life for every day of mine.

Hinata
Minato ventured beyond Naruto's tucked-away VIP suite in search of snacks and 'real' coffee for his wife, and found an errant Uchiha instead. Sasuke was asleep in what was more of a waiting corner than a waiting room, just outside the restricted VIP section. For the first time, Minato saw a child as vulnerable as his own.

He bought extra snacks.

"Does your family know where you are?" he asked, after a careful nudge (because these were kids who attacked first, woke second) and polite disregard for the mumbled obscenities the boy blinked awake with.

"Itachi always knows," grumbled Sasuke, after long sullen seconds in which he appeared to debate answering at all. He straightened. "How's Naruto?"

"Good," said Minato, unable to stop a smile. "Vitals are all strong. Sleeping. He did wake once, for about ten seconds."

The taut, tired lines of Sasuke's eyes and shoulders eased. He accepted the hot chocolate and crisps Minato offered with grudging thanks, burned his tongue and tore through the package and Minato wondered when the kid had bothered to eat last. He could eat a lot, if Big Breakfasts were anything to go by.

"Thank you," said Minato. "For convincing Naruto to go along with this willingly," he added, when all he got was a skeptical eyebrow. "For a lot of things, probably."

There was an awkward kind of softening in that prickly body language, and Minato took it as a small victory.

"You didn't know how scared he was," Sasuke said, crisps demolished, hot chocolate cupped in both hands.

"Of the surgery?"

Shoulders hunched. "Yes." Bloodshot eyes met his. "He thought he was going to die."

Minato's mouth opened, denial a half-thought caught out by hard young eyes. No words came.

"I didn't tell you," said Sasuke, "but I knew. He thought he was going to die in that surgery. That's why he wanted to play just – just a few more games. One more would have been enough. But I didn't say anything, because I didn't care that he was scared." It came out bold and defiant but Minato heard the agony. It made his throat ache.

"We told him the risks, Sasuke. Death was the most miniscule of them. We had every foreseeable safety and back-up plan in place—so how he could think that? He didn't think that."

Sasuke shrugged, scornful and helpless. "That's just Naruto. Always thinks he's gonna die."

Minato shifted, frowned, tried to keep things light, grinned against the gnawing echoes of too-recent nightmares. "Nah. He acts like he thinks he's immortal! Like he really believes he's some sort of video game character that can take a thousand hits with zero damage, or has regenerative powers, or multiple lives-"
Sasuke made a sound that was maybe a laugh, maybe a sigh. "No, see? That's what I just said. He's so sure he's gonna die, he sees no point in being scared of anything else that can happen. I mean, anything that has to do only with him. It's everyone else he's always freaking out about."

Minato didn't want it to make sense, but it really, really did, sharp as the knife-point zig-zag-cutting an already scarred forearm, searing as that burned-into-memory, pay-any-price desperation warning given hard and clear through too-bright blue eyes. The Naruto-ache in his chest that was actually his heart twinged hard, got his lungs all caught up, and for awkward moments he had to fake being able to breathe.

There was something in the too-old eyes the Uchiha was watching him with, something so much like that consuming curl of fear and faith and need that was the closest Minato could come to explaining what it felt like to love that he wondered, suddenly, what it was this nearly-grown man really felt for his son.

"It was fun," Sasuke said, pushed the words into heavy silence, long limbs straightening and stretching but stiffening again under the strangeness of a conversation neither of them was quite sure should be happening. "Everything we did. 'Cause Naruto always did everything like it was the last thing he was ever gonna do." Dark eyes met Minato's, that same hard challenge leveled again. "I miss that."

Stop, Minato wanted to say. "Well, come on," he said instead. "Come see him, and then go home. Get some sleep. Don't you have a hockey game tonight?"

"Tomorrow." The boy stood. Guarded distance between distrustful adult and sullen teen fell back into place between them. Minato put a hand on the kid's shoulder, fully expecting Sasuke to twitch away. He did.

But – "Maybe that will change," Sasuke said. The words were hard to catch. "Maybe he'll get scared, normal scared, and—and careful. Maybe he'll be afraid now."

That didn't sound like regret. It sounded like hope.

Naruto woke to soft light and strange smells and monotonous beeping and his brain pulled up the word hospital really, really slow, like whatever was making his thoughts all fuzzy was also making them sticky, and they had to be peeled off piece by piece.

He couldn't feel his leg. The left one, he figured out, and at the same time he discovered the heart monitor clipped to his finger and the IV in the back of his hand and the blood pressure cuff auto-inflating around his bicep and the shadow that was the wrong shape hovering over his sleeping mother—

"Still," ordered Yugito, and Naruto willed himself and his breathing and the increasing tones of the heart monitor to be still, froze rigid and reaching.

"Don't touch her—" he begged, straining painfully on one propped arm, sticky-slow brain trying to think through the steps for detaching wires and getting enough force from one leg to get to that corner fast enough, steadily enough, to have a chance—but Yugito just raised a hand, calm and empty.
"Still," she said again, voice barely a breath across the room, but Naruto was too well-trained not to hear and fear it, pain and adrenaline and confusion be damned. "Still, Naruto. I won't hurt her. Are you well?"

His throat closed up as panic tightened into a more complicated kind of ache. He wished she would step forward enough that he could see her face, but knew she would remain nothing but shadow. Her voice came easy, dry enough to be teasing, and she hadn't done anything, yet, to play the enemy.

"Are you well?"

"I—"

"Hospital, why? Hurts—Mom—get away from Mom—why— "They took it out," he managed, memories slipping slow into order: Sasuke making fun of him for being scared; agreeing to doing this right away so it would be super secret; forcing his body to sit and stand and lie down and not shake while they prepped it for surgery; Mom and Dad telling him they loved him. Mom crying you made it, you made it: "The—the thing in my chest. Fibri-whatever. The batteries. Both of them. They put me in an MRI machine and the magnets screwed up the zappers and— " his throat closed. Why-leg why-if Mom wakes-

Silence, or maybe a sigh, from the corner. There was a growing ache under his left shoulder, sharp and throbbing against the pull of muscle as he worked to push himself higher, see clearer. Shadow moved. Stepped forward, and in the same breath that Naruto raised shocked eyes to her unmasked face, Yugito was forcing him back onto his pillows, something softer than he remembered ever seeing on the carved-stone lines of her always-indifferent face.

She'd always been very careful not to love him.

"Good," she said. "I'm glad, Naruto."

On the hide-a-bed in the corner, Kushina stirred; Yugito moved to the door, silent as a hunting cat, and with a few taps to the phone in her hand, the lights in the corridor went dark.

"Have a good future, little fox," floated back to him, and long before the seconds it took for Mom to wake and the corridor lights to flicker back on had passed, she was gone.

Naruto tried to breathe.

Another light flipped on, hands reached. "I thought I saw—I heard—" gasped Mom, as the wordless panic she woke with heaved into relief to find Naruto there and breathing. "What just happened? Was someone here?"

Maybe if he kept his head down—"Just turned the TV on for a sec," he told her. "Sorry. Didn't mean to wake you."

"That's okay—baby, are you okay? Are you—you're crying! Where does it hurt? Should your heartbeat be that fast? I'll call the nurse—"

He couldn't. Couldn't have doctors poking at him right now. Couldn't be lost in the fog of pain meds, or endure another EKG, or—"Please," he begged, throat too tight again, words scraping against an entire childhood's aching loss— "no, please no, Mom, I—"

"You are crying—sweetheart—let's—let's get you help—"

"No—"
"Okay," she whispered, eyes too wide, hands falling from his cheeks, backing away until the sudden frantic beeping of the heart monitor finally slowed. He shut his eyes tight. Shut out Mom's face and Yugito's eyes and all the pain that wasn't from any sort of surgery.

That was goodbye. He knew in his bones: goodbye to everything, everything that had been Naruto before he knew who Naruto was.

Shouldn't hurt this much. *Shouldn't.*

(They'd made it so hard to love them—made sure he knew they would never love back, could always, easily, thoughtlessly hurt him—had hurt him—but—but—)

*(but—)*

And there was something else, bubbling up through pain so intense it jerked ribs and diaphragm and guts in until his entire center was one huge fist clenched too tight and he probably wasn't breathing again but there was something else, something flickering and rising, tiny lights bursting brighter and brighter until in a sudden, shuddering breath, he could give it a name.

Naruto opened his eyes.

"Mom," he said. She was right there, all white-faced and worried, and there was another growing glow sweet and warm just from being able to *say her name*—"Mom, Mom—"

Her attention split between him and the door, which Dr. Tsunade was entering, but he didn't care, just reached for her. "Mom, I can *live.*"

*Live* caught on the fist twisting up everything inside on its way outside, and the grasping-aching darkness leached light and dragged down hard, wrenched shut throat-mouth-eyes and all that glowed behind them, and he gasped to breathe but her arms were there and he grabbed and held *tight* and it was okay if he couldn't see or speak because she was there and—"I can live, I can *live,* Mom! I can live—"

He held tight and shook apart, mourning and wheezing and sobbing and celebrating until he was back in control of his body but too tired to do anything but kind of melt sideways, head in her lap, tears soaking silent into the cloth of her jeans as he cried himself back to sleep from every single nightmare she'd never been there for.

pxUxq

"We need to get him home," was the first thing Minato said, after getting over the surprise and instant fear of finding Naruto laid out too-still and his wife and sister-in-law holding each other and weeping. He didn't quite understand what had happened—something about Naruto waking up and crying because he wasn't going to die—but he was glad to go along with their heartfelt relief.

Still—"The city's crawling with police," he told them. "They were blockading streets just a few kilometers down the highway from here. I turned around because I was afraid if I went back to the house I wouldn't be able to get back here, and no one knows what's going on yet. Rin's on it, but we don't have enough security here—"

"My hospital has excellent security," Tsunade cut in. She sounded quite willing to take on anyone
threatening Naruto herself, a sentiment Minato appreciated; but their ridiculous house had a panic room, and he was not above overreacting enough to use it.

"Would it be safe to move him?" wondered Kushina. "I know whatever's going on probably has nothing to do with Naruto, but with this kid's luck—"

Tsunade's mouth thinned, but she moved to check vitals and surgery sites, an examination she had completed just minutes before. "As a last resort," she allowed, "but I cannot recommend it. He's recovering admirably, but incision sites are still draining; risk of infection is comparably high, and a delayed adverse reaction to the anesthesia or unforeseen complication from the surgery is enough of a possibility that I just—I want him where I can see him, where I have the tools to treat him, Minato, Kushina, and I know you can understand that."

"I do," sighed Minato, and made his body sit so it wouldn't pace, but didn't bother to reign in the hand gripping at his hair. He'd torn himself away from his son's bedside to debrief their assistants and security team, something he felt had better be done in person after not trusting them enough to tell them about the surgery before it happened.

(It hadn't really been about trust. It was just... extreme caution. And they knew that about him—Rin, Obito, and Kakashi did, anyway—but he knew they'd be hurt, and he also didn't want to risk phone calls or emails or any other form of information that could be too-easily intercepted. Extreme caution. Right.)

Kushina moved next to him, untangled his hand from his hair, bent to kiss his abused skull. "We're safe," she whispered to him. "We're together. We're protected. We're—"

Behind them, the night sky flared white-orange-red. Kushina and Tsunade both leaped to cover Naruto, Minato pushed himself between his family and the window, and as dark re-fell as suddenly as it had fled, thunderous echoes shook through the room.

Maybe three block away, plumes of smoke blossomed over Konoha, burgeoning bellies tinted red.

"—safe," whispered Kushina.

Sasuke eased the door open with every intention of disappearing quietly into his room, guiltily hoping that Itachi was on a double shift and too busy to notice Sasuke's near-16-hour absence—but no, Itachi was very much there, hard fingers gripping into shoulders, spinning him around, pinning him to the wall, jarring free every excuse before there was even time for pride.

"My battery died! I swear I didn't turn my phone off, or let it die on purpose, it was an accident—I'm sorry, aniki! I'll keep it charged—"

"Are you hurt?" Itachi interrupted, eyes very focused and also too wide, and Sasuke finally noticed that his brother was in full uniform. Itachi never wore uniform, not on regular shifts—"Did anyone tail you home? You wouldn't have noticed, would you. Were you stopped—"

"I'm fine," Sasuke managed, though his heart was thudding with echoed panic he had yet to see an explanation for. "What happened? Is Mother okay? What's wrong?"
The grip on his shoulders eased, small knobs of pain from each bony fingertip pulsing into place instead. Itachi let out a breath. "You're fine," he said. Stared a moment longer, as if daring Sasuke to provide any evidence that this was anything but true, and all Sasuke could do was wait, and shift awkwardly.

Long arms dropped and Itachi pulled away, form flowing straight and fine into the flawless cold professionalism Sasuke hated most. His brother looked distant and dangerous, and there was a gun at his hip, and all the little hairs on Sasuke's arms stood up. Itachi moved on quickly to the door, and then maybe he took pity, because he looked over his shoulder and offered something of an explanation.

"There's been a series of terrorist attacks throughout the city," he said. "Every member of the force has been called to duty. Information is limited, but it is possible that police officers and their families will be specifically targeted. Take care of Mother."

The door clicked and locked into place behind him, and Sasuke stood staring into nothing, empty air vibrating with the fear Itachi left behind.

ioUoi

Thirty-eight hours. Naruto (and Namikaze-san and Kushina-oba) had been gone for thirty-eight hours, and no one knew why or where, only that they left strict orders to keep up the appearance of everything happening as usual in their home. Rin-san had said there'd been a call from Namikaze-san more than an hour ago, that he was coming home to fill them in on things, that he'd explain everything when he arrived in fifteen minutes. They'd all gathered near the entrance while pretending not to—Kakashi and Rin and Obito on one side, Genma and Iwashi on the other, and Hinata hovering on the edge, hoping against hope that Naruto would be walking through that door soon, too.

Naruto hadn't come. No one had. There'd been a second phone call that sent Rin-san rushing to her office, only to pop back out barely a minute later with crisp orders for the entire security team to go on full alert, starting a moment's rush of urgent motion and tension throughout the house before all was too still again. Then it was just Hinata and Kakashi and Obito standing awkwardly in the front receiving room. Obito asked Kakashi about the hockey practice he was meant to be coaching. Kakashi explained that he'd already sent in his excuses. The two of them started making up and comparing excuses, each more ridiculous than the last, and Hinata wrapped her hands under the baby hiccupping in her belly and tried to think through threatening tears.

She didn't have many expectations about being kept in the loop, but she could see the lack of information (trust?) grating even on the adults—Kakashi, Rin, Obito, the entire security team—and that helped her feel better about her own anxieties. The atmosphere in the big, strange house had grown increasingly tense (and empty, terribly empty, without Naruto crowing exaggerated commentary to his own athletic feats in the basketball room or eating huge portions of food in Kushina's kitchen or flopping down on the ground near whatever quiet spot Hinata nestled in to work on some trigonometry, promising he'd be 100% quiet and well-behaved and she wouldn't even know he was there—) until she retreated entirely to her room, and shut out the world, and got a lot of schoolwork done.

As the sun had set on day two, Obito clomped around the house turning on all the lights in all the rooms while Rin chided him not to waste electricity and Kakashi said cheekily that of course all
the lights needed to be on, to welcome everyone home. Rin said they didn't know when anyone would be home, that it could be weeks or even months, but then Namikaze-san had called, and everything came back to life in the flooding light.

Until he called again.

Maybe they would still come. Maybe they had stopped at Naruto's favorite ramen stand on the way. Or got stuck in traffic and Rin was helping them figure out the best way around it. Or paparazzi saw and mobbed them, and Rin was starting PR stuff for the photos that would come out while they drove around in circles so they wouldn't get followed home. Maybe Naruto was on the news right now—

"Can we turn on the news?" Hinata asked, all the words out and smooth before she'd made up her mind to even say them, and both men turned to her in surprise.

"Good thinking, Hina-hime," Obito-san said, one of his warm, wide smiles added on the end, and Kakashi-san was already manning the remote.

"Explosions all within a 3 kilometer radius of the city center. We have three confirmed deaths and eighteen injured, and those numbers are expected to rise. The KPD is treating this as a pre-planned, coordinated attack, and have issued a warning to get indoors and stay indoors. Repeat, please find a safe place and stay there. Report any suspicious activity to the number on the screen. More attacks may be coming—"

Hinata didn't realize she was falling until Kakashi caught her. Her knees had simply stopped working, the reporter's face blurring and the continuing stream of words sliding meaningless over ringing ears. Even before she could focus enough to pick out words, before three interminably-long quarter-hours passed and she realized that the pictures they had started showing were artists' renditions of scarred-cheeked murder victims. Before the warnings that the bombs appeared be diversions allowing far more targeted killings, before the nervously drawn comparisons to the signature of a murderous gang believed to have fought itself into extinction twelve years ago—before 'Nine-tails' crossed the newscaster's lips—Hinata knew this was about Naruto.

She had felt it. Felt it creeping and cold, slowing the blood in her veins; felt it in uneasy anticipation she'd shoved for two days away because there was no context for it, let alone words; felt it in the way the emptiness of the house seemed to settle, claim permanence.

She found herself alone in the front sitting room, empty walls flickering in blue and white by the light of the TV screen. When she tried to remember how it had happened, how the room had gone from gathering place to emptiness, fragmented snatches of recent memory pulled forward: Kakashi rushing out to check in with the security team, him coming back to find Obito clutching his hair with both hands, going still and pale as something about what the newscaster was saying made terrible sense. "It's my family," Obito said. "Just like-just like twelve years ago. It's the Nine-tails, and they're going after the Uchiha-"

Hinata thought that she should feel something about that. Some sort of concern or empathy for the Uchiha, for any innocent bystanders getting caught up in this mess and the people who loved them, but all she could think about was Naruto.

Obito left. Kakashi tried to stop him, but the door slammed anyway. Kakashi made sure she was sitting safely on a chair and made her repeat at least three times that she was "fine", and then he was gone. The house was very quiet. And Hinata was very, very alone.

Neji had warned her about the scars, about what they could mean, when he first noticed her
blooming fascination with the WoF hockey team's newest member. She'd taken the hint and run with it, scavenged dusty library newspaper archives for every mention of Kyuubi and his slashed-cheeked victims, cried over the horror and the tragedy she found there; but in the end it only cemented the conclusion she'd already come to: Naruto equals miracle.

She never asked him about his scars, though she wondered many times if he knew how he got them; if he would tell her, should she find the courage and breath and words to make the question.

She'd heard other people ask him. To Kiba, Naruto had said, "Why, you wanna be as awesome as me? Sorry man, not even badass scars could make your face worth looking at-" and soon enough they were brawling on the floor and Kiba had entirely forgotten how it started. When Konohamaru asked, Naruto had made some joke about how he'd have to kill him, then went all serious, looked the younger boy dead in the eye, and said, "It's just better if you don't ask about that, okay?" And on one occasion Sasuke had stared down a group of giggling girls visiting their rink for a figure-skating competition and said flatly, "Would you feel comfortable talking about a traumatic childhood meeting with a cooling fan? No? Then why on earth would you ask?" Naruto had started to squawk indignantly, stopped as realization dawned on him, then promptly buried his head in Sasuke's shoulder and moaned loudly about bladed fans of death and oh he was gonna have nightmares all night now and Sasuke patted his shoulder comfortably and the girls hurried awkwardly away, though maybe not fast enough to be completely out of earshot before both boys collapsed, laughing.

Naruto should be dead. Shouldn't have scars, because everyone whose face had been cut like his was dead before the lines were carved.

Like the people who'd been killed tonight.

Her baby rolled, stretched, kicked; setting a line of nerves down her left leg tingling and the muscles in her back spasming. She must have just woken; Hinata hadn't felt her move since morning. She spread her palms, rubbed them gently over the taut skin of her belly.

"It's all right," she whispered. Lied. "It's all right, it's all right, it's all right..."

The moon had risen and set before Hinata gave up, gave in, took her exhausted body to bed.

In the abandoned front room, wide-eyed newscasters listed new casualties.

IiYiI

Something was wrong.

Naruto had known it since he woke, mid-morning, in a hospital room with all the shades drawn and his dad asleep on a chair wedged in front of the door and his mom curled on the hide-a-bed in the corner, mouth slack and breathing deep with sleep, but tear tracks down her cheeks.

He could think mostly clearly, now, which was a huge relief compared to the groggy half-memories that were all he could dredge up from the previous day; he also hurt, a lot, and both his IV bags were empty, and he really, really needed to pee.

There was an IV needle that needed to come out of his hand and little see-through tubes coming out of his chest and leg to pull, which meant peeling back a lot of bandaging, teeth sinking into his bottom lip to stem a pained hiss. The tubes leaked a bit when he yanked them out, some gross
combination of puss and blood they must have been sucking out of places he'd been cut open
dripping all over perfectly white sheets, and he felt a little back about that. The monitor beeping
away his pulse and regularly measuring his blood pressure wasn't hard to turn off, and he
celebrated that for the dizzy seconds it took for his head to stop spinning after successfully
leveraging himself onto his feet. Well, foot, because his left leg wasn't taking much weight, but he
could work with that.

Or maybe not, when he ran out of handholds and his muscles gave out on him and he kind of
crashed to the floor less than a meter from the foot of his bed. Which was when Dad was suddenly
not asleep anymore, but right there with him and holding him, and Naruto could tell that the man
dearly wanted to ask what Naruto thought he was doing, out of bed with all his special monitors
and tubes and things gone and the bandage of his chest kind of flapping open, but Dad just took in
this really long, deep breath and Naruto looked at him and said feelingly: "I gotta pee". The breath
came back out with a strained "okay" and Dad hauled him to his feet and into the bathroom and
Naruto tried not to blush over having him stand there half-reaching out to catch him while he peed.
He tried to think of a distraction and there it was, the distraction: something was wrong.

"Something went wrong with the surgery," Naruto guessed, too flat and accepting for it to really be
a question. He'd been manhandled back into bed and his chest bandage carefully fixed and now
Dad was looking over the dripping drainage tubes and empty IV bags with this little unhappy
frown between his eyes. Mom was still asleep. No nurses had come in yet, nor had his dad even
tried to call for one, which was one more puzzle piece of weird.

Tired blue eyes met his, startled and questions. "No, everything went really well," Dad said. "Or—
do you feel something? Does something feel wrong? You must be in pain, even if you're not
showing it—agh, I wish we could get a nurse in here, but—"

Naruto pounced. "But?"

And Dad would no longer look at him. "The hospital's very busy," he said quietly. "But don't be
afraid. You're okay. More than okay. The surgery went perfectly, you've been recovering well,
everything is okay. You're okay. You're okay, Naruto."

Naruto would feel a lot more okay if Dad didn't seem to be repeating those two words like saying
them enough times would make them more true than they actually were.

He smiled at him anyway. "'Course I am," he said. "I'm Naruto, -tebayo! Can I have some water?"

Dad smiled back, just a little. "Of course," he said, words light and easy, but his eyes searched the
room a little too desperately, for a few seconds too long, until and he spotted and grabbed an open
water bottle from the little table by the hide-a-bed. "You don't mind sharing with Mom, do you? I'll
go get some more, and some breakfast, once your mother wakes up, but she didn't really sleep last
night so let's let her rest for now—"

All the lights in the room flickered, on and off, three times. With curtains pulled tight over the only
window, there were moments of near-complete darkness.

"Dad," said Naruto. *Something is wrong.*

"Actually, let's wake her up now," Dad decided suddenly, and the water bottle was shoved into
Naruto's hand so Dad could lean over Mom, whispering, "Kushina, love, we may need you—"

Naruto coughed. Thought he saw Mom sit up, thought he heard Dad say something else, but then
he was coughing more and more, and the room was tilting upside-down, and when his brain finally
put together *oh* and *shit* and he was clumsily pouring water over his sheets and trying to drag the wet sheet over his mouth so he could breathe and also get between his parents and whoever was opening the door that the lights went out again, and then the dark was complete.
So much blood.

The smell was thick enough Naruto could taste it, and he came to retching and spitting. His face was hot and the floor was hard and sticky and for a while that was all there was—blood and pain, lots and lots of pain. Then he could hear, ears filling with the gasping rasp of his own breath for long seconds before he realized he was the one breathing; the blurry mess of color his open eyes couldn't quite comprehend shifted, separated, and then he could see and really, really wished he couldn't.

His gut told him he was alone, but someone else was there. Someone very still, very pale, and very dead.

He didn't know where he was. Didn't know how—Dad, Mom, I was with them—in the—in the hospital—DAD—MOM—

He tried to get up, and threw up instead. There was nothing in his belly but water and acid, and it burned his throat and mixed with the blood he lay in (so—much—blood—) and set him heaving again but he was trained for this, to get up heaving and bleeding, to shut down everything but the order that would keep him moving, breathing, fighting, and he made it onto hands and knees and crawled through blood and bile to stretch out trembling fingers just far enough to brush blonde bangs from a staring face. Six parallel lines wept red, three on each cheek.

No.

"Yugito-nee," he said. Begged. For a moment everything welled up again: fear, relief, horror, guilt—and words were coming out of his mouth that he couldn't understand, because Yugito couldn't be dead, couldn't be killed. She—she killed, couldn't be killed, wasn't like Mom and Dad who needed bodyguards and even that wasn't enough and MOM—DAD—

Shut down, his last shred of clear thought whispered. Shut it down, Naruto.

He closed his eyes, cowered back, breathed in, stopped feeling, breathed out.

When he opened his eyes, he heard everything, saw everything, felt nothing.

He was alone.
He was in an apartment. Yugito's apartment, maybe, though he'd never been inside. The place was wrecked. Yugito fought, and fought hard. Must have—must have been cut up, like that, after. Hadn't gone down alone, probably, because one body had a lot of blood but this—but whoever killed her, whomever she killed, they were gone. And Naruto was here. And so was his knife. No, not his, but the same model, and it was in a piece of Yugito.

Get out.

Okay, he agreed, and managed to stand, dripping blood, and there were two windows and two doors and this was a trap but that didn't mean he was caught—yet—

But he'd been with Mom and Dad when he blacked out, and—time—it was always about time, what if there was still time—

There was a phone in Yugito's jacket pocket. He grabbed for it, cursed as it slipped from his sticky-slippery red-soaked hand, swept panicked eyes over windows and doorways as fingers found a dishtowel to wipe with, picked up the phone again, put in the number he'd memorized long before he'd ever have admitted to doing so.

Pick up. Pick up, pick up, pick up—the window was locked, so was the door leading farther into the apartment, breaking the window would be fastest—Shit, three stories up—his left leg wasn't taking weight, his chest ripped and burned every time he moved his left arm—

"This is Namikaze," came through speaker pressed to his ear, harsh but clear, and the rush of oxygen to his lungs that came with it had Naruto's hand shaking so bad he almost dropped the phone again.

"Dad," he said, "You're alive—you're—"

Footsteps. Outside, pounding towards the front door. Boots, heavy, many of them. Running. Five seconds—

"Naruto! Where are you? Naruto, are you—Kushina, it's him—" Four—three—

"Love you," whispered Naruto. Had no pockets, dropped the phone. Climbed the counter. Wrapped his good hand around the marble knife-block resting by the sink. Smashed glass. Two. Grabbed a knife—

"KPD, STAND BACK! BACK AWAY FROM THE DOOR!"

One.

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vIvIv

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"Can you track this number?" Minato's voice was clipped and clear, but Genma heard enough suppressed panic to get all the hairs on his arms standing on end. A new window pinged open on Raidou's laptop, announcing the successful remote connection to Minato's phone. "My phone says it's blocked, but the line's still open, he didn't hang up—"

Raidou was already taping into the call, and as he turned up the volume there was a slight buzz of static before what sounded awfully like an explosion. "KPD! FREEZE! Hands in the air—"
Genma and the unseen KPD officer yelling over the tapped phone line swore simultaneously. Don't be stupid, Naruto, prayed Genma, fingers flying as he guided his software through the blocked phone's defenses, copying coordinates into mapping software as Raidou fine-tuned the call connection.

"Get that door open! Yes, I see the window—" a grim voice crackled through. "This is one sick bastard, look at this mess..." another was saying, and orders were flying. A building was being surrounded, a pursuit strategy was being laid out, and an address had just been pinpointed by Genma's computer. "Permission granted to use lethal force. Suspect is armed and dangerous—"

"Ready, boss?" He asked, and at Minato's desperate affirmative, reeled off the address. Wished he could say something that would keep Minato and Kushina from rushing in there, knew there was nothing in the world that would stop them. "We'll meet you there."

Iwashi was at the door, armed and brandishing kevlar vests. "Get dressed in the car," he said grimly. I'll be here with Princess. Hatake's going with you. Good luck."

"Yeah," mumbled Genma. Don't get killed, kid, don't— "Wish we were the ones who needed it."

UoHoU

His fingers were slipping. One hand on the windowsill between him and a ten meter drop, and what with the blood and sweat and his own sickening weight, Naruto was going to fall.

He heard the apartment door blast open, the shock reverberating through the walls hard enough to cost him another couple centimeters of his grip. Ten meters was looking really freaking high. But it was get down or get shot down, so the thought go, and swung his hips to throw his body to the side, and fell. Right arm caught the drainpipe he'd aimed for, gripped, palm burned and peeled as his body screeched downwards, until the bare soles of his feet clamped around the metal, and he slid the rest of the way with some measure of control. There were shouts above, they'd seen the broken window, he had less than seconds—and there, in the first bit of luck he'd had since waking covered in blood, frantic eyes caught a first floor window halfway open. He dropped, stumbled the meter to window, pushed it wide, hauled himself up and over the sill, landed in a full kitchen sink with a crunch and a splash that drew the stares of the cute little family watching television across the room.

Naruto pulled the knife out of his teeth. "Sorry, sorry," he said, hopped down, and just before the screams started, ran.

They had a door to a hallway in the same place Yugito's apartment had, but theirs wasn't locked. He found the back bedroom, but it only had windows on the same side he'd come through—no good—the bathroom had a window, small and high, but at least it was on the right wall. He locked the door behind him, wrenched the window open, registered what he'd just seen in the mirror, reeled back in shock.

With a butcher knife in one hand, bare feet, and hair, face and hospital pajamas all dripping blood, he wasn't gonna get very far. There was an overflowing laundry hamper, but the underwear spilling out was toddler-sized, and he went for the towel thrown over the curtain rod instead, desperately mopping at the red covering drenching his face and hair. There wasn't much he could do about getting clothes. Not unless he ventured into the other rooms again, but with the way the family in
the front room was crying and yelling for yelp—he'd already scared them badly enough, and surely the cops would have heard them by now—so it was onto the counter, in two tries because his stupid left leg wasn't working, and through the window, and collapse more than land, gasping against the pain. He couldn't do this on one leg, couldn't breathe around the agony in his chest, couldn't see straight with the way his head spun—

_Sewers. Don't hafta go far, just gotta get under—_

_Up, get UP—_

Raw fingers clawed their way up the brick wall, and he was standing again, muscles locking and holding even if the hurt was searing, and once he was standing he was running. The towel was probably useless, but he took it with him, threw it around his neck, if he could just hide some of the blood—there, the street was clear, just had to get across, he couldn't be more than a block from a manhole.

"FREEZE!"

_Fuck._

Spin, duck, run the other way. There had to be two ways out of this alley. Shit, more cops. But only two, and their backs were to him—dammit, they were turning as the ones behind him shouted—he twisted the knife in his right hand, attacked hilt first, had one man down before the other was sure what he was even looking at. The other man went down with a knife-hilt to the face, but only to one knee, and came back up, baton swinging.

He ducked the first blow, couldn't pivot on his bum leg fast enough to avoid the second. The hit exploded over his left shoulder, just above where stitches stretched and pulled, took Naruto's breath and vision with it as pain roared red.

The knife in his hand turned on its own, muscle memory driving it forward before he could think, struck true. His attacker gasped, swore, staggered back.

He could see again and the knife was sticking out of the cop's chest and Naruto wanted to cringe, hit the rewind button, somehow undo what he'd just done. He ran instead. They'd start shooting any second now. He didn't know why they hadn't shot at him—yet—maybe he'd make it—just one more time, get ridiculously lucky one more time—

_Yugito's dead,_ that stupid voice in his head that always had too much time to think whispered, _Who's gonna save you this time? Huh? Huh, Naruto? Lucky, hah—_

He rounded the corner, stumbled, shrunk back against into the wall. This was the front of Yugito's building, and there was nothing but a strip of sidewalk and the wide sweep of stairs leading to the double front doors between him and a half-ring of cop cars and a freaking army of fully armed and armored officers.

_Caught._

There was a shout, and the first shot rang out, pinged into cement beside him. From behind, from the ones were who chasing him, but instantly the eyes and aim of the dozen armored men before him were focused too.

He risked a half-breath pause, for the cops to realize that he was between them, that if they shot at him they'd hit each other. Just before his pursuers could get close enough to attack or the mini-battalion at the foot of the stairs could decide on their orders, threw himself down the stairs.
Felt the jolt of every cement edge on the way down. He'd half-jumped, half fallen, crumpled on landing, rolled. Reach the bottom, tried to stand up, only made it to one knee before they were on him, boots kicking, batons swinging, he took one out at the knees but then there was that very special pop that featured frequently in his worst nightmares and he was done.

Didn't feel the taser barbs go in. But he knew what was happening. Felt every second of every muscle contracting in perfect slow-motion, felt his head crash into cement and the skin of his cheek rip as he lost all control of every part of his body, felt the pain in his leg and chest and palms explode to unbearable levels, heard the tortured groan rip through his throat, rode through every helpless convulsion in unrelenting agony.

It ended. A hand reach into his hair, twisted tight, wrenched his chin up. Cold metal pressed into his jaw.

It was an officer he should recognize, Naruto knew, but the haze was growing, sparks of light blinding and words a long, long way from coming.

"...Didn't quite believe the tip," the man was saying, "But what a prize. What a special, special prize. Thought you'd slip away again, Gatekeeper? Go on, fight your way out, little one, I know a touch of taser isn't enough to stop you, perhaps we should start with three or four rounds..."

Naruto said nothing. Spat blood before he choked on it.

"Again," said the man. The gun against his head disappeared. He braced—

*Pop.*

—gagged down a scream—

—*it would never end*—

"Stop."

For a moment, Naruto believed the Fox had come for him. No one else could make a single word promise death. But—

A blur of movement, a flash of crimson, something furious colliding with the man who held him, and strong hands lifting him, cradling him—eyes, blue eyes seeking his—

*NO*—

"I've got you, Naruto, I've got you—"

*Please please—*

There was shouting and fighting, police officers that must have come with his parents arguing with the ones who'd just beaten him. Names were yelled and guns were pointed and Mom was gonna get arrested if she kept wailing on that coppers like that and cameras were flashing and he'd never seen Dad so furious, so helpless, knew now that it was Dad who had made them stop, but there were officers dragging Naruto out of Dad's arms now, onto his knees and cuffing his wrists behind his back and every time he blinked he saw blood and knives on the backs of his eyelids: the knife-like-his in Yugito's bleeding-broken body and the knife-not-his he'd just driven into an officer's lung.

Then they were making him stand, and his vision greyed out and his leg caved in and one of the men holding him cursed and jerked him upright again, and as his head wobbled something hot and
wet ran into his eye. If he couldn't walk, they'd just drag him.

*Please no…*

"Dad—" he twisted, trying to see, got kicked for it, but he wasn't fighting, he really wasn't, he just had to— "DAD—Dad—it—it wasn't me, tell Mom it wasn't me—Yugito-nee—I didn't, didn't—

Dad—Dad—"

Dad was yelling at the officer who'd kicked him, but maybe he heard, because he cut off suddenly, and through a haze of grey and red Naruto found blue eyes again.

"It wasn't me," he said.

"I know," Dad said. And kept talking, maybe promising, but all Naruto could hear was the steel snap of the perfectly primed jaws of a trap.

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Naruto woke to the smells of iodoform and sanitized air and for one relief-dizzy moment, he believed it had all been a dream. A mashup of all his favorite nightmares, imagined so vividly the echoes actually ached. He'd fallen asleep in the hospital, and what happened next had felt horribly, horribly real, but he was still in the hospital and the heart-bomb was still gone and as soon as they noticed he was awake, Mom and Dad would start fussing and -

—and his wrists were cuffed. Ankles too. In thick leather straps like the one binding his chest to the bed; all tight, strong loops that must unlock or unbuckle or whatever they did out of sight under the mattress, where his chances of tampering with them were pretty much none.

There was a uniformed police officer looking bored in the corner, thumb scrolling a smart phone screen. An Uchiha, from what Naruto could see of his face, which wasn't much from the angle of a head straining to rise more than an inch from the pillow.

It was pain that had woken him, and it rolled over him now, horrible heavy throbs through his head and neck and chest, unbearable ripping intensity searing his leg. But recently he'd learned what it was like to have a mother, and it was the desperate ache for her - her arms, warmth, smell, voice - that stung his eyes and closed his throat.

Before his breath could catch and give him away, before the thug-in-uniform looked up and maybe decided a conscious prisoner was more entertaining than whatever was on his screen, Naruto let his hurting head fall, squeezed swollen eyelids shut. Sank miserably back into sleep.

One of many lessons he'd learned the hard way: you can refuse to give up all you want, and still be too beaten to fight. That's when you hide. And sometimes, the dark behind your eyelids is the closest to safe you can get.

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Passing headlights washed swatches of orange light across the entryway wall, and Sasuke's eyes trailed blearily after, brain slowly readjusting to consciousness. Bits of dream still clung around the edges of his vision, and he felt dizzy and disoriented, body stiff and cold from its place half-slumped against the wall. His phone stopped vibrating, and he came fully awake, realizing what had woken him in the first place.

He'd been asleep for at least two hours, and had three missed calls, all from Sakura. Sasuke was still deciding whether he wanted to call her back immediately or try to reach Naruto first when her name flashed on his screen again. Frowning, he tapped answer.

"Were you there?" Her voice was rushed, high and hard, and he'd started to reply to are you there before registering that that's not what she'd asked.

"When?" He asked back. "Where? What are you taking about?"

"You mean you don't - you don't know - I was so afraid you were there too, and they just didn't
report it because Itachi or - but are you okay? Where have you been? When you weren't answering your phone - why didn't you answer your phone, you jerk -"

She sounded panicked, maybe even in tears.

"I was asleep," he admitted. "What's going on? Please - please tell me."

As always, please was the magic word with Sakura. He heard her draw in a shaky breath, mumble to herself that at least Sasuke was okay. But the ache in her voice wasn't soothed at all.

"He's been arrested," she whispered. "Naruto. For murder. He's been arrested for murder. Caught - caught at the scene."

Her voice had grown shakier with each word, and he sat in frozen silence, phone cold against his ear, listening to her try to regain control of her breathing while he didn't breathe at all.

"Sasuke."

He exhaled, jerked in oxygen. "When? I just saw him in the hospital, Sakura. I saw him yesterday. He wasn't even awake yet - was still out from the anesthesia - "

"That's what they're saying - that he escaped from the hospital," Sakura said. "How did you even know he was in there? He missed a couple practices but nobody - I don't think even Kaka-sensei knew -"

Sasuke said nothing. He knew very well how much Sakura hated being left out of things. She knew she wouldn't get an answer from his silence, and went on, the occasional word catching on a half-swallowed sob.

"Wait, what did you say about anesthesia? You mean it's true?! What happened - what happened to him, Sasuke?! He's seemed so - so happy - why...how..."

She was choking off into tears again. Murder, Sasuke's brain echoed mechanically, she said he's been arrested for murder. But there was just no way. Naruto should barely be able to walk, let alone... whatever it was they thought he had done. The second battery had been in his thigh. Namikaze said the surgeon had to cut right through the muscle, that Naruto would need crutches. Sasuke had scoffed at that.

"He's obviously been framed," he told her. "And not very well, either. He has a rock solid alibi. His parents can confirm it, I can confirm it, the freaking hospital director can confirm it. He can confirm it. He just had major surgery. Shouldn't take too long to sort this out. Namikaze's probably already taken care of it, the press just hasn't caught up."

"Surgery?" she said. "What surgery? He wasn't in the hospital for surgery. That's not what they're saying. Are you sure he had surgery?"

"Why else would Naruto be in the hospital?" Sasuke snapped, annoyed. He stood, stretched sleep-cramped muscles. "It's Naruto. He could break his leg, splint it up with random crap he fished out of a garbage can, then get up like an idiot and run on it without even thinking of seeking actual medical care. I'm not allowed to tell you what the surgery was for, but yes, I'm damn sure. You think they could get his stubborn ass in there for anything less?"

Sakura was quiet for too many seconds. "Not that part of the hospital, Sasuke," she said. "They're not saying anything about a surgery. ...They're saying he escaped from psychiatrics. That his parents put him in there, secretly, because he's unstable. That he's violent. Crazy. That his parents
were afraid he would hurt someone. And that he got out, and did."

Her sentences hit his brain, broke apart, put themselves together again. Violent. Unstable. Headlines from a dozen recent headlines flashed up from memory, all drawing connections between Namikaze Naruto and Kyuubi/criminality/violence, many with grainy stills of Naruto beating the Kumo ambassador, smiling wide with blood all over his face.

"It's a setup," he said. "What I can't figure out is why they think they can get away with it."

"They caught him literally red-handed, Sasuke, literally covered in blood," Sakura whispered. Her voice twisted, tore. "He - he stabbed an officer while resisting arrest. Even if - even if the rest of it is somehow fabricated, they got that on body-cam."

Hopelessly knotted from a day and a half waiting for Itachi, Sasuke's insides turned to lead. He crouched by the door where he'd already spent too many hours waiting for his police officer brother to reappear, and tried to compute that his best friend had just killed someone wearing the same uniform he'd last seen Itachi in.

"Why?" he said. The questions weren't forming clearly in his brain, but they came out of his mouth anyway, wretched and raw. "Why were they arresting him? Don't they know he has to fight them? He killed an officer?! What did the officer need with Naruto! Why can't they leave him the fuck alone? There are freaking bombs going off all over the city and all the KPD can do is chase after Naruto?! Why - "

"No," interrupted Sakura. "You got it wrong. The officer isn't dead - yet, critical condition, but - he was trying to stop Naruto from fleeing the scene of the crime. Because she was already dead, this random woman, attacked and killed in her own home - the way the reporters are putting it, it's like they caught him - caught him doing it, but couldn't stop him in time, and he threatened a family with a little kid, and stabbed an officer with a stolen knife and - and if that officer dies, it's a double... double murder... He'll be locked up forever, they'll never let him out... "

Her voice was growing too small, too strange, too anguished. It was almost like... "You believe them. You actually believe them. You are being unusually, unbearably stupid, Haruno Sakura."

She started crying, really crying. His grip on his phone was so tight his fingertips were going numb. Awful words just kept coming through it, gasped and broken and suddenly angry.

"Shut up, Sasuke, you don't know a thing about what I believe," she said. Heaved in breath, shuddered on it, choked words through it. "I called you because I thought you would know, that you would understand what happened because I couldn't, but you don't understand at all. Do you have any idea what they're saying about him? You don't, because you've been effing sleeping. You know nothing, you understand even less, what the hell was I even thinking, calling you?"

She hung up.

The phone felt hot, and hurt his ear, but Sasuke couldn't move. Couldn't think. He felt shocked, offended almost, because Sakura, Sakura had yelled at him. Told him to shut up. Hung up on him. His thoughts latched on to that, turned it over and over until he was seething with indignation, until he'd almost built up enough false emotion to distract him from what he was feeling.

Minutes stretched. He went to the bathroom, thought about eating something, found himself slumped by the front door again instead. His body hurt from sleeping on the entryway floor. Itachi was so late. Sakura was annoying. Naruto- No. No thinking about Naruto. Itachi will come. Itachi will know what really happened. Itachi will fix things.
Itachi stumbled through the door.

Fell onto Sasuke, and for a truly horrible second Sasuke knew that today was the day when all his nightmares came real at once, because Itachi was dead. There was a lot of blood, and Itachi stayed sprawled across Sasuke's lap with his limbs all awkward and wrong and a scream was clawing its way up Sasuke's throat but then his brain finally caught up to everything and told him that that horrible wheezing was Itachi breathing and Sasuke should probably start breathing again, too.

"Don't panic, don't call - don't call anyone," Itachi said, gasped like there wasn't really enough air in his lungs to make words. Coughed hard. "Sasuke. Are you okay, Sasuke?"

The absurdity of it, of Itachi - untouchable, invincible Itachi - lying bleeding, barely breathing in Sasuke's lap, asking if Sasuke was okay, was his undoing. His eyes opened so wide it hurt. He wanted to run and panic and cry and call for his mother and -

"Mom!" screamed Sasuke, voice cracking like it hadn't since he was twelve, fingers scrabbling to undo the blood-sticky buttons of Itachi's shirt, trying to find the source of the bleeding. There seemed to be less blood under the shirt, and though it was weird to see Itachi's ribs and collarbones stretching skin tight like that, at least there were no horrible gashes, no weeping bullet holes. "Mom! MOM! MOM -"

His last bit of brain that was kind of-sort of working thought that she wouldn't come, but she came. Fluttered down the hallway like dry leaves on the wind and probably just as useless, that same bit of brain snarled, watching her gasp and falter and cover her mouth with her hands. But she took a step forward, then another and another and another. The grip of those thin, pale, too-often-trembling fingers on Sasuke's wrist as she pulled him out of the way was cold and unusually strong.

"Asthma," she whispered, after five or six seconds of fingers flitting, checking, proving. "Asthma. I forgot, Itachi has asthma. Itachi. My Itachi. Itachi..."

*He does?* But Sasuke's heart was already pounding with shock-induced adrenaline, and the only thing that mattered was - "What does he need? Tell me what he needs! MOM! What does nii-san need?"

Clarity snapped her eyes sharp again, and she stared up at Sasuke for half a moment before drawing in shuddering breath, then took Itachi's face in her hands. Sasuke's heart thundered and echoed so he could hardly hear her command his brother to breathe. He tried to calm down, tried to focus, heard her beg Itachi to tell her where his inhaler was - and Itachi tried, but had no breath left, except what whistled - _whistled_- in his barely-moving lungs. His shoulders were bunched up around his neck, cords of muscle standing out in an unnatural strain, lips purpling, veins popping. Mother started searching his pockets, fast and frantic. Sasuke made his hands copy hers.

He wasn't entirely sure what they were looking for, but in seconds Itachi's keys, badge, wallet, migraine meds, a pen, and two mobile phones were on the entryway floor, and all Mom did was frantically shake her head.

"Go - look in his room, he must have one in his room - go - Itachi, breathe, please, please -"

The hallway seemed to jump and jerk as Sasuke hurtled forward, smashed open Itachi's door, knocked over his desk lamp, felt hot panic wash cold at the emptiness here. Almost all of Itachi's stuff was already gone, moved to his new apartment. Sasuke tore open desk and bureau drawers, slammed the wardrobes's sliding doors wide, let stacks of clean folded clothes tumble to the floor as he searched on and under and behind everything he could see. He didn't bother to set anything right again.
There was almost nothing left. Every personal item here would fit into a single suitcase, as if Itachi had never really lived there, as if he was just a guest. An impeccably clean and organized stranger who would leave nothing behind when he'd gone.

As Sasuke stilled, unable to think of anywhere he hadn't already looked, he realized that the wheezing had stopped. All he could hear was Mother, telling Itachi he had to breathe, had to fight, that she was sorry.

*My sweet son,* she called him. She hadn't called Itachi anything in four years. Hadn't acknowledged him. Hadn't even looked at him.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, my sweet son, I'm sorry... Breathe, please, you have to breathe, you have to breathe" -

*My sweet son...*

It was the wish he'd longed for most, so deep and hungry his own thoughts barely dared stir its silence. A dream coming true in a nightmare.

Mother's voice was getting higher. Her words were starting to break into bits, too-small pieces all shrill and sharp with panic.

*Find it. Please let me find it. Please!*

There, crumpled on the bed, a disordered lump he'd ignored because he'd thought he'd caused it. But he would have remembered lifting Itachi's leather jacket. The thick weight of it, the the silky lining of its pockets -

He was already running back to Mother, violently raiding pockets as he went. He found pens, hair ties, tic tacs, a cylinder - a brushed metal cylinder, with an open L-bend at one end and a small glass bottle that looked medicinal inserted into the other. It *had* to be -

Mother half stood, grabbed it from him, barely pausing to check the label on the bottle before she was propping it against Itachi's open, soundless mouth.

"He found it, Sasuke found it, breathe in, please breathe in, I'm sorry, Itachi, I'm sorry-"

Itachi's eyes, gaping wide at the ceiling, slid sideways, found Sasuke's, caught there, glassy and lost.

Breath rattled. Mother pulled the inhaler out a little, then pushed it forward again, depressed the little bottle fitted into the top.

"Breathe," she begged.

Terrible seconds slipped away. Itachi's eyelids were sliding closed. Sasuke sank down next to him, picked at sticky-wet edges of a stained-red open-wide uniform with shaking fingers, fell forward, pressed his face into Itachi's stomach. It was clenched and clammy and made Sasuke's tears too hot in contrast.

"Breathe," said Mother.

- please please please please please -

Itachi breathed.
It was quick and shallow and whistled, but it would deliver oxygen. Mother kept checking the time on one of the phones they’d pulled from Itachi’s pockets, and enough minutes must have passed, because she pumped another dose from the inhaler. Sasuke turned his head just enough to see, watched with his cheek against his brother's belly, aching, unable to make himself move, though his neck strained to hold his head so it wouldn't press down, wouldn't add to Itachi's hurt.

He could feel a pulse there, just above Itachi's navel, just below Sasuke's ear. Felt it ease from hyper-panic-fast to fever-fast to ran-too-long fast. Watched staining muscles keeping shoulders high around a corded neck begin to ease. Watched Itachi's rib cage start to expand and deflate again, each breath a little deeper than the last.

Closed his eyes as relief flooded them

"Oh," whispered Mikoto, fervent and repeated, like a celebration, or a prayer. "Oh, oh, oh..."

And then she was reaching for a phone, dialing emergency numbers, crying that she should have done so earlier. The steadying pulse beneath Sasuke's cheek hitched high again, and Sasuke pulled upright, took the phone from her, hung up on the insistent operator.

Mother's eyes went wild and wide. She asked what he was doing, hissed that Itachi was still in very real danger, started to shout that he needed a doctor. Was still, Sasuke realized, very, very scared. Everything she said was true. "I'm sorry," he muttered, unable to keep looking at her face, horribly unsure if he was right. But his brother's too tired, too intense eyes pinned him, and urgent words were trying to fit in with what little air Itachi forced in and out. "Itachi told me not to," he said over Itachi's wheezes. "The first thing he said when he was through the door - I, I don't-"

"No," wheezed Itachi. "Shisui." He'd said it several times, but Sasuke hadn't understood.

"We should call Shisui?" That would be good. Itachi trusted Shisui. And he was police, too, trained for emergencies - even if he couldn't talk Itachi into seeing a doctor, he’d help. Somehow. Sasuke was already scrolling through his contacts.

"No." Itachi was struggling to get up onto his elbows, and it was making him cough again.

"Yes, I'm calling Shisui," Sasuke said, clinging to the first comforting idea he'd had since Itachi came home.

Itachi tried to say something, choked a little, let his head fall back to the floor, breathed noisily, stared at the ceiling.

The person you are calling cannot be reached, Sasuke's phone intoned. He mashed the end call button, hit call again, swallowed hard on his own frustration. The person you are calling...

"Why isn't he picking up?" he said, mostly to himself.

Itachi made a sound that made Sasuke think he was choking - or laughing - or crying-

"Because he's dead," he said. "Because Shisui is dead. Because our people shot him dead."

Mother's hands covered her mouth, but couldn't stop the small, sudden wail she made. She closed her eyes, began to rock on her heels, forward and back, forward and back.

Itachi looked at her, looked at the ceiling. "Don't trust anyone, little brother," he said, strained voice hard to follow through the sudden ringing in Sasuke's ears. "I thought... thought they'd shot
you, too. So... so. Did you lock the door? Lock the door." He stopped, seemed to focus on breathing. Sasuke did as he was told. Itachi's rasping breath softened, a little. "I'll be alright, Sasuke," he said. "A hot shower and my lungs will be fine. Help me get Mother to bed." He closed his eyes, braced everything. Then he hauled himself up, gripping the door jamb hard, face falling set, fading calm. As if there weren't fine tremors making his fingers clumsy on the door chain. As if his clothing wasn't rust-red with his best friend's blood.

Sasuke stepped in close, caught an arm and slung it over his shoulders when his big brother's knees went weak. Kept his eyes averted so Itachi could keep pretending he was fine. Told him not to kill him when he saw the wreck Sasuke had made of his room.

Swallowed down the bile that rose in his throat when his own unthinking idiom echoed shrill in his ears.

Minato had felt worse than this, once. Felt fury and failure make even tighter knots of the thin muscle between skull and skin. Forced breath after breath past the desperate clawing despair shredding his stomach.

Once, they told him his son was dead.

They weren't saying it now. But it curled like a promise at the edges of lips saying smug words only the most detached part of him was trying to follow. The rest was making a monumental effort not to kill anyone himself. Minato didn't know if he was truly capable of murder, nor did he want to find out. Following they line of thought, he'd decided to wait on bailing Kushina out.

Right choice, he decided, staring down the interviewing officer - the same one he'd first seen torturing Naruto with a Taser.

"You're reporting an assault and kidnapping, carried out with the aid of some sort of sleeping gas, that occurred inside the hospital. Yesterday. While the entire building was on lockdown."

"I'm not reporting," Minato said calmly. "I'm following up. The incident was reported immediately. Police records, as well my own independently verifiable transcripts, will confirm not only the initial calls, but prompt offering of the KPD's assistance in the form of armed escort once my private security team had traced my son's call for help and estimated his location. You can verify it now, I'll wait."

"Oh, we've looked into your story," the officer said. "Quite creative on your part. Did you really think we wouldn't have witnesses to corroborate what really happened? How long ago did you start planning the little psycho's cover-up? I sure hope you haven't done DNA testing on him. Much better to have been conned onto believing he's your dead kid than for it to be true. You could still come out of this with some of your fanbase intact, Yellow-Flash, if you ditch the mini-murderer. Want to confess why you really had Psycho Jr. admitted? I'll note your cooperation right here in this file you want me to open up, help you out."

"What you'll do," Minato said, voice even, threat abundantly clear, "is get your superior in here to launch an investigation into the gross mishandling of the rescue operation of my son, Namikaze Naruto. Do not confuse this with any other pending case. Surely the standards of the KPD have not
The man flinched back, then straightened his shoulders and leaned forward aggressively to make up for it. "You'll see my superior soon enough," he said flatly. "Most likely in the interrogation room. Pretend you still run Konoha while the delusion's there for deluding. Sir."

"Indeed. Now, my case," Minato said, glad of the way the words came out, poised and amused and predatory. Like he wasn't imagining Kushina smashing in the man's teeth, followed immediately by his balls. "My lawyer and his team will be here shortly, but considering how poorly my family's concerns have been handled thus far, as well as the current state of crisis in the city and how thinly stretched the KPD's resources must be, I find it necessary to oversee everything personally. Pull up the appropriate case file. Now."

"Yes, yes. Ah... Funny, isn't it, that the only people who could verify this top-secret surgery you insist happened were knocked out in the terrorist blast that hit the hospital? And there were victims with cut-up cheeks. Hmmm."

"Funny, yes," said Minato quietly.

"Senju-sama was in a coma, last I heard." The man's lips curved malice. "Does thorough work, your little Fox."

Minato looked at this man in a uniform meant to represent safety and authority until the one wearing it began to shift uncomfortably.

"Yes," said Minato. "Yes, I understand where your lack of self-control is coming from. He was so little, wasn't he? I mean, he's barely up to your shoulder now. And to have this tiny little kid, probably overtired and underfed, outmaneuver entire platoons of highly trained, fully armed officers again and again... Just drove you crazy, didn't it. And now you have it in for him. This abused child you completely and utterly failed to protect."

The man's face flushed dark, but he only leaned back in his seat, brow mockingly raised. "A child," he repeated, twisted, made it sound dirty and off. "Sure, sure. Just a poor, pathetic little kid. Such a victim. I've got a man on life support 'cause your darling child stuck a butcher knife through his lung."

Minato couldn't stop the way the muscles of his jaw jumped and clenched, and the officer saw it and smirked.

"You're through, Namikaze," he said softly. "I told you, you shoulda left your son dead. This ain't no kid. This is a violent murdering psychopath, all trained up by another violent murdering psychopath, and I'm going to do my job and keep this city safe from him. Though maybe we should let him out, huh? Let him finish you and your bloody wife off, save us the trouble? I'll bring it up with the boss..."

"Yes, you will," said Minato, and there must have been enough of the poisonous rage sharpening all his uselessly roiling emotion into cold-blooded strategy seeping out through his voice and eyes to get his intent across, because the officer suddenly looked a lot less smug. "Your boss will hear about this conversation, the case you continue to mishandle, your department's astonishingly persistent failure to comply with due process, your gross misconduct towards myself and my family, and the lawsuit I will be filing against you personally for brutality and abuse of a minor far sooner than you would like. That discussion will happen in the presence of your direct and superior supervisors, my lawyers, and my wife. Speaking of my wife - how is the tooth, by the way? Are you getting a replacement made? I hear dentures work better as sets - I'm sure Kushina wouldn't..."
mind helping you replace the rest of them. She has a generous soul." Minato stood. Leaned forward in confidance. "My people are watching," he promised. "Touch my son again, and you'll find out just how far into the underworld I was willing to go, when I was trying to find him. I don't know, yet, who is behind these attacks on Konoha and the KPD - but I will find out, and I am not above allying with them."

Then he straightened, flashed his best Prime Minister smile, and left.

IiViI

Naruto dreamed of sun streaming through open windows and air that smelled like his mom's kitchen when things were baking. There was a big staircase in front of him, like the one in his parents' house except very very long and tall so he couldn't even see the top of it, and he knew he was dreaming - could feel flares of pain tugging him towards consciousness - and threw himself desperately back into subconsciousness.

It wouldn't work, he knew. The harder he tried to hold onto a dream, the faster its edges would shred, and he'd wake up empty-handed and not even sure what or why he wanted to remember, *ached* to remember. He could already taste the sour wrench of reality in his mouth, could feel the weight in limbs that had just been floating.

*Not yet,* he begged, and heard a voice, a voice in the dream.

She was standing on a step higher than his head, wobbling a little on tiny feet, arms outstretched, with these gorgeous knowing eyes and huge mischievous smile.

"Baby catch!"

Naruto just stared up at her, confused about what she wanted, and couldn't help the huge answering smile stretching his face, the wonder glowing warm through his chest, bubbling up to steal the breath from his throat.

"Catch!"

He looked around for what she wanted him to catch, but her tiny reaching hands were empty. He held up his own empty hands, beginning to laugh.

"Catch baby!" she cheered, getting the word order right this time, and with a little squeal of excitement, Hinata's daughter launched herself into the air.

*NO!* Too far, he was too far from her, but Naruto launched forward anyway, crouching-surging-leaping in a single panicked thought, *trying* -

Bound to a bed in a secure hospital room, Naruto's eyes snapped open. *Too late, too late, too late* pounded round and round his head, but it was already nearly drowned by something hotter and fiercer than the creeping cold of fear.

*Protect.*

*I will,* he promised, and let that fiery energy that always got him into the shittiest heaps of trouble thunder up. The thing that made him really stupid and really reckless, and always, always refused
to let him stay down - no matter how hard he'd fallen, how much smarter it would be to simply not
get up again. I will, I will, I will.

"Well," said a dry voice, "Sleeping Beauty's awake. Let's make sure he stays conscious this time - I
want this murderer behind bars. Hello there, son." A face, lined and scarred and missing an eye,
leered beatifically into Naruto's still-swimming vision. "It's been a long time coming, little
Gatekeeper."

Sick with swelling fear and pain, Naruto bared all this teeth, swallowed bitter bile, and grinned
right back. "Damn, I thought you'd died," he said, winced at the rawness of his voice, the bite of
leather straps against uselessly braced muscle. "Who let you out of the crypt, Danzo? Whose
organs did you steal? 'Cause there's no way that bloated liver of yours could still be functioning,
and I know you didn't have a beating heart. Been profiting from human trafficking again?"

"Perhaps an accidental overdose of anesthetic in your IV was the right choice." Danzo frowned
thoughtfully, tapped his scarred chin. "But no - you have yet some work to do before your use has
run dry. And you've got us off to such an excellent start, truly. Stabbing that heroic policeman -
well done, Naruto. Well done."

Naruto had forgotten about that, just for a groggy, pain-filled, barely conscious moment.

Protect, that furious-fiery inner thing screamed. Beat back against thick dark horror swelling the
walls of his throat closed. Forced his eyes open, forced them back to the one face he hated most.

"Been fighting you all my life," Naruto said, low and loaded. "What makes you think you've won?"

The blow of the cane to his cut-open-stitched-shut-ripped-open-again thigh made him cry out, but
the look of feral fear and loathing flashing through that flat gray eye was absolutely worth it.

Alive, still alive.

Gassed, blinked tears from his vision.

Protect.

Breathed, measured and steady.

Get up and

Blinked, saw a fleeting, shining face, a baby face, a memory - no, a dream - about an angel, maybe

FIGHT.

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LiVil

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I know a few things about monsters.
When I was ten, my parents were murdered. There was no viewing at their funeral; their coffins were closed to hide their slashed cheeks.

I bare this unspeakable childhood trauma because it should make you believe that I have, at the very least, a victim's understanding of why some people are deservedly labeled monsters. But this is not why I know monsters. Most of what I know of monsters, I learned in a decade of teaching the least-wanted students of Konoha's least reputable schools.

I teach these students not because I have no other option, but because I recognize them. All children are children, and experience the world as children - but what they experience is not the same. When their experiences are monstrous, many children act like monsters - usually as a matter of survival.

I taught Namikaze Naruto.

Of course he was not Namikaze, then, but he did go by Naruto. He said he was two years older than he was, and tried to enter secondary school with no record of having attended primary school. He seemed clownish and loud. He could not read. I did not want to teach him; I did not want to look at a student and see my most painful memories scarred across his face. He was placed in my class anyway, and, under pressure by my superiors, I agreed to a brief trial period.

My new student was very small. Short and skinny and obviously unloved, he faced Konoha's toughest students friendless and undefended, an immediate target for every child with a will or reason to bully - and he was bullied. Daily. Terribly.

I know about monsters, remember?

This is what I learned during that trial period, and the years following, in which I was privileged to continue as his teacher: the boy who is Namikaze Naruto is the opposite of a monster. His circumstances were monstrous. His treatment at the hands of other children and some of the adults entrusted with his care was monstrous. But, partly in defiance, mostly because of his own inherent goodness, that scarred, scrawny kid straight-up refused to become what life tried to make him. He was ultimately a survivor - he had all the skills to fight, to strike fear into his tormentors, to become the bully rather than the bullied - but he did not fight. Would not fight.

I was guilty, because I was the one who told him it was never okay to fight, told him to find a trusted adult instead, promised to be that trusted adult. But Naruto had every reason not to trust any adult, and faced conflicts I didn't understand, and still he listened. He didn't fight back, and he didn't ask for help. He just... endured.

I tried to look after him. He so thoroughly changed my mind about who he was that I wanted to change his mind about me, wanted to prove that there was an adult he could trust. I did my best to intervene and protect: warned the other kids off him, helped to free him from abuse as a dependent minor, oversaw his WoF application; assured him again and again that I would always hear his side of the story, that even outside of school hours, I was only a phone call away. But a teacher's scope is limited, legally and pragmatically, and Naruto was far from my only student. I could not always be there for him. He needed help when I wasn't there. I failed.

Naruto never failed. In the two and a half years that I taught him, not once did he lose control. Not
once did he become the bully, or even strike back to defend himself, in spite of being more than capable of doing so. I did witness him stand up to his bullies - but only to save another child from their bullying.

Could you do what Naruto did? Could you show up every day, walk knowingly into a hell-place where you are ignored by those in authority, laughed at, scorned, taunted, and beaten by your peers? Go "home" to treatment that is the same - or worse? Could you do that, and never retaliate? Could you do that, and keep coming back, always ready with a big bright smile?

Could you come from that, and transform into a star WoF prodigy, fully committed to education, future, and friends?

Look me in the eye, and tell me you could. Tell me you would never be a monster. Tell me how you know that a child you've never met, whose circumstances you could not begin to know or imagine, is the monster the media is so eager to paint him as.

I'll look right back, and tell you what I always told Naruto: I will hear his side of the story.

Wait. There is time to judge. It is not yet. Wait.

Hear his story.

- Umino Iruka, Konohagakure

vVoVv

Shisui's viewing was miserable.

Sasuke felt numb more than anything. Kept his arm pressed against Itachi's, because he knew, knew with an urgency that grew on its own without thought or definition, that if he wasn't right there, Itachi would do something terrible.

Itachi was straight-backed and tall in full uniform, pale and blank and still, staring stark into the face of each identically-uniformed officer moving down the line of mourners. When Sasuke risked a glance up into his brother's face, his chest seized so hard and cold that heartbeats hurt until he could breathe through the fear again.

That was murder. Murder in Itachi's eyes.

They were whispering, some of them. Murmuring condolences and, steps past bowing their heads over a clansman and teammate's corpse, still muttering — words Sasuke couldn't hear but raged at anyway, because what he couldn't hear, he could read loud and clear in the way shoulders shifted and brows bunched and eyes-narrowed-small skittered back to Itachi.

Sassed stared back. Did you do it? Did you? Whose bullets hit Shisui? Who fired the shots meant for my brother? Or was it a team effort? And there was the small slithering voice in his head that doubted, doubted Itachi, because it was all the same, wasn't it? The same as when Itachi betrayed Father —

—The Fox's words rang in his head, cold and cruel even in echo: Ask your mother, little Uchiha.
Shisui's mother howled suddenly, grief ripped past the muted sobs she'd quivered with as she stood small and fierce beside her son's casket. The sound hit Sasuke and took his air and left his hand white-knuckled on Itachi's sleeve. His eyes shut and when he opened them again he hated himself for it, because he was hiding just like all the other uncomfortably-glancing-away Uchiha. Mother moved, fell to her knees at the foot of the funerary stand with her arms around the shrieking, shivering mess of her sister-in-law. They knelt there in their black dresses and pointy black heels and Shisui's mom kept making horrible sounds that everyone pretended they couldn't hear.

Sasuke held onto Itachi. No one else would be able to tell, but Sasuke could feel the fine tremor that was nii-san crumbling.

There was a ripple, a shift through the crowd. Bodies moved to clear a path to the double doorway.

Father stood there.

Oh, Sasuke thought, and he couldn't reason or feel his feet, Oh, it's that day, too.

He'd counted down to this. Forced himself through hour after hour of meaningless schoolwork so that every grade report would be perfect for this. Entered competitions he didn't care about, just to have shiny trophies lined up with his name on them for this. Got to every hockey practice early, stayed late, worked himself until he dropped and then got up and worked some more, determined to be the best on his team, because - if he could just - be impressive enough - maybe Father would see him.

Now Sasuke stared through his too-long bangs at a the dour-faced man in a too-broad-shouldered suit who swept the room with judging eyes, eyes that lingered on Mother as already-downturned lips defined a deeper frown, and thought that there were things he should be feeling. He watched Father step forward, flanked by Uchiha police officers and bowed to by others. Watched heads nod and hands reach out to clasp in greeting as Fugaku moved past the line of mourners awaiting their turn at the casket.

Soon Father will look at me, Sasuke thought, and waited for the familiar twist of excitement and anxiety to swoop through his gut, but instead his brain said: Was this planned? Was Father part of this plan? Did the plan go wrong? Was he supposed to attend Itachi's funeral today?

"Mikoto," Father commanded, and Sasuke caught a glimpse of her wide, startled eyes; then Mother was standing and ducking her head in embarrassment, nervous fingers flitting to check her hair and dab around each eye with a small silk handkerchief. At Father's nod, large uniformed men reached down, took hold, tugged Shisui's mother up and away; she wailed louder and reached for her dead son; Mother began to reach back.

Mother's hand fell. Sasuke blinked again and Mother was standing straight and still at Father's side, hands clasped and eyes downcast. Sasuke felt - Sasuke felt - Run, was the only word he could put to the coiling of his muscles and desperate ache that might be his heart -

Father's gaze shifted, then, and found his sons.

Itachi shuddered, a lapse of less-than-millimeters but Sasuke was too close not to feel it. There was a breath, and then cold, gentle fingers were prying Sasuke's grip loose, squeezing his hand briefly before letting it go. Sasuke watched without breathing as Itachi performed a polite nod to Father, and then nii-san's back was to them both. He moved with grace, somehow taller going out than Father had been coming in, and while whispers of fear and blame and rage surged, Sasuke still did
not breathe. If he breathed he would scream.

*His best friend,* his brain ricocheted wildly, helplessly, *that's Shisui, that's Itachi's Shisui, Shisui is in that box, Itachi needs to be here, they can't do this, they can't—nii-san—*

"Sasuke," Father said. He was smiling. Sasuke realized this slowly, eyes still seeing Itachi's silhouette against a white winter sky.

*How will they dig the hole? Too cold. Too frozen. How will they bury him?*

"Sasuke."

He should bow. Should be saying something, any of the things he had practiced saying for when Father would be there to say them to. He knew his place in line, right next to Mother, and he shouldn't leave Shisui alone, Itachi wouldn't want Shisui to be alone -

But Shisui wasn't there. That - that was a body. A body in a box. That wasn't Shisui.

Sasuke met Father's eyes. Didn't run, didn't bow, could barely feel. Turned away, slow, limbs too cold to hurry or shake.

*It's cold,* he thought. Stepped. Not to the door, but to the side room where family members' coats and purses had been set aside. Put his on, found Itachi's, sucked in, gasped out, stepped back into the reception hall.

Father stood stiff where he'd left him. There were eyes, so many eyes, but he only paused to check on Mother. Her eyes met his.

*I'll be okay.*

That gave him breath. With Itachi's coat folded over one elbow, hands dug deep into brand-new dress-coat pockets, Sasuke turned and left. Past Father, past Mother, past every kin he knew and some he didn't, past too many uniformed KPD officers, past the funeral hall manager hovering near the guest book and his commandeered office where, from the sounds of it, Shisui's mother still cried.

Nii-san needed a coat.

."WuUuW".

"He won't see me."

"You're not special, Minato. He's not seeing anyone."

The moment she said it, Kushina regretted it. There was more than enough stress and misery to go around without snarking about it.

Naruto was on his fifth day in KPD custody, ordered held without bail, and the closest thing they had to reassurance that he survived was Jiraiya's lawyerly witness that yes, their baby was breathing, and doing it well enough to spit out creatively insulting leave-me-alone-old-pervert snipes in answer to every plea and question. Naruto was bruised and guarded, Jiraiya reported. Cautious and careful in how he moved, maintaining a constant state of hyper-awareness, looked
way too tired. Minute had a mole in the KPD who swore up and down that their child was being treated just fine. Kushina didn't trust the man; he talked because Minato paid, and that kind of loyalty rarely outlasted fear.

And the Uchiha knew how to instill fear.

This is what Minato and Kushina and their currently-useless entourage knew: Naruto had been transferred from the hospital less than twenty-four hours after being re-admitted; as an individual suspected of acts of terror, he was being handled as an adult, rather than a juvenile; because he was labeled an out-of-control and active threat, he was in a solitary cell; he'd been interrogated once, but refused to speak, even with Jiraiya present to defend and counsel him. Not that he was letting Jiraiya provide much counsel. If Naruto would just talk to them, they could tell him to trust their lawyer. Tell him why they trusted him. Tell him they were figuring this out. They'd get him out. Tell them they were there for him, he wasn't alone, everything would be okay, if they could just—see that Naruto was okay—

He was allowed one visitor per day. Kushina tried first. Minato tried twice. They asked Kakashi and Hinata to try. He'd refused Hinata.

There was nothing they could do, Jiraiya said. Naruto had the right to one fifteen-minute, heavily supervised visitation per day, conducted through bulletproof glass via direct-connect phones; he also had the right to refuse any visitor he pleased. They couldn't have him forced into the visitation box.

Kushina thought about asking Obito to frame himself for a crime that would get him locked up with Naruto. She'd do it herself if she had any hope of passing as male, but—NO, don't think that way, think legal, think right, she yelled back at herself. She needed sleep. She needed a brain capable of logic and restraint and reason, and the way she and Minato were burning themselves out on worry and frantic, mostly impotent action, neither of them would be ready when a real chance to act came.

Naruto needs us. Maybe you don't believe it, baby, but you need us, and we're here for you, and—and—

"Why," said Minato. All flat and tattered, like he'd been trampled black-and-blue on the inside, like he was trying to get up anyway. "Why, Kushina, why. You're the expert here, right? The expert. Why do kids like Naruto refuse the people trying to help them?"

Well that bit. Fighting back, huh? If they had no one else to throw verbal punches at, they had plenty practice injuring each other. She opened her mouth - No, said the recently-mended-whole corner of her heart. No. Not like this, Kushina. She closed her mouth. Closed her eyes. I'm hurting. He's hurting. We're both worn out and wrung dry in every way any person can be. I feel pain. I feel helpless. I feel it. I breathe it out.

Kushina opened her eyes. "I don't know," she said. "I don't know why, Minato. We should..." she hesitated, bit an already-bleeding lip. "We should ask someone who knows him better."

Minato looked up at her, eyes desperately unhappy, both hands tangled hard in his hair, and said: "Who?"

"Sasuke," said Kushina simply. "Or Sakura or maybe Iruka-san." The Fox, the most desperate part of her whispered, but she wasn't ready to listen to that bit of her psyche yet.

As if Uzumaki Kurama could walk into KPD Central and request visitation. Logic, Kushina, logic
Minato echoed "Sasuke" and the way he grumbled it had Kushina thinking that maybe Minato hated Sasuke, just a tiny bit. She watched him deflate. "I texted him," he said, voice small. The beyond-sanity majority of her exhausted brain thought this was funny. They were so lost. So desperate. So helpless. "No reply."

"Minato," she said, "let's sleep."

"We can't."

"We have to," she whispered. "Didn't we learn that, last time? Didn't we destroy ourselves and each other, last time? And we still failed. We failed him. Let's go home," she said. "Let's go home, and keep ourselves together and alive, and trust Naruto to be alive, because that's it. That's all we got. Be here. Be okay so we can be ready. That's the best we can do."

She read the fight in the tenseness of his jaw and shoulders, his urge to lash forward, respond by attack, because what he truly needed to fight was (always) just out of reach. People didn't realize it, didn't notice the unyielding steel built into that charming smile, didn't recognize the inferno terrifyingly controlled by a smart, affable demeanor; but that's what Minato did: he fought.

Like father, like son, she thought, and finally, finally warmed, just a bit.

Maybe this silence was part of Naruto's fight.

Maybe he didn't know any way to fight, except alone.

Maybe they could change that.

We've been here before. "Mina," she said, finding enough gentleness to make that more a part of her voice than weariness, "remember what you always said? Made me angrier at you than anything else."

"I'm not giving up," he said, too-fast, aggressive. In this strange small brief bubble of comfort she'd folded herself around, it made her smile.

"You're not," she agreed. "You don't do that. But not that. The thing about why Naruto had to be alive. Had to have survived. The thing I always threw things at you for using like you thought it was the ultimate argument-winner."

He stared back hard, small muscles of his jaw working, shoulders high, the way his forced-smooth brow failed to hide the angry defiance in his eyes so exactly like Naruto that it made her heart pull even tighter. She held it all in her own gaze, pretended the threads of assurance and confidence she felt were less breakable than they were. "He's ours," she whispered. "Our son. You plus me. Remember."

For just a breath, she watched the words (memories) light up and twist painful inside of him. Ours. Strong and smart and made to survive. That's who we are. That's who he is. Naruto. He's just waiting for us to find him - He sighed, huddled in, then shook himself out and up until he was tall and straight again. Still haggard, still devastatingly lost and more than a bit scrappy, but open. A little bit open.

And suddenly he was right there, and reaching for her - she held out her arms and he folded between them and around her, clinging, desperate, broken. And she was broken too, had been broken for a very long time, but that didn't mean she couldn't learn - couldn't change - couldn't take
a second chance if she was lucky enough to get one.

Last time, she ran away.

This time, she reached her arms all the way around him (Minato: first friend, first love; also last) and held on. Maybe the rest of her was a shattered mess, but her arms worked just fine. All the muscles of her gripping-tight fingertips, sure forearms, firm biceps, thick round shoulders were still there, still strong, still solid, able to bear up.

Bear up her (again) falling world.

XiViX

Hyuuga Hiashi sat with steepled fingers pressed to an aching brow, eyes closed, thoughts racing, trying not to admit how his heart was aching.

There was no one to see him. He was alone in his office, long night fading into near-morning. Even his personal secretary had reluctantly agreed to head home, somewhere between 2:00 - 3:00AM, as he'd made it quite clear that there was nothing anyone could do for him.

And nothing he could do. Would you have found some way to step forward, Brother?

Hizashi's memory-ghost was useless for everything except inducing guilt. As usual.

Swayed by Minato's earnest optimism and his daughter's love-bright eyes (and how had he reached a point where he acknowledged that reality, he wondered), Hiashi had thrown his lot in with Namikaze Naruto. It was a dangerous, but carefully calculated, risk: the media fever surrounding the boy would rage regardless, and Hiashi's executive decision to cast all facts relating to Naruto in as positive a light as possible cemented alliances that would hopefully pay off exponentially with the elder Namikaze's probably-inevitable return to power. Take the most popular political leader in recent history, add dramatic fairy-tale twist to a story with a deep-reaching grasp on public sentiment, a new-generation star shrouded in mystery and tragic backstory with just enough in common with his hero-worshipped father to be embraced in spite (or because) of it all, and you had one incredibly powerful, volatile formula for swaying and controlling public opinion.

Political gold. Until terrorists set off lethal explosives across the city, killing a some, injuring many, and terrifying all. Until the KPD, scrambling to respond to and contain the terror, caught Namikaze Naruto - the cause Hiashi chose to champion - covered in the blood of the woman he (allegedly) murdered just before stabbing a police officer while resisting arrest, having escaped from a hospitalization rumored to be caused by dangerously deteriorating mental health. And - just for an extra wee tidbit of damnation - the kid's mother joined him in brutally assaulting police officers, and spent nearly half a day in jail before being released to her husband on bail. For those news organizations with headlines to spare past the bombs and murders and psych ward escape stories, Uzumaki Kushina's record of activism-related arrests was being gleefully reworked as a perhaps-inheritable family history of violence and terrorism.

And Hiashi, on behalf of his entire (generations of sweat and blood and dealings and sacrifice the Hyuuga clan's influence and fortune was made of) family, was both-hands-in, sunk-to-the-elbows involved in what was looking more and more like the horrifically wrong side of a nation-shaping conflict. Just this morning, his chief editors had published that op-ed from an old school-teacher of
Naruto's in every media outlet controlled by or partnered with Hyuuga Corp. Media Syndicate, begging the public to withhold judgment on a crime so blatant that the plea, clearly heartfelt, came off as laughable. His entire legal team had been embroiled since the attempted cover-up of Naruto's assault on the Kumo ambassador (and wasn't that exactly the red flag he'd told his team not to portray it as?). His daughter was in the middle of everything, rumored romantically linked to Namikaze Naruto, living in the Namikaze household -

It took too much willpower to swallow the groan of rage and despair grating up his throat.

Most damning of all: his involvement made the Uchiha happy. And happy they were, bombings and death of at least one of their kinsmen notwithstanding - he could not understand it, but Uchiha glee could never be a good sign.

Fugaku had been released, he'd heard. Resumed clan leadership with hardly a hiccup. That family had no shame.

"Uncle."

Hiashi opened exhausted eyes to see his nephew, tall and imposing in the doorway, looking exactly like the canny, calculating, elegant leader Hiashi feared he could no longer be. The thought echoed startlingly clear among the blurred overlap of too many and too harried thoughts, calming and bittersweet.

"Neji. Good. I assume you've read my points on where we need to roll back to a more neutral position. Too much damage has been done already, but with the right approach, we may be able to work our early portrayal to an advantage - if we can make the public see their understanding of the situation unfolding along with ours, hindered not by journalistic bias but humanity, or even hope - we must come off as neutral, at the very least. Tell me which strategies you would consider - "

Neji was watching him too intently, his thoughts so carefully shielded that even as Hiashi cut himself off to allow the opening to hear them, he couldn't begin to guess at them. Still, he was unprepared for what came next.

"I have ordered a stay on all proposed changes. We will not roll anything back," said Neji quietly. "I am proud of the position we have taken. I will support Naruto."

Hiashi closed his eyes. "He is your friend," he said, once his shock and sudden hot offense against his nephew's uncharacteristic defiance had processed and cooled enough for his voice to remain collected and in control. "I understand that this is difficult for you. Still, you have never given me reason to doubt your professionalism before. Consider this your great, final trial. You are on the brink of taking on great leadership, and you have earned it. But you cannot rival my understanding of the powers at play, Nephew. This is a conflict where experience must lead, with the sharp vigor of youth needed to bear up and follow."

There was no hint of softening in his nephew's smooth face, nor the stubborn set of his shoulders.

"Do not fight me on this, Neji," Hiashi said softly. "You will lose, and we do not have time."

"On that alone we can agree," said Neji. "There really is no time. There is no time for caution or neutrality. We are at war, Uncle, if you didn't notice last week's bombs and murders. I will not allow our family to fall on the wrong side of a conflict my generation did not choose, and did nothing to deserve."

Frustration raged quick and hot, and Hiashi struggled to reign it in. "I have shown much regard for
"I don't blame you," said Neji, almost gently, though his eyes were hard. "But I will, if you force a front of 'neutral' now. You want to know what I understand? This is what I understand: it's about money and power. Of course it's about money and power. Konohagakure is the real seat of power in Hi no Kuni. The Capital is mostly a front: a convenient puppet government with the shadow-oligarchs of Konoha pulling the strings. A few families, ours being one of them, amassed business monopolies powerful enough to control most of the money, and that money buys the secret militaries - yes, that is what they are, Uncle, unless we choose less-flattering terms for our "security" organizations, like personal mafias, I could go with that one, it's very accurate - that fight the battles our puppet government has just enough judicial power to pretend to prevent.

"For decades we have fought over bits of land and law. Out of greed. Greed. But we don't hurt each other most. We hurt all the people who aren't us. Where did the Nine-tails come from? How does anyone dare ask, as if we don't all know? If everyone in power abuses it, does it not stand to reason that someone would do all they could to eliminate everyone with power - eliminate those wielding the law as their own personal lock-pick, always above and untouched by it - the KPD are just another mafia - "

"Neji."

"Don't pretend to defend the Uchiha," hissed Neji, fists clenched, words coming almost too fast. "And don't try to defend the Hyuuga. I've read our files. More than you would ever allow me to read, had you known I was reading them. I know who we are."

Hiashi rose to his full height, but found he could no longer tower over his nephew, as he always had done. "Return to the ice rink," he said, voice and face very cold to counteract the heat of shame and rage inside. "Go back to what you actually know, child, to your career as a star figure skater. I do not wish to hear any more of your thoughts on politics. Once you have sided with a mass-murdering terrorist gang, you have lost every argument common sense or decency will ever make."

"No," said Neji. "No, I will not. Don't put words in my mouth. I did not 'side with' the Nine-tails. But I do side with Naruto. There is a difference, Uncle, and I beg you to see it."

"What difference, Nephew?" The exhaustion was returning, a headache following merrily along, thick and throbbing. "That the younger's victim count is not yet as high? I wish for the truth to be different as much as you, Neji. He's - that boy - this will hurt Hinata. But - but we cannot, no matter how much we wish - I have turned a blind eye to the truth too long already - the boy has killed - "

"If you are looking for a murderer, Uncle, you have the wrong man," snapped Neji. "The wrong boy. The circumstances are indeed damning, but I have found several holes in the accounts and investigations already, and I intend to publish and pursue each contradiction with every resource available to me. But if you, like so many in our country, are so determined to see a murdered, don't look at Naruto: look at me."

His breath caught on the last word, and his shoulders rounded and bunched, and for the first time since disturbing Hiashi's troubled vigil, he dropped his gaze to the ground. Fingers fist at his sides.

"Explain yourself." It was hard to make the words, his jaw had clenched so tight.

Neji's eyes were closed. Whatever he was deciding to say or not say cracked the smooth mask of
his face, drew it long with banded pain. He swallowed, hard, twice, three times. "I tried to hurt Hinata," he whispered, eyes still closed but words clear. "Could have killed her. Three years ago. I broke into her locker, many times, and worked with a file to weaken the stanchions of her skates. I hoped they would break. I hoped she come down on a jump, and the blades would snap. I hoped she would break her neck."

Pale eyes opened, fixed on Hiashi, haunted, desperate, shaded with the determination of one who had nothing to lose.

But Neji had so much to lose. And all Hiashi could see was the way his nephew had taken his daughter's hands, when she'd told them that she'd seen her baby, that she was having a girl - how he had bowed before Hiashi's desk, shortly after her disappearance, and begged a chance for her happiness - the warmth that softened his face, when he brought Hanabi up-to-date on her sister's well-being - "Why," whispered Hiashi. No, screamed the little bit of hope that survived, curled defensively, in some forgotten corner of his being.

"Naruto caught me," said Neji. "He had just joined the WoF varsity hockey team. He was their weakest skater. So he was always at the rink at odd hours, practicing. I don't know how, but he noticed me, and watched me, and figured out what I was doing. I thought I was doing as our family always does," said Neji. Hiashi could hear - could feel - his regret. His shame. "I felt... justified. I was more talented, more dedicated, worked so much harder and risked so much more than Hinata. I won every competition I entered. Won gold. Was forced into pairs instead of the solo career I craved, because agreeing to pairs came with a scholarship I could not continue without. Hinata didn't even want to be there. But you drove her to every practice, analyzed and co-coached and commented on every one of her routines, hired top choreographers and commissioned music. You never once watched me skate."

This time, it was Hiashi's eyes that closed.

"I'm sorry," whispered Neji, swallowing again in the silence. "I... understand better now. But three years ago... three years ago, I was so angry. Angry enough to be blind. To be barely human. Do you remember the day I came home with two black eyes and a missing tooth? I said I was mugged by a street gang. The truth is, the truth is that Naruto found out what I was doing, and... confronted me. He did that to me.

"And then... then he went with me. Or made me go with him. To buy Hinata new skates."

A memory blossomed: Hinata, so surprised with delight that a rare smile grew and opened up her face so wide that dimples he'd thought she'd grown out of showed on both cheeks. Smiled at a gift she'd never dreamed to of receiving, not from the hands of her always-cold, always-scornful, always-distant older cousin.

New skates.

"I can't abandon him," said Neji. "I won't. Uncle, I won't. He could have turned me in that day. Should have. My WoF career would have been over. And... and I would have lost my place in the family, in your home. ...Rightfully."

"Perhaps you still should," Hiashi said, and watched devastation hit the young man before him with a near-physical blow; Neji even staggered a bit, breath catching.

Hiashi felt nothing. No - that was not honest. He felt too many things. Before he could begin to understand what they were, Neji rallied. Braced. Was again the tall, sharp, knowing businessman Hiashi had grown far too used to relying on, face smooth and untelling as carved marble, manners
impeccable.

"I understand," he said, and there was nothing left in his voice for Hiashi to analyze - nothing but confidence and cool acceptance - feigned or not, Hiashi could not tell. "You may begin legal proceedings if that is necessary. I will not fight for anything more than I have earned. In the meantime, I will use my place and influence in this company to fight for one of very, very few things I know to be right in this world."

The headache roiled full-force now, seizing his skull in a vice that smothered the things Hiashi wanted to say before he knew what they were. He still stood behind his wide desk, fingers twitching with the fists instinct wanted them to make, and watched his nephew - his son - his pride - perform a deep, perfect bow.


Hiashi was alone once more.

I have one child left, whispered a part of his mind he wished would stay quiet more often. Only one...

You fool, Big Brother, huffed Hizashi's voice. It sounded so much like his own.

You're right, Little Brother, he thought back. To himself. Inside his head. I am a fool. A mad fool. Why did you leave me, Brother, to grow old alone?

Even in his thoughts, Hizashi didn't answer.

IbUdI

There was cold, and there was pain, and Naruto awoke from the dream.

It was such a good dream. It had warm rooms full of food, so much good food, made by someone who smiled at him and ruffled his hair and kissed his forehead and called him hers. (Mom.) Hockey games and video games and snowball fights and help with his homework if he was brave enough to ask for it. Sheets and blankets and towels that were so soft and smelled nice and always clean clothes to wear, clothes no one would laugh at him for wearing. Morning push-up contests and one-on-one basketball games and someone creaking his door open just to see if he was all right just before midnight. Table-fulls of all his precious people: Sasuke and Sakura-chan, Kakashi-sensei, Iruka-sensei, Gaara, Itachi, Hina-hime. They were safe; they sounded happy.

A warm coat. Freedom (gorgeous perfect magic fast motorbike) safety (helmet and gloves and chaps and jacket all fitting perfectly) love (the people who gave those to him). A kiss from Hina-hime. Someone who never gave up, never stopped looking for him (Dad…). A name for Baby-chan -

There were walls, and bars, and him in an orange jumpsuit that rubbed and chaffed against ill-tended stitches, half-huddled-in against the cold, half-stretched-stiff against the pain, and time had run out.

The dream was over. Now was for nightmares. Naruto knew all about nightmares. His never really ended - it was just that for a little while, he'd let himself dream while awake. It hurt, but he was glad. For a just enough days that he'd started to believe it was real, he'd had a chance to dream.
Chapter 28

"...Hey."

Before Hinata could soften the anxiety binding her tongue enough to try fitting words past it, Naruto shuddered, pulled himself together, and spoke up first.

He even smiled.

He looked terrible. Peeped up at her from under too-long half-blond fringe, skin sallow, eyes bloodshot, lips chapped. She couldn't see his hands, but she could picture the fingers seizing, thumb nails scraping nervously into chafed fingertips.

He was nervous, and embarrassed, and sorry, and reading all of that in the slope of his shoulders and reddening of his ears made her own sensitivities secondary, relatively-meaningless enough that they were suddenly manageable. She breathed a little deeper, which was hard, with her diaphragm crushed as it was by the her ever-growing belly, and smiled sweetly back.

Her smile made him even more broken. "I'm so sorry about... about not seeing you, last time," Naruto said, eyes skittering sideways, watching the security guard looming behind him, the door to the little visitation cubicle he was locked in, the floor, back to her. There was bulletproof glass between them.

"I'm glad I'm seeing you n-now," she said.

"How is everyone?" he asked, and the question came out sounding more like himself, made him straighten his back, lift his chin, pull back his shoulders a little. "Do you - have you seen - do you know if Sasuke is okay? I heard them talking about - about Shisui - " and the sadness filled up his eyes.

Hinata hesitated, not sure if she should tell him. The truth, that Sakura had called her twice, with exactly the same anguish and the same questions, wouldn't be very good for Naruto to hear when he couldn't do anything about it. Her tongue started getting all stiff again.

"Nevermind, I'm being stupid," Naruto mumbled, before she could decide what to say or start to say it. "I should be asking about you. How are you? How's Baby-chan? Are you feeling okay? Are you eating lots? Are you sleeping? I know I've messed everything up and stress is bad so that's why I decided to see you even though I didn't want to 'cause I really don't want you to be stressed and if you came all the way here again I promised to myself I would make myself talk to you and ask you to please not be stressed 'cause - damnit, agh, that's not - I said everything all wrong - I want to see you, it's just - "

If he bit his lip any harder, it would bleed.

"It's just, didn't want you to see me," he finished clumsily, face to the floor.

"I miss you," he whispered, while all she could do was stare at the top of his head, at his clumpy, in-need-of-a-wash bangs hiding shadowed eyes, and try to swallow enough of her heart back down her throat to tell him words that would make him look up again. "I miss you so much, Hina."

"Ev..v..everyone is o-okay," she tried, taking quick small breaths to catch air to make words. "The h-house is... so-so empty, without y-you. Y-your parents are always in meetings. The se-security team m...makes up j-jobs to d-do. I've been cooking for them." She smiled as much as she could,
hoping to win a glance up.

She did.

"Every...one at the ice rink has been m-meeting too," she said. "Th-they talk ab..bout how to de-
defend y-you. Lee-san is dedicating his new r-r-routine to you - "

Naruto looked shocked. "What?!"

"It's very dramatic." It was getting easier to smile.

"Please tell me he's not going to skate about me all dressed in green," Naruto moaned. "And sparkly - and - and spandex..."

"He never skates in anything else..." Hinata said honestly.

"BUSHY BROWS WHY," cried Naruto, loud enough to earn a sharp glance from his uniformed watcher. He sobered up immediately. "And how about you?" he asked, pressing up closer to the glass, back determinedly to the sneering officer. "Are you really okay, Hime?"

Was she? Seeing him, seeing animation fit his face back into familiar lines she loved so well - "Yes," she said, very clearly, "Yes, Naruto-kun, I am okay. Baby-chan is - is driving me c-crazy. Sh-sh-she k-kicks me all night long - makes me p-p-pee twenty times a day - " she blushed, hid her mouh behind her hands over that particular detail popping out; wasn't even sure she'd ever said the word 'pee' before - but Naruto looked delighted.

"Really?" He gushed. He was as close as he could get to the glass now, palms flat against it. "Did that website tell you what fruit she's supposed to be this week? Is she a honeydew melon yet?"

"P-pineapple," said Hinata, grinning. The first time she showed Naruto the site she used to read about what was expected in a pregnancy each week, Baby-chan had been the size of a turnip. Or so it said. Baby-chan was a very wiggly pineapple.

"What about your classes?" pressed Naruto, falling from enchanted to worried. "Are you keeping up okay? Did you pass the trig final - " A chime rang in the visitation room. "Oh," Naruto said, voice low and scraped hollow again. "That's... that means five minutes. Five minutes til I have to go. I..."

Hinata looked up at him, at the hand he had pressed to the glass, at the shadows greedily reclaiming the brightness in his eyes. Her throat squeezed tight; she became very afraid that she would cry. Her hands knotted in her lap. She untangled them, braced the left against the narrow countertop beneath the glass barrier, placed the right on the glass, carefully lined up with the cold outline of Naruto's left palm.

"I'll see you again soon," she said, grateful that her voice only shook a little. She met his eyes. "I'll come visit you again, and, and y-you'll, you'll be here again, right? On the other side of the glass?"

"I - Hina-hime - "

"P-p-p-p-" It wouldn't come out. The word wouldn't come out. Angry tears welled, tears she'd been pushing back since she registered for the visitation and tried not to feel the way everyone looked at her, obviously very pregnant, obviously very young, signing in to visit a boy in prison, and felt every scrap of pity-scorn-judgment anyway. "P...p...pr-"

"I'll be here," said Naruto, rushed, anxious, anguished. "I - I'll - if I can - "
Something fierce and hot and unstoppable swooped through Hinata, right through her gut, blazing up into fire in her cheeks, in her eyes, and dripping warmth all the way to her toes.

"Promise."

Wide blue eyes caught on hers. Pale, chapped lips told a small, true smile. "I promise, Hinata."

"G-g-good," she said, a little huffily. "Y-you n-need to l-listen. To your l-lawyer. Y-your p-parents. Be careful - "

"Okay," he said, looking defeated, looking relieved. "Okay, Hinata-chan, I promise. I'll listen."

"Don't give up," she begged. Her eyes spilled: hot-then-cold down her cheeks.

"Hey, I promised, right?"

Another chime.

"That means one minute," whispered Naruto. "Hina-chan, I... I don't want to talk to my - my parents," he confessed. "Not... like this. Can it - can it just be you?"

There was so much she wanted to make him understand, but - "Yes," she said, simply.


His hand was alone on the glass: without thinking, she'd pulled hers away to wipe her tears. She put it back. A couple centimeters higher up, this time, to make their fingertips match. "Don't give up," she whispered, again. Don't you dare.

"I won't. ...Hinata?"

She focused on his eyes again, tried to smile.

"There's something - I - I thought of a name," he said. "I want to tell you - for Baby-chan, just, if you still want it - "

A buzzer sounded, flat and final and too loud to talk past, and the man guarding Naruto's visitation cube unlocked the door and stepped through. Naruto was already standing, flinching away; his wrists were cuffed. He leaned very close to her, whispered a name the glass, then - maybe unsure she'd heard it, yelled it, with a big besotted grin. Twisted and turned out of the guard's reach, going where the officer wanted him to go but not letting himself be touched. Was through the door on the opposite side of the cell. A last, too-quick glance back. Grinning, wicked and wild, the never-keep-me-down grin she'd fallen for so hard she still felt winded. "See you, Hime!" he called. "Love you!"

Love you.

Love you, Naruto.

For long moments of trying to breathe more and cry less, Hinata huddled on the stool before the glass of the empty visitation box. She dried her face, shut away her fears, gathered in the brightness of that final smile, and nested it carefully in the small strong bundle of hope in the center of her chest. Somehow, it was still there, unfrayed, even with the sharp edges of despair always rubbing against it.

Maybe she was a fool, believing in Naruto as much as she did. Believing that he was going to make
it out okay. That he would make everything else okay.

That was okay. She would be a fool. She why Naruto survived. Why he was who he was. He hoped. Fought hard, played hard, hoped most. Failed low, hoped higher. She had borrowed a bit of that hope from him, when she decided to save Baby-chan. She borrowed more to keep herself going through school, to stand up to her father, to reach out to deepen her friendship with Sakura, to slowly, slowly open wide the layers of defensive camouflage around her heart - to be with him, to be with his family, to love him, to show that love to him - and it just grew. Like she had a muscle for hope that also worked for courage and it stretched and strained and tore and healed and suddenly she was lifting and pushing and heaving up weights she'd once thought more significant than she was - and she could. She had. She was. She would.

Her brain still worked and she could still reason, and logic told her to she had everything to fear. She wasn't ready for this baby. She had no reason to believe she could be a decent mother. Naruto was accused of murder and assault and prosecutors were seeking evidence to charge him with conspiracy and terrorism as well; his best option would mostly likely to make a plea deal in exchange for a more lenient sentence - life in prison, maybe, instead of the final judgment she couldn't allow herself to think about long enough to name. She was not-quite sixteen years old, had no job, no degrees, lived only off the generosity of Naruto's family, and they had no reason to keep her or her child - now more than ever. What could she possibly be hoping for? A lifetime of loving a boy she would see grow into man, then grow old, then, then lose forever - only through the glass of a visitation cell, a handful of watched minutes at a time? A lifetime of unskilled labor, probably multiple jobs at once, to provide food and shelter for a child she wouldn't be present enough to shower in the love and acceptance she was determined to give? The alternative of remaining always and completely dependent on the charity of others - be it Neji, Naruto's family, or her own father? She could not be physically dependent and emotionally independent at the same time. Neither could her daughter. And Hinata knew, knew in a way that planted her feet and tugged her chin up and pulled her spine straight, that if she failed in everything else, in three things she absolutely could not, would not fail: love, defend, make free. For her daughter. And then - then, if she had anything left, for herself.

She knew this, but the secret warmth in her soul never seemed to hear. Or care. It grew. It grew and grew and grew, warmer and stronger and brighter, and finally, finally, she could return a bit - just a bit - of what she'd borrowed.

Okay. Ready. And Hinata checked herself back out of the holding area, collected her purse with nose high and shoulders straight, rode the bus home.

UiTiU

UiTiU

Sasuke saw nine missed calls from Sakura, and for once, he wasn't annoyed. He texted her Itachi's address, and asked her if she could come.

She came.

She paused to look at him as he held the door for her, at the rolled-up cuffs Itachi's too-long trousers, the packet of tissues in his free hand, whatever she saw in a face she couldn't really feel; hesitated between one step and the next, came carefully close - very close - fit her arms around him, giving him plenty of time to twist back into his own private space.
He didn't, and then she was pressed all the way against him, her grip around his ribs making it hard to breathe.

He found that he didn't mind, much. He looked down at the top of her head, at the caught snowflakes melting under his breath, tried to think of something to say, felt his stupid nose start to run again before he could, so pulled out of her arms to turn away and make use of his tissues instead. When he turned back she was staring at him again, and his other hand was still holding the door open so all the cold air was coming in, and he didn't know what her stare meant anyway so he nudged her to the side so he could close it.

"I'm taking that grunt as a hello," she told him, moving away just until their distance was less awkward. An alien bit of his brain decided that she should have hugged him again instead. "Hello back. Are you sick?"

"Just a cold." At least she hadn't assumed he'd been crying. Which he hadn't been. Did Sakura know he could cry? Probably not.

Naruto did.

"Sucks," she said sympathetically, and pulled off her boots, steadying herself with one hand against his arm as she did, then lined them up neatly. Looked up at him patiently. Looked down the length of the corridor they were standing in. Looked at him again.

Oh. "Kitchen," he grunted, leading the way. "Itachi's sleeping."

"How is he?" the question was so soft and sad, it made his throat ache. He led her through the tiny sitting area to the separate, but equally tiny kitchenette. Pulled out a chair for her at the little table, took the only other chair for himself, looked at her, stood up again immediately. Set about boiling water and getting out mugs for tea.

"Sasuke?"

She was still waiting for him to tell her about Itachi. "Fine." It was a lie. Itachi was not fine. All Itachi had done, for four days, was watch the news. And sleep. And take really long showers. Sometimes Sasuke pretended he couldn't wait any longer to take a piss, just as an excuse to break the lock and make sure his brother hadn't managed to drown standing up. "They're making him take leave."

"I bet he hates that."

At least they can't shoot him and claim it's an accident. "...Yeah."

The electric kettle shut off; he filled the mugs. Passed one to Sakura. Passed her the sugar bowl, too, in case she was one of those twisted people who asked for tea and meant hot sugar water.

Itachi was one of those people.

Sasuke couldn't fit his restlessness in a chair; he cupped both hands around his mug and leaned back against the counter, breathing in peppermint steam. It made his nose run again.

"Will you... are you staying here for now?" For good? Have you been kicked out? Or have you run away? he heard, but she didn't ask those things out loud. The ache in his throat was back; he shrugged.

"For now. Did they get Naruto out yet?"
"You don't - no, they haven't."

"What's taking them so long? It's not like Namikaze hasn't got the connections -"

"They're treating him as a suspected terrorist, Sasuke. Charged as an adult and - and held without bail and -"

Just-boiled tea sloshed as Sasuke slammed his mug down, searing. "That's stupid," he snapped. "A six-year-old could look at the timeline and recognize a set-up. What's Namikaze wasting time for? He can't afford a lawyer or what? I trusted him to take care of -" he cut himself off, cursing, and turned his back to her, yanking on the faucet to run cold water over his scalded skin.

He waited for the rebuke, but when Sakura spoke, she sounded as angry and drained as he did.

"I know what you mean. I mean, that's their job, to protect him - if they can't protect him -"

No one can protect him, Sasuke's own words mocked him, from a conversation that felt like it had happened in someone else's life, though it had been him and Sakura worrying about Naruto, and he'd been feeling lost and angry, just like he was now.

"Do you think... do you think someone else...?"

Did Sakura know about the Fox? Sasuke wasn't sure. Would the Fox rescue Naruto?

"I don't know," he whispered.

Could the Fox rescue Naruto?

And from whom? From us, he thought, hands coming up to cover his face, soaking his collar in ice water. From the Uchiha. My family.

"I need to go." Do I change my clothes? To what? They'll take them away anyway - does Itachi have any empty bottles -

Sakura looked up from her place at the Itachi's tiny table, the glint in her eyes the exact opposite of the calm, comforting picture she made, one hand curled delicately around a cup of tea. "Go where?" she asked sweetly. "To do something monumentally stupid?"

He was going to get himself arrested and hopefully jailed in the same cell as Naruto. Probably by committing an act of terrorism. He decided not to answer Sakura's question.

"ITACHI!"

"Dammit, Sakura -"

"ITACHI! SASUKE'S GOING TO DO SOM - MMMPHHH - do that again and I'll bite it off, try me - ITACHI -"

Before Sasuke could get out the door Itachi was in front of it, shirtless, hair loose, dried drool on his cheek, but eyes harder and sharper than Sasuke had seen since Itachi fell into his lap and gasped that Shisui was dead. Sasuke took one look at the set of his brother's jaw and retreated back against the sink, nursing his burned and bitten hand, hissing at Sakura and unsure if he wanted to kill her - or, seeing Itachi's lips quirk up, just the tiniest bit, at the sight of his suffering sibling - kiss her.

"Oh," said Sakura, staring at Itachi's chest, her entire face tinging red. This did not help Sasuke's dilemma at all. "I'm sorry I woke you," she said, voice a little choked. "I thought you were
probably already listening."

"Clever girl," said Itachi fondly. "It was time I woke anyway. I should have been listening. Now, Otouto, what was it Sakura wanted me to prevent you from doing?"

Sasuke realized the noise he was hearing was his teeth grinding, and tried very hard to relax his facial muscles enough to look blasé instead.

"I don't know, I just guessed," Sakura admitted. "But it was right after I told him that it looks like Naruto will still be in jail for a - a long time - and his eyes did that thing and he said he had to go -"

\textit{My eyes did 'that thing'? What thing?!}

"-You know how he and Naruto are always following each other into the stupidest kinds of trouble - I was - I thought maybe -"

"Shut up, Sakura."

The look Itachi gave him made him want to go stand in a corner and think about being a better boy. "Was she wrong?"

"No," said Sasuke, in between a few more murmured swears. It wasn't like Itachi would believe him if he made up something else. And the cowardly half of him was wretched enough to feel relieved - relieved that someone would stop him from putting himself in harm's way to help his best friend.

Naruto had never had anyone to stop him. Or maybe no one could.

"Naruto needs your help, Otouto," Itachi said, and Sasuke's eyes snapped up to his in surprise, fear and exhilaration shooting cold through his gut.

"What do you mean - " Sakura was saying, half-rising, looking all stressed again -

"They've scheduled the arraignment," Itachi said. "You need to be there. You're the only witness apart from Namikaze-san and Uzumaki-san who knows Naruto was in the hospital for surgery, and was never admitted to in-patient psychiatry. Naruto's enemies have worked thoroughly, but it seems they are not aware of - or perhaps have overlooked - your visit to the hospital. With Senjusama and her assistant incapacitated, only Naruto's parents are expected to be called as witnesses, and much has been done to discredit them already."

"You can prove that the KPD is lying! Maybe enough to start unravelling the rest— " Sakura exclaimed, hope brightening her face. Sasuke looked away quickly.

"You need to lie low," Itachi said grimly. "Stay credible. They'll call on you when they need you. Namikaze-san already spoke to me about having you called forward as a witness. Loathe as I am to see you enduring cross-examination, if you want to help Naruto, that is how you will do it best. Any further delinquency by anyone associated with Naruto - on his behalf or otherwise - will be used to hurt him."

"But you always said he had - he had to stay away from the KPD," Sasuke said, and it was difficult to get the words past the tightness of his jaw. "You refused to leave him alone, last time he was arrested. They disciplined you for it and you didn't care. Because something worse than being jailed could happen to him. That they'd - they'd make it look like he did it to himself or, or - he's alone in there - Shisui—"
"I know," said Itachi, and then he was right there, one arm wrapped around Sasuke, its muscles taut, skin cool against Sasuke's flushed neck. "I know, Sasuke. I think that's why they tried to get Shisui and I out of the way."

"Then **what does it matter**, if every freaking person he knows goes and blows stuff the fuck up?! Why hold a trial if they're just gonna kill him anyway - "

Sakura made a little inverted shriek, both hands flying to cover her mouth, horror babbling out in frantic words anyway. "They can't - they CAN'T, right, right? They're the police, they're the law, they have to follow the law - they can't just - and everyone, EVERYONE is watching - he's - Naruto is so famous now - "

"You're both right," said Itachi. His voice stayed cool, but somehow the gravity of the entire room seemed to shift, settle towards him, like it would be impossible to do anything but believe everything he said. "If they wanted Naruto dead right now, they would have killed him when he resisted arrest. They have enough footage of violent noncompliance that no one could have contested it. Not successfully. I don't think Naruto is safe, but I do think they want him alive - for now, anyway. I believe he is safe - relatively safe - until the arraignment. Perhaps until trial, which may give us as long as another year."

Newly-burned skin on the back of his hand stretched, and Sasuke forced his fingers out of fists. "Tell me, **tell me**, aniki," he pleaded. "Tell me why they want him. What they want."

"Please," Sakura whispered.

Itachi sighed, tightened his arm until Sasuke could feel the rise of his chest with his next breath. "Revenge," he said. "A chance to regain power they believe to be inherently theirs, wrongfully stolen. Vindication. A chance to see those they deem enemies thoroughly, maybe permanently, destroyed."

"Namikaze?" asked Sasuke. And frowned, because the Uchiha had been after Naruto long before anyone knew his connection to Minato. No, that was wrong. They'd targeted Naruto first, when they took him, when they implanted the fibrillator. Had the known all along? But then -

"Namikaze's extreme success and popularity has long been a thorn in the ambitions of Uchiha clan," Itachi agreed. "But the first blows to their power - which, two decades ago, was reaching a level of dominance even the Senju and the Hyuuga were hard-pressed to meet - were delivered by Kyuubi."

"The Nine-tails killed everyone, though," Sakura said, looking like she was unsure if this was something she could talk about or not. "Not just the Uchiha. Anyone with lots of money or influence became a target, right? That's what the articles say."

Itachi didn't answer, and as the seconds ticked away his silence, Sasuke's suspicions grew. "You know something. Something about the Kyuubi and us. The Uchiha."

"I know a lot of things I don't feel safe telling you," Itachi said. "...Maybe that's a mistake I need to stop making."

Sasuke looked at Sakura, saw the same hope and anxiety narrowing her eyes that twisted up his stomach. They both turned to stare at Itachi.

Itachi sighed. "Perhaps it's time. First, I will dress. Stay, and I will share at least some of what I know - or have guessed - when I return." With a look of deadly warning that had Sasuke sitting
obediently in the second kitchen chair, Itachi swept from the room.

"Are you mad?" Sakura asked, big eyes forlorn, when Itachi was far enough down the hall not to hear them.

It was a stupid question. Anger was one of Sasuke's top three emotions. But... "Not at you."

"Sasuke," she said. "We're making a plan. No one was able to reach you, so I'm telling you about it now."

"What sort of plan?"

"Gaara-sama initiated it," she told him solemnly. "It's Plan Z, I guess. If the adults don't save Naruto, we will. Hopefully while saving them too."

Sasuke wondered, like many times before, how accurately Sakura perceived reality.

"Should I tell you about it not?"

Sasuke worked to smooth the edge of scorn that would have her shutting him out of his voice. "Tell me."

She gave him a long look under arched brows, then huffed. "Fine, but judge a little less. At least until you've heard everything. First, you need to know that Naruto's parents have a pretty desperate plan of their own. Hinata overheard some things by accident, and they concerned her enough that she overheard more things on purpose. She hid Naruto's phone in the room where they meet and listened in on her own. Can you believe Hina-chan was so sneaky?" Sakura's tone bordered astonished awe. "She's a closet badass. So she told Neji, and he decided to tell us. They - Naruto's mom and dad and their assistants and bodyguards and Kaka-sensei and maybe even some hired people - are making plans to take over the court room and free Naruto by force, if it looks like the verdict will be bad."

"They - " Sasuke started to speak, found only blank space where he expected words and opinions to already be formed, shut his mouth. Images rose instead, of a court room that looked just like the ones in the TV dramas his mom liked to cry along to, people in long black prosecutor's robes being beaten around the head with a chair by Naruto's mom - wild red hair flying everywhere - while Kakashi and Obito laid about with hay-makers, fighting back-to-back, and Rin-san spirited an open-mouthed Naruto past guards held off by Namikaze's double guns - ridiculous he scoffed at his own brain, and shook his head violently.

"Yeah," Sakura agreed grimly. "Even if they get Naruto out, they can't all get out. Anyone who did manage to run would be a hunted fugitive. I don't think they plan to go into hiding. From what Hinata said, they're trying to figure out how to cause just enough chaos to have someone they're working with retrieve Naruto and - and somehow get him out of Konoha, then out of Hi no Kuni - he'll be in hiding for life, they'll go to prison, everything - everything will be destroyed..."

Yes. She was right. Everything would be destroyed.

But Naruto would be alive.

"Still, I understand why they'd do it," whispered Sakura, big eyes deep with echoes of the fears Sasuke wasn't even brave enough to acknowledge out loud.

"What's our plan?" asked Sasuke. Then stiffened, cutting off the answer she'd opened her mouth to give, hearing Itachi's footsteps in the hall.
"All right," Itachi said, looking much better - to Sasuke, at least, Sakura looked disappointed - than he had when he'd left. He'd washed his face and pulled his hair back neatly and was appropriately dressed. "I've decided what I'm willing to tell." He settled into the spot he'd scared Sasuke out of, and leaned back against the counter, arms over his chest, long fingers of one hand tapping against the opposite elbow.

"I will start from what was, to me, the beginning. My first assignment, upon being cleared for field work, was to catch the Fox. It was an impossible task, given as a punishment, not a reward, and everyone knew it. I knew my chances of completing the assignment successfully were infinitesimally small, but set out to complete this task anyway. I chose, as my first target - or lead, depending potential capitulation - a character known in the crime world, and to the KPD, as the Gatekeeper. Naruto."

Sakura sat up very straight, listening very, very hard. Naruto had always avoided telling her about his past. Sasuke refused to tell her anything Naruto wouldn't. He'd also made sure to hint at how much more he knew than she, in some petty need to prove his superior knowledge, and now he felt rather guilty about it.

"'The Gates' usually refers to the system of underground passages claimed and defended by certain organized crime units - alternate, mostly secret routes with access to much of Konohagakure, some extending far beyond city limits. It also sometimes refers to any illegal activity made possible by the existence of these passages. The KPD has never successfully blocked, monitored, or controlled the underground passageways, in spite of billions of yen being devoted to doing just that; our efforts became least effective when the Gatekeeper began operating." Itachi sighed. Pinched the bridge of his nose. Seemed unhappy about admitting what came next. "I told you that the Gatekeeper was Naruto. He was - the Gatekeeper was a child. Only a child. He'd been working for some time - my most modest estimate is two years - before officers began to take note of him, to notice the pattern. This was the pattern: any time an infiltration or bust went south, the kid was there. Any time we seemed close to confirming the existence of a passage we hadn't mapped, of connecting and understanding the Gates, the Gatekeeper would find us first. Catch us. Tiny kid, smaller than Sasuke. Recognizable. Scarred face and dark hair. We couldn't seem to get a mole or a plainclothes in anywhere. Doesn't matter who we planted. He always figured it out. Set off some sort of silent signal. Then things would go bad, for us. Tunnels collapsing, walls appearing where there hadn't been any before, ambushes waiting, gang safe houses suddenly and completely cleared out, anyone we were looking for - thought we had a deal with - gone. Just gone. And he still won't tell me how he did it."

Because Naruto never forgets, Sasuke didn't say. Didn't interrupt. If he talked, Itachi might stop talking. I don't know how he did the other things. But he sees things in people - not just - not just the way they look. And he never forgets.

Like how he never forgot Namikaze.

Itachi huffed, more outward annoyance than Sasuke was used to him showing, and smiled and small, exasperated smile. "For a while we even toyed with a theory that there were many kids, all trained to look and act alike, stationed all over the city, because the Gatekeeper was everywhere. A small, scarred, clone army. Now I guess - I guess that he guessed. He learned to think like us. Anticipate us. Naruto is intuitive, and a very talented strategist… and he certainly didn't work alone. But whatever he did, however he did it, he was effective."

He would have been better off alone, thought Sasuke bitterly. Don't think I'm going to forget about the part where you talk about the Fox, Aniki.
"Obviously, being repeatedly thwarted by a small child, while having to answer to government overseers for the millions of yen funding the various projects to control the Gates or render them unusable yielding nothing, made the Gatekeeper a prime, and hated, target. As I worked to gather and compile everything everyone at the KPD knew or had heard about this Gatekeeper, I was horrified to discover how deep this animosity ran: there were unofficial rewards, large ones, for anyone who could kill Naruto. Kill a child. Capture was secondary, even discouraged; it would look very bad if anyone learned that the KPD had imprisoned and harshly interrogated a little kid, and the Gatekeeper was regarded as too dangerous to treat in any other way. It was for the best, general sentiment agreed, if it merely disappeared - one more small body, collected from a certain area of Konoha, would draw tragically little attention.

Sakura looked horrified. Sasuke wondered when he'd stopped being surprised that people who were supposed to protect children very often did the opposite. Wondered if he had ever believed and trusted like that.

"What most disturbed me was that even good men and women, those I respected and emulated, seemed to agree," Itachi said, words going flat, an old, old anger pinching at the corners of his eyes. "I became obsessed with finding out why. Why people of integrity seemed to have, in the instance of one obviously threatened and manipulated child, none at all. The scars. Because of the scars."

Sasuke remembered being eleven. Remembered Itachi getting home from work, often in the middle of the night, and coming immediately to check on Sasuke. Remembered waking up to find Itachi sat on his floor, asleep, back against the bed, head leaned back on the mattress. Remembered Father rebuking Itachi. Calling him obsessed, deviant. Commanding him to worry less about Sasuke and more about fulfilling the expectations of his career and also to try being normal for a change.

As if Father thought Itachi could live in a world where a kid not much different from his own brother could be hunted, condemned to die for the marks on his face, and be okay with it.

Father never did understand Itachi. He just stopped telling Sasuke to be like him.

"The connection to the Nine-tails was obvious - that was one of two reasons I chose to go after the Gatekeeper first, in my quest to find the Fox - as was my next step: to discover why, beyond the obvious fear of an at-large mass-murderer, those scars elicited so strong a reaction. I had met the Gatekeeper, you see, and had a very different goal: to repay a debt." His eyes met Sasuke's, for a moment, and the blurred memories echoed the pain of too much cut skin (being jerked along dirty narrow passages, riding up to street level in a service elevator, emerging onto rain-slicked streets, vision fading in and out as Naruto staggered along, the only thing keeping Sasuke up) made him shiver. "I wanted to find Naruto. I hoped I could… protect him. Somehow. To have a chance of doing so, I had to understand why my colleagues wanted him dead. I found it - or most of it. This is the connection between Naruto, the Fox, and the Uchiha: the last is responsible for the first."

No no, please don't go cryptic on me now, stupid Itachi, Sasuke prayed. They were so close to actually learning something -

"The Fox was raised by the Uchiha."

We—what? Made what?

"In the early days of Konoha's rise from insignificant village to a center of influence in Hi no Kuni, there was little true law; those with money bought mercenary 'security personnel' to protect their interests. The Uchiha did the same, and were successful, particularly once they gained nearly full control of the nascent police force. To establish their dominance, they went a step further: they
chose a child, a smart, strong, desperate child, and turned him into an assassin."

"Kyuubi?" whispered Sakura.

"Kyuubi," affirmed Itachi.

"...Seems like that backfired," Sasuke said, the bitterness biting off his words expressing more than he wanted to. He hated his family. Hated being Uchiha. And loved them. Would never be anything else. *Don't you dare judge me, not you, you bastard,* Naruto had said, last time he'd punched Sasuke in the face.

"It did," said Itachi, gone grim again. "They got their elite assassin. The best in the business. Where they failed was in assuring his loyalty. From what I was able to piece together, they were able to use him as they wished for some years; when he turned on them - I have not been able to determine why; perhaps he simply waited until he felt ready - they were utterly unprepared, and his handlers became the first bodies to be found with cut cheeks. And until last week's attacks, the last known victims of the Kyuubi were also Uchiha... which is another reason I doubt that the Nine-tails were, in fact, behind those attacks. But I digress. You asked, Sasuke, what the Uchiha want with Naruto. I suspect the answer is tangled up with what Kyuubi wants with Naruto."

"He did to Naruto what the Uchiha did to him, didn't he?" said Sakura. Her eyes were huge. "I don't think it worked..."

"So many Uchiha fear," confirmed Itachi. "You can imagine, now, why they feared him so much as a child. Why they wanted him dead. They feared who he could become."

"And now?" whispered Sasuke. He was so cold inside, he had to fight not to shiver. "Why do they want him alive now?"

"Now, he is the linchpin," said Itachi, and there was an edge to his voice that made Sasuke want to panic, because it sounded helpless. "The point of commonality of all of their largest problems. He is the son of Namikaze Minato and Uzumaki Kushina, the two unconventional, and uncontrollable, masterminds of a social revolution that toppled the power structures the Uchiha used to maintain dominance - and went on to prove that Konoha could function, could *thrive,* outside of the rules the previous elite relied upon. Until Naruto disappeared, they were wildly successful. Now Naruto is back. And he is a Nine-tails," he said, mouth twisting down, "a living legacy to our family's most costly mistake. Raised up, perhaps, to continue the Fox's revenge. He is also a mystery: one the public cannot be allowed to solve. Because almost no one knows, still, why Namikaze Naruto disappeared. Who was behind it. Because Naruto hasn't talked. But he can. As long as he lives, he can."

"I know." Sasuke hardly recognized his own voice. The darkness in it chilled him further. Itachi closed his eyes, pained.

"Please - please, don't advertise that, little brother," he begged. "You are tangled in this tragedy too deeply already."

"I get it, I get it now," Sakura said. She sounded as hollow as she looked, even with her eyes lit up with the canny intelligence Sasuke sometimes feared. "Naruto is dangerous to the Uchiha because he's actually proof of some of their crimes, and has very close ties to their biggest rivals, both - both in front of the whole world - cause his parents - and, um, in the 'underground'," she said. "But it goes both ways, doesn't it? Just like he could ruin everything for them, if they use him right, he can win everything, can't they? That's why they're keeping him alive. They're turning everyone against him. Even - even against his family. I've heard some of the stuff people are saying. So they turn
Naruto into a murderer, drag it out through a whole legal process while making his parents look like they don't care that he's a murderer, they'd risk letting Naruto kill people just to keep him with them, which almost makes them accomplices. People will feel betrayed. By their heroes. That turns everyone against all of Naruto's known allies. And then… and then if the F-fox…" she stumbled over the name, and Sasuke wondered, again, how much of this information was new to her, and how she was taking it all in and turning it all over in her big fast brain without vibrating to pieces before his eyes. "If the Fox comes for him…cause no one well can... well Naruto is just bait, isn't he? He's bait. *Naruto is bait.*" And she started to cry.

"Clever girl," Itachi said again, very softly, and Sasuke knew Sakura was right - she was right - and everything else was wrong. His family, his life, his closest friend locked up - a piece of the rope being twisted, primed to hang everything he fought for, everyone he loved - and all Sasuke could do was reach across the table, and hold Sakura's shaking hands with his own death-cold ones, and let her cry.
Chapter 29

Naruto's home wasn't anyone's home without Naruto in it.

Some changes were subtle: a general lack of attention to neatness, how the people who still lived there moved in rushed, stressed clumps from Point A to Point B, quiet re-settling like a second layer of dust almost before they passed. Some changes were glaring: no Big Breakfats - no sit-down meals of any type, really; no daily shuttling to and from the ice rink; no squeaks of sneakers on linoleum or echoing smack of a dribbling basketball or crowing battle cries bursting from the gym. And no one laughed anymore. But really, Hinata thought, fists clutched under her chin as she leaned into the balustrade of the grand staircase and listened to emptiness, it was this: a house needed to be a place of connection to be a home, and Naruto was the point where everyone in this place connected.

And Naruto was gone.

Hinata had seen him as the sun for a long time, and she recognized what was happening: they were out of orbit. All of them. Reeling, unbalanced, disconnected. Catastrophe-headed.

They were trying. They were trying. Her heart broke for the way Naruto's parents reached for each other again and again, for the way their reactions to what was happening snapped distance between them, again and again. Kakashi-sensei seemed to be caught in some sort of fight between Uchiha Obito and Rin-san; it had something to do with the plan to free Naruto by force if they had to, and Rin's role in that plan, and it hurt enough to draw tight lines into all three of their faces. No one was sleeping enough. Genma, Raidou, and Iwashi worked doggedly at protecting people who no longer cared, much, if they were protected. Who were actively preparing a scenario where they couldn't be protected. Hinata heard Raidou telling Genma that he didn't know how much longer he could deal with just failing, failing Namikaze Minato, and she bit her lip and ached for them, and made sure to have Genma's favorite almond crescent cookies to go with their next meal. The bodyguard team were the only people who talked to Hinata every day, and she was pathetically grateful that they kept showing up for the food she made. She felt a strange, secret kinship with the lead bodyguards: because they were on the outside, looking in; because they were treated well, but always thought of second, or last, if at all; because they felt like they failed. So she baked cookies. There wasn't much else she could do.

She could sit on the stairs, and listen to emptiness, and wait. Everything was waiting, now: waiting for her final exam scores to be posted, waiting for someone to remember to eat what she cooked, waiting for the next underage-defenders-of-Naruto meeting, waiting for news of Naruto so there was a reason to call a meeting, waiting for her next fifteen minutes with Naruto.

Waiting for Baby-chan. She was thirty-five weeks pregnant. She had one month left, probably: one month until the life she cared for only by caring for herself was suddenly on the outside, a whole separate tiny helpless person who needed her for everything and could be damaged just by being picked up and held wrong and also would trust Hinata to give her a life that was worth living and keep her alive to live it and Hinata was terrified. Given only the track record of her own life, she never would have dared. Maybe... maybe she would have found just enough endurance to give birth, to give her daughter some chance at life. She could have caved to Kurenai-sensei's gentle-but-unceasing "consider adoption" pressure.

Maybe she still should. But she knew what she wanted, wanted so desperately that want wasn't a strong enough word: she wanted to be selfish. She needed to be sure.
Sure that this baby, this little human who didn't ask to be part of this very messed-up world, would face that world loved. Cocooned-in, free-to-fly love. The comfort her own mother's arms, remembered with so much pure warmth that just thinking of it made her eyes sting and her chest burn; the die-for-you determination that grew for Naruto and made her heart dance on its own, dance alive, beating joy for having someone worth putting up with all the worst parts of being alive for. The love that shattered whole people and built them again in mosaics of their own pieces but with pieces of others, too, and cracks that let them reach taller.

The love that filled and burst and scorched this home: pain and loss and gain and hope so intense she could hear it, sitting on the stairs and listening. The house was untouched. The home was gutted.

Hinata breathed in, and deep-under-words knew: she would give birth in this house.

Then she thought: *No, of course I won't. I'll be in a hospital* -

But she wasn't registered with any hospitals. She had attended only two prenatal doctor's appointments, and would fight against a third. If anyone had been paying enough attention to notice, she was sure they would have scolded her; it was selfish, and stupid, to avoid something that might help her baby… but did the appointments really help her baby?

They didn't help her.

She'd gone only because Neji-nii-san so desperately worried about her. She was glad she'd been there for the ultrasound. She treasured the printouts, the memory of that strong, fast little heartbeat, the revelation that Baby-chan was really there, and really hers - her daughter. It didn't make up for the nightmares that came after, asleep and awake. It didn't seem to matter, in the part of her brain where terror lived, if the person touching her was a female doctor, threatened and vetted by an over-protective cousin.

Being touched was enough (too much).

If she could be in this place that had mostly memories that meant home - if she could be alone - no, if Naruto could be there - *Naruto can't be there*. But still, relief welled: birth - what had to happen to her body for it to give birth - scared her cold and sweaty and breathless - but it scared her a little less, now. Peace edged the fear-clouds, thin but healing, and Hinata breathed out.

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For years that took a far greater toll than he could afford to show, Uchiha Fugaku had longed for home. Under the respectful watch of loyal clansmen, his incarceration had been a relatively civilized affair; he had no freedom, few comforts, and fewer rights; but was protected, particularly from those with cause to seek revenge.

Sometimes he wondered if Itachi had realized that. If he had, was that a piece to the motivation-puzzle that had led a praised and promised son to betray his doting parent? Or did his son harbor a secret frustration - that his father had not felt the full justice he was so determined to bestow? (Because Itachi was - would always be - his. He could not show it: could only suffer for it.)

In prison, Fugaku did not sleep well. For twenty-six months, he slept only when biological need defeated neurological distress. Rest took on a different form: lying on the floor with his feet
propped on his bench, easing the work of his heart, as he indulged in painful, pointless, poignant longing. For home.

He was home. In his own bed, with his wife, feet raised on the extra pillows she had supplied for him without question. Cold and surprised and hollow to find the old ache unmoved, throbbing deep and dark and entirely undisturbed by the reality that all he hurt for was here, and it didn't matter.

It was uncomfortable to watch Mikoto sleep. She did so soundlessly, and only because she took sleeping pills, which angered him. The face he had seen only in full make-up and perfectly pretended composure in chaperoned visitation rooms was slack now, her bare-faced beauty as soft as he'd remembered in hours so long and bleak they weighed like decades. She was turned away from him, and lay so close to the edge of their bed that even a slight shift would topple her from it.

He did not deserve this.

He had waited. Waited for experience to teach his son what he had failed to. To teach him about life, and the delusions named honor and rightness and justice, and that there were always choices with too-high stakes and no fair answers. Even a brain as prodigious and precocious as Itachi's needed time, and failure, to understand: there was no black and white, no true right and wrong, only the choices of survival: prey or predator, protector or attacker. Humans loved to paint themselves above the laws of nature, but their survival depended on the same canny balance of selfishness and sacrifice that determined any species' survival. One couldn't choose not to choose, couldn't opt out of the game. There was only what to choose: Fugaku chose family.

Every time.

So he waited. Waited for Itachi to learn. Waited for Itachi to grow, to come, to bend, to bow. The bite of betrayal would not overwhelm his love for his son. Theirs was a clan of fire; it was no surprise, really, to stoke too-brilliant flame and end up burned.

Itachi was born old, and wanted to make true those black-and-white fairytales that would let him be young, and in doing so set afire all Fugaku had toiled and bled and sacrificed the greater part of his life for. He condemned and betrayed his elders, his father. Sent his disappointing, volatile younger brother spiraling into unbridled self-destruction. Upset the delicate balance of Mikoto's weak mental health. Destroyed the reputation of their family - destroyed their family.

All in the name of correctness. Goodness. Justice. You swore an oath to protect and defend - to enforce the law - to bring order - and you do THIS? Are those words as meaningless to you as your actions make them? You are not a messenger of safety, of justice. You are meant to be a guardian of the peace! Father! You serve no one but yourself! This selfishness breeds the opposite of peace - the clan - the clan - it's all about the clan - any evil justified, so long as it's for the clan - And then Fugaku had struck Itachi across the face, something he should have done much earlier, and hard enough to send him to his knees. Sasuke screamed. Fugaku hadn't noticed his younger son eavesdropping.

With Sasuke between them, Itachi changed. Kept to his knees, bowed. Apologized. Then Fugaku knew: he could not trust in this child. His child, whom he loved.

Two days later, Itachi took binders of evidence of KPD corruption so meticulously cited and annotated they must have taken months of dedicated effort to assemble, and delivered them to Konoha judiciary's head prosecutor.

The process was tedious, treacherous, but the ultimate consequence never varied: publicly shamed and humiliated, Uchiha Fugaku began life behind bars.
And then - even then, Fugaku did not deny his son. He answered the elder's cries to disenfranchise and disinherit with calm assurances that they, as Uchiha, were above such petty revenge. Itachi was still very young, still promising, still the genius, the future of the Uchiha balanced on the braced breadth his shoulders. He was also tragically misguided, blinded by ideals he was not old enough to recognize for the tools of manipulation they were. While the consequences of his choice were disastrous, their intentions were good. Solidly, devastatingly good. Fugaku wouldn't cut off his firstborn child. He wasn't a Hyuuga.

One day, Itachi would learn, would see the world as it was, and then the most fearsome mind of the rising generation would, once again, belong to the Uchiha. They only needed Namikaze Minato out of the way.

Once... once, Minato had been a friend. (There were always choices. Fugaku always chose family.)

It seemed it was still time to wait. Wait for Itachi. Wait for Mikoto. Wait for Sasuke - little Sasuke, whose sharpness of jaw and breadth of shoulder and depth of voice startled and pleased Fugaku, those months ago in the visitation box. Whose confident invitation to a sports game was absurd and shy and sweet (like Mikoto - too much like Mikoto.) Who stood only a centimeter or two less than Fugaku. Little Sasuke.

Little Sasuke, who met his father's silent command with eyes that were bold and dark and burning and very, very sad, then turned his back and followed his brother.

(Mikoto's eyes looked at him just the same way, only not at all bold - only cold.)

*You killed our Itachi's best friend,* Mikoto said, words nearly choked to nothing in the war of rage and helpless fear he read between them. *And now you will kill Sasuke's closest friend, too.*

She was wrong. Fugaku was blameless, and he told her so. She did not seem to believe him. His cold anger drove her farther. Farther across the room, farther into her not-submissive silence, farther behind her walls. He never had known how to get behind her walls -

He felt the closeness of his cell caving in on him, and leapt from bed. Drugged, Mikoto slept, soundless.

He left the room.

He'd had no part in Shisui's death. *None.* As for Namikaze Naruto... *There are always impossible choices. Who would I be, had I chosen another's child over my own?*

Madara had learned a new way to control. A terrible, indefensible, total control. The beat of child's heart, started or stopped with the tap of a finger.

One finger.

Uchiha Madara believed Itachi needed to be controlled. Uchiha Fugaku provided a more valuable source of control. Uchiha Fugaku provided Namikaze Naruto.

To live is to choose. There is only one choice that cannot be chosen. One cannot choose not to choose.

Uchiha Fugaku, striped by streetlight through window blinds, chose what he always chose.

*Family.*
Riding a motorcycle was a lot harder than she'd expected. Her heart beat hot and high and her shoulders strained and pulled and her eyes stung and every inch of skin from wrist to elbow was swelling and reddening into what was going to be a truly massive bruise - if she hadn't been wearing Naruto's arm guards, she might not have a right forearm - and the TV was off. And she'd almost not noticed.

Sakura went very, very still, then slowly, silently, shrugged her coat back on. The entryway and family room lights were on, and Momma's shoes were in their usual sloppy pile nearer the door than the shoe rack, and the TV wasn't on.

When Momma was home, the TV was on. It was maybe the first how-to-understand-life connection Sakura made, probably before she could talk. And it was always, always true.

Thoughts came too fast, assurances and fears half-formed and tangling, welling up only half-matched to words: Motorcycles are scary-Momma!-Too quiet-She finally-always told her-mute button-Okay it's all okay just adrenaline too much adrenaline-Please be okay Momma, please please please-Sasuke's cousin is dead-they killed-What if-Because Naruto-What would Naruto tell me to-back-out-get-help or inside, see-

"Sakura?"

Her knees gave out, her stomach turned, and when her eyes were working again she was on the floor, hands splayed to catch her fall, one of her stupid, lazy, careless, perfectly safe mother's clumsily kicked-off shoes digging into her butt.

"Honey? I heard you come in. Are you wearing those boots that take forever to take off? Because they cut off your circulation and you should never have bought them to begin with."

Hyperventilating, decided her blank, numb, useless brain. What my lungs are doing. Hyperventilating.

Owww. How does breathing fast hurt so bad? My poor throat?

"Momma's okay," she whispered, not really audible under her wheezing, but at least her tongue was more coherent than her head, so she repeated it over and over until it her brain believed it. Momma's okay. Momma's okay. Momma's okay.

"Well, come in when you get that ridiculous footwear off. I found the mute button for you. But since you're such a slowpoke, I'm pressing it again."

The TV turned on, and Sakura laughed but didn't really have enough breath for it to make much sound and smacked exasperation/relief into the cold floor with her open palm because damnit, Momma, and I was right about the mute button. I was right.

She took her time getting her shoes and coat and scarf and gloves off, and arranged them all neatly in their clearly labeled spots. Then she put her mother's things away in their clearly labeled spots, because no matter how brilliant Sakura's organizational designs were, Momma never stopped being a slob. I analyze information systems all day, Sakura. I need chaos. Life is chaos. The second law of thermodynamics, sweetheart. One gets tired of fighting the inevitable, dear.
So she was breathing normally and her eyes were only a tiny bit red and the girl in the selfie she
took to double check looked impressively unruffled for someone who’d fallen off a motorcycle
twice). She shuffled past the entryway, peeked into the family room, whispered a very small, very
heartfelt fuck. Momma was staring right at her, right into her, and the usual distracted distance was
Not There. Any hopes of this being a normal conversation - questions from one of those "how to
unplug and connect with your wired kid" blogs, probably, borrowed by Momma and added to her
weekly checklist, matched up with Sakura's sarcastic-but-fond responses - finished their death arias
the moment Momma pressed the mute button. Again. And the house was Sakura-all-alone quiet.
Again.

It was a day for firsts. Sakura's first time riding, driving, and crashing a motorcycle. Momma's first
time using the mute button. It was kind of beautifully symbolic of her life, actually, that the former
was a heck of a lot less scary than the latter.

"You haven't developed asthma, have you?" Momma was frowning, and looking uncertain, which
didn't suit her Born-to-Command makeup at all.

really doesn't seem like the type - I mean, not that there's really a type to have asthma but - okay,
forget I said any of that, that was stupid. But. Sasuke had no idea. For years. So I don't feel too
stupid for - "Stop babbling. Stop it, Sakura." Anyway. Um. I, would, I would tell you, Momma,
you know that."

Momma smiled, half her mouth curving just a bit, the rest staying flat, a little reminder that in
Momma's world, it was never safe to put it all in a smile. Sakura smiled back, with her whole face,
like she always did, and told Momma the truth, like she always did.

"You scared the crap outta me, Momma. Using the mute button and all. I thought I'd walk in and
find you bound and gagged and tied to a chair, some thug from Suna wearing a balaclava and, and
holding a knife - like one of our kitchen ones, the best one for chopping carrots? You know the one
- to your throat, demanding I throw the championship game if I ever wanted to hear you making
horrible mean fun of talent show contestants ever again - "

"The judges, Sakura. It's the judges I ridicule. Not that I don't take a fair shot at anyone who comes
on national TV asking for one, but - One: I would take down any balaclava-clad thug long before
they had a chance to try to manipulate my poor, sweet, totally-able-to-own-them daughter, and
Two: I am not that predictable. Just because I choose background noise - "

"Why did you use the mute button?"

That got her hit with a full-throttle stare, until she regretted skipping the warm-up, sending them
careening head-on into the crisis. It wasn't like she got to banter like this whenever she wanted to.

"Sakura," said Momma, "how are you?"

And just like that, one measly little ordinary question that most people got asked a dozen times a
day, and there was a painful lump tightening up her throat and traitorous tears filling up her eyes.

"Your father called," and there it was, the one thing that would make this trying-not-to-cry thing
pretty much impossible. "He asked how you're handling... well, I don't want to make assumptions.
But we both know you have a lot on your plate, and that's when things are going well. And things
probably... haven't been going well, lately."

It would have been her stepmom, her sweet, sincere, very-difficult-to-hate-because-she-actually-
understood-emotions stepmom, who worried. Who told Daddy to worry, because while Sakura had given up on hating her she'd never gotten around to telling her she'd stopped hating her, so no direct communication there. And Daddy was scared of Sakura. Well, scared of Sakura having emotions, and crying, and even though it had been years since she'd been anything other than bubbles of light and good cheer in front of him, he still hid behind Momma.

Some things just... couldn't change. Prayers and dreams did nothing. A TV with no sound was the biggest miracle Sakura was going to get.

"Come here," said Momma, and with a look like she was bracing herself for something mildly unpleasant, opened her arms.

Sakura ran into them anyway.

She got at least twenty seconds of arms around her before Momma let go. It ached worse than her bruised arm, that space coming between them again, but Sakura was so full of aches right then that one more could hardly knock her balance.

Sucked to be crying, though. A tissue waved in her face, and she took it, and crept back into her safe corner of the couch, the little throw pillow she'd displaced finding its way into her arms, squeezed tight.

"Is it... Naruto?" Momma tried, even more uncertain.

"He didn't do it! It wasn't him - don't believe what they write, Momma, I know it looks - but - it's because they set him up, his whole life they've-"

"Okay," said Momma, staring at the TV, and it was hard to tell between the tears messing with her eyes and the snot dripping from her nose and the need to find a fresh tissue, but Momma seemed to accept what she said. If what she said was even coherent enough to understand.

She didn't know what was safe to say, so Sakura helped herself to the whole tissue box instead.

"He's been a good friend to you, hasn't he, baby."

Damn. She'd almost stopped crying.

"Come back," said Momma quietly, and held an arm half-open, and gave Sakura a wavering half-smile when she looked up, choking on a sob. I'm trying, Sakura read in that half-smile, and like it always did with her parents, longing and gratitude shuddered through her. Gratitude that they tried. Gratitude that they wanted her. Gratitude that they cared. Longing - unsightly, slimy with guilt, oily with resentment longing - for parents that weren't her parents.

They were exceptionally intelligent. They were responsible. They were kind. They gave her freedom and independence friends like Ino envied. They were respectful and forward-thinking and feminist and everything a thoughtful parenting book could make them, so long as they didn't have to connect. So long as it didn't take too much valuable time. So long as Sakura didn't interrupt the things that mattered most.

Slowly, feeling her psyche's splintering edges, Sakura scooted along her couch cushion, cautiously lowered her head.

Momma smelled like Momma. Lemon lotion and salt. Her thigh was thick and soft. Hesitant fingers pushed sweaty hair back, smoothed over a taut brow, walked the curve of her shoulders and back, raising goosebumps and shuddering breath. Sakura's eyes closed. Felt her heartbeat slow and
steady, her breath drop low in her belly, this-is-how-to-understand-life memories whisper, warm: safe.

"I'm sorry about your friend, I'm sorry you're hurting," Momma said, a little stilted, fingers stumbling still. A moment later they were moving again, and Sakura told herself: cherish, with dread and love and longing, and Momma must have pushed the mute button again because the sound of the TV filled the room.

Home, came next, and sleep came with it, and Sakura let it.

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It was getting harder to tell the difference between awake and not. Harder to remember that he hadn't always been inside-out cold from helpless-shaking-pitiful fear, Harder to remember that he wasn't tiny and weak and helpless. Sweat seeped, squeezed through shivering muscle that burned in forced stillness, itched and slid and breathe - one (in) breathe - two (out) the breath, only the breath, one - two -

The first hint of a footstep and all of Naruto's limbs burst out, pushed up. He careened into one too-close wall, bounced off, had his face pressed to the window above the hatch in the door long, dripping seconds before the officer reached it.

"HI! Hey! How are you today? Still early for dinner, isn't it? Didn't we have lunch? How's your day going? Anyone giving you trouble? Wanna vent? I can listen! I can —"

"Talkative? Interrogation is ready when you are."

"No," said Naruto, and took a step back from the door, and hated himself for it.

The man laughed at him, short, mean, and vindictive, then slapped a visitor's registration printout onto the glass between them. "Daddy's here. Shall I pass along your rejection, then?"

Naruto knew the procedure by heart, now, had opened his mouth to say the first 'deny' when the caving closeness of his cell with its stench of sweat and urine and its smothering silence that blended nightmare and memory closed his throat right up. He gulped and shivered and looked, for the half second before it was whipped away, at the little picture of Namikaze Minato's face printed in black-and-white in the top corner of the paper on the window. "Accept."

"Oh, it hurts him, you know - what?"

"Accept."

Sharp dark eyes met his, hard and clear and calculating, and Naruto let some of his own hate through as he stared back. "Accept."

"Well, we are breaking you, after all," the officer said softly, and was gone from view before Naruto could suck his next breath in, heave it out in loud defiance. Bellow and body slammed forward, hit the door, bounced back. His next breath came on the floor, fingers fisting in knotted bangs, and the next came too fast, and the next faster, and they were coming for him and he couldn't do this. They'd be back - the officer would come with guards, this time, and they'd unlock his door and search him and put on the cuffs and walk him down the hall (OUT - out of here - ) and
down two more halls and up the stairs and one more hall and behind the little row of visitation boxes and into one of them, where he'd be locked in alone, again, but there, on the other side of the glass-

**DAD! DAD I'M RIGHT HERE! I'M RIGHT HERE! DAD! I REMEMBERED - I'M RIGHT HERE - please, PLEASE - DAD PLEASE-**

(He was eight and he was small and they'd get him and make him quiet but he'd fight back and Dad would fight them and Dad would win and Dad would take him home and

and Dad turned, just a little bit away, bulky with hockey pads and head half-hidden under his helmet but Naruto knew and Dad knew because he looked right at him and his eyes went big and Naruto smiled and mashed tears out of his eyes with stinging hands but Dad wasn't moving he was just staring and then -

then Namikaze Minato's face went sharp and cold and closed, and his eyes were so angry and Naruto shuddered away from the glass, a terror beyond all he'd felt seizing and shaking and making him hot and cold and sick and scared, scared of Dad.

But Dad was there, even if he'd turned his back, so Naruto shoved to his feet and smashed into the glass and pounded and roared and screamed and begged as Dad dropped his stick, surged forward, sprinted and skidded over the ice to leap the boards and disappear down the tunnel. There was a whole crowd on the other side of the ice, a whole crowd of people shifting and shouting and turning, but none of them saw Naruto, who beat at the glass with knuckles that bled and called out with a voice that didn't make sound anymore.

After a while, the game went on anyway. After a while, Naruto's fists wouldn't move anymore. After a while, the arena on the other side of the glass was mostly empty, and Yugito came. He curled in, silent and still, but she just picked him up and held him against her chest, mouth a small, bitten line.

They took him back. Back to the room with no windows.)

In a room without windows, Naruto forced his limbs to unfurl. Made his diaphragm shift, up and down, in and out, until his lungs un-seized, until his muscles would hold him up where he took up stance in the middle of the cell, arms out.

They came, they unlocked the door, they made him stand palms up against the wall, they ran rough hands over all of him. They put on the cuffs. They shifted around to herd him through the door.

It took two tries, but his feet moved. In the corridor his heart skipped and sped, made his head too light. He was out. He was moving forward and the wall wasn't four paces away. He could see twenty meters to the turn in the corridor and it made him dizzy. Up the stairs and his thighs burned. The guards were talking but he couldn't make their words clear; it didn't matter. He just had to stay up, move forward, not think about - about -

There were the little glass boxes, and he couldn't move. Something shoved roughly against him - one of the guards had walked right into him, reflexes too slow to catch the change in his charge's movement and respond. Sloppy. Almost made him laugh. They weren't being sloppy now, though. Were wary and braced, more than ready for him if he was stupid enough to fight. Maybe if he was really, really polite, they'd take him back to his cell -

No.
"Sorry about that," he said quietly, and it came out rough and unsteady, but he was able to take the next step forward. They swore and pushed him and that helped. He bit his lip too hard while they unlocked the door and swallowed blood before stepping in. \textit{Just - sit down. Breathe first. Then -}

\textbf{Look up.}

Looked up, into a face that was way too old, into eyes that were very blue and very warm and dangerously close to leaking.

Warm. Warm.

"Thank you," whispered Dad. "Thank you for letting me see you. Thank you, Naruto."

Blue eyes closed. Quick fingers flicked at tears. When Dad looked at him again, Naruto still hadn't remembered to breathe. It happened in a gasp and Dad's shoulders hunched tighter, and it had only been twenty-six days since Naruto had seen him but by the way all those lines had set into his face it might have been years.

"How are you? Can you tell me?"

\textit{Can I?} He opened his mouth, and his heart came out, in words that were too timid and small and true. "I want to go home…"

Seconds stuck tight, and they both swallowed down hard. "Yeah. You and me both, kiddo. I would give anything to get you home."

There was nothing trite in that promise. I would give anything, Dad said. I would give anything, Dad meant. It scared Naruto, a little. "Dad, I, I know I said I would end up in jail but - but I - I really didn't want it to happen, didn't want this - I'm - I'm - "

"It's not your fault," Dad said quietly, immediately. "I need you to understand that. This - none of this - none of this is your fault, Naruto."

Naruto looked at him, looked at the way the creases around his eyes wrote pain. "It's not your fault, though," he said, and his voice was too soft and too strained, so he wasn't even sure it made it through the little holes in the glass.

"I... There's no real point in playing the blame game, I know, but I should have done some things - everything differently. The surgery—by keeping it all hushed up, by not trusting even my closest advisors, I played right into their hands—that's on me, Naruto, you know I pushed you and everyone else into doing it my way—"

"They would've come for me anyway. They'd have found a way."

"...That's not comforting. \textit{Please}, Naruto, please talk to Jiraiya about what you know. Please. Let him help you."

Naruto couldn't imagine a lawyer doing anything but making things worse, but under the devastation of warmth-and-agony in those eyes, he would have agreed to anything. "Yeah. Okay."

Dad's face lit up, looked more like Dad was supposed to look. "Perfect. Don't underestimate Jiraiya-sensei, kid. He's the reason my name stayed clear during, and after, the revolution. There's no one I'd trust more with your case."

Naruto nodded, and swallowed, and couldn't think of anything to say. Which is probably for the
best, because it was still hard to breathe, and his throat was still tight - getting tighter - and the five-
minute-warning would sound, and then the one-minute, and then Dad would leave, and he'd go back to the room with no windows.

No, no, Dad wouldn't leave, he was the one who had to leave - 
"…see your mother, if she comes? Just five days left to the arraignment, so we'll see you then, but - "

- Dad was still talking, was asking questions, and he needed to answer, but to talk he had to breathe and he could hear air going in and out if him and it was actually really loud but no matter how hard or fast his lungs pumped there didn't seem to be any oxygen and Dad was yelling at him now and someone was unlocking the door and - 

"Don't touch him, let him calm down, please don't touch him - "

He wasn't on the bench anymore. He needed to fight, needed to fight so bad. If he hit something he would breathe. What if he killed someone? What if Dad was right there and watched him kill? They were reaching for him. They were going to take him. They were going to make him quiet. Dad was going to leave -

"I'm going to restrain you," someone said, and the words came together so slow in his flying-crazy-
fast brain but he figured it out just in time to detach from his body, leave his limbs listless and shivering in someone else's hands while he floated up, reeling with gratitude, because he wasn't going to hurt anyone now.

If he ever saw Dad again, maybe those eyes would still be warm.

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Chapter 30

"You ready?"

"No," said Minato heavily, pulling his wife closer.

"...Fair," Kushina decided. "It's not like this is something we should be ready for. I thought we grew out of this level of stupid in our twenties."

"I must have grown into it. Your fault, of course."

Kushina grumbled. Wiggled away whatever space had survived between them. Tucked her face between his jawbone and clavicle and breathed in deep, sucking, greedy breaths. She was trembling, just a tiny bit.

"It's cold," she whispered. "There's a blizzard warning for tomorrow night. What if they cancel?"

"I don't know. They shouldn't. Reschedule, I guess."

They should sleep. Or have sex - who knew when (if) they would share a bed again, after tomorrow - but there wasn't really room for anything but breathing, here in these minutes between planning stupid, reckless, desperate plans and enacting them.

Breathing was hard enough.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow Naruto would face arraignment. Tomorrow, Jiraiya would present their wildcard counter-accusal along with a plea of not guilty, and maybe, hopefully, miraculously swing the tone of the proceedings widely enough to sway the judge from the expected "held without bail" decision. The best possible outcome would see Naruto released into their custody until trial; it would be the beginning of a drawn-out hell of legal battles they had very little chance of winning, but it would give them time.

And Naruto would be with them. They could protect him, feed him, hear him, love him. For only months, maybe, but Minato would take and hold a minute. Every minute. They needed (had lost so much) time.

"I'll find something," Kushina said, anguished. "I always do. There is always evidence. I just need to recognize it."

"Shh. Love. You will."

"Don't shush me," she snapped, and he murmured apologies and didn't wince when the strong arms around his ribs squeezed tighter.

They would try very hard to fight legally. They would follow all the rules. They would agree to any conditions that would return their son to them, however temporarily. But they would not - could not - leave Naruto in the custody of the Uchiha.

"I like Killer B," Kushina said, and Minato twisted his head to catch her eyes in his, surprised by the hard bright note of unexpected hope in her voice. "I think - doesn't make it any less crazy, but I think - I think this plan will actually work."
"Yes," agreed Minato, in blithe opposition to the way his stomach weighed with slowly churning ice and the secret part of his intellect that just knew things whispered awful premonitions, "it will."

It wouldn't. It was a stupid, reckless, unbearable risk. They were playing chance with their child's life. Playing chance was their only chance.

Maybe Kushina was right. Maybe it would work.

Being kidnapped by amoral anarchist killers had saved Naruto's life once before.

Maybe black-luck lightning would strike twice.

"Guys, I—I don't know how to tell which van he'd be in, I thought there'd only be like two to track but there're six parked and one already left and what if they use a car instead?—I—fuck—how do I not screw this up—"

"If we're right about the door, I'll see them bringing him out. We've got probably more than an hour to wait. Stay calm."

"Easy for you to say, Shika, you aren't dealing with a hyped-up-on-adrenaline, hunting-instincts-activated freaking mess of a dog. Plus it's freaking freezing and there's something up with the weather—try telling Mr. My-Instincts-Can-Kick-Your-Instincts'-Asses we got a whole hour to wait."

A heartfelt sigh. "I believe in Akamaru's training. You should too."

"OF COURSE I BELIEVE IN HIM—"

"Cut the chatter. Healer here. I'm ready."

"You watch way too many spy flicks, Sakura-chan. But damn if that doesn't sound sick. Fang here. In place, if not exactly fucking ready—"

"Shadow here. Ready."

"Blades here. Ready."

"White Ghost. Ready."

"PFffffff! White fucking Ghost—"

"Tanuki. Ready."

"...Damn, you sound terrifying. Leaf here. Ready."

"Noodle and Red here with Leaf! We're ready!"

"Beetle. I am ready."

"BEAUTIFUL BEAST SPEAKING! I am ready."
"Dammit, Lee, watch your volume-"

"Wonder Woman, born ready."

"Hulk, ready."

"...Someone's missing. Who didn't report in?"

"Sasu—Avenger. Come in, Avenger. Come in—"

"...Is he okay? He's okay, right? Avenger, can you hear us?"

"Should we send someone to check on him? Maybe Leaf's team-"

"Guys, GUYS! A van is leaving—Shadow did you see-"

"It wasn't him. Avenger, do you copy?"

"If he doesn't check in within five minutes, we need a fall-back plan. Blades, once you finish Phase 5, can you replace Avenger at checkpoint D-"

"We need to know that he's okay—I'm going to disconnect to call him-"

"Stay on the channel, Healer. We can't afford to lose contact with you, even temporarily. Blades, was that an affirmative?"

"Blades here. Yes. Affirmative. After Center, I'll head for checkpoint D."

"White Ghost here. I don't agree with this alteration to plans. Choose someone else to replace Avenger."

"That's not up to you. Do I move on my own, or wait for a cue, Shadow?"

"Ooh, you're in trouble now!"

"Shut the chatter. Tanuki here. Shadow, are you maintaining your visual while orchestrating these changes?"

"Shadow here. Yes, I'm watching. Let's give it another minute before officially changing plans. Avenger, do you copy—"

"I have an in-!

"Sa—Avenger! Where were you? We've been trying to reach you for—"

"There was a fucking voice in my bag—I'm fine, it's Ita—someone's radio, I'm getting police chatter—I think he, I think he hacked the channel we need. Hang on, I'll get it on my mic-"

"Shadow here. Is this cause for concern? It could be sabotage-guys, be ready to pull out-"

"No. No. He's helping us. I know he is. Fuck, we might actually succeed."

"White Ghost here. Is he with you?"

"No. I don't know where he is. But he's on our side. We ready?"

"Beetle here. We are ready. Why? Because we were all ready at the appointed time. Only you were
not."

"Tanuki here. Do not be distracted. Avenger, what do you hear over the dispatch radio?"

"Can you hear it?"

"Shadow here. I hear it, but it adds too much static to our channel. Do you know what to listen for?"

"Ah...I know some of the codes... I think 10-15 or 10-16 means prisoner transport -"

"I'll ask the internet. Stay quiet and keep your channels open. It's wait time."

"Last chance to back out."

"Like hell. Last chance was two weeks ago. But it's okay. No one here is backing out. Right, boy?"

"Like I said, I trust Akamaru. Now shut up. Shadow over."

"...Forty minute mark. Everyone okay? Should we do a sound off?"

"Tanuki, one."

"White Ghost, two."

"Blades, three."

"Beautiful Beast! Four!"

"Hulk, five."

"Wonder Woman, six!"

"Healer, seven."

"Fang, eight."

"Beetle, nine."

"Leaf, ten!"

"Red, eleven!"

"Noodle, twelve..."

"Shadow, thirteen."

"Avenger. Fourteen."

"All accounted for. Avenger, heard anything?"

"...They're...complaining."

"Anything useful? No? Fine, keep listening... We'll check in again in ten minutes rather than twenty, because we should be getting close. Stay warm and stay awake, guys."

"Heed your own advice, Shadow. Healer over."
"I wish I'd brought more snacks..."

"Do you think our parents will find out that practice wasn't canceled today?"

"Shhh—"

"Door's opening! Shadow, can you see? My view's blocked—"

"I can see—it's not—no it is—it's him! Cuffed—we expected that—four goons—one driving, one front passenger, two getting in the back with Maelstrom—who's blond now, by the way, just so you all know—"

"I see them! Fang on Phase 2!"

"Be careful! Turned right out the gate—you still see them? Good, tell us where you lose them—Healer, ready for Phase 3—"

"Roger. Ready and waiting."

"Avenger here. They reported their departure. Gave their ETA as 13:45."

"Good, that fits our estimate."

"Akamaru's still on them! We're flying! YEAAAAH BOY! WHO'S A GOOD BOY YOU'RE THE GOOD BOY—Beltway! They're headed for the beltway!"

"Good work, Fang. Healer and I see them. Phase 2 over."

"Shadow here. We passed Fang and will keep on their tail. Watchers, write this down—you ready? Plate number is P0068Z. That's—uh—Papa-zero-zero-six-eight-zulu. Leaf, Red, Noodle, you copy?"

"Leaf here! 10-4!"

"Red! Got it!"

"Noodle. P0068Z. I copy."

"Excellent. Shadow here. Tanuki, Ghost, you ready?"

"Ghost, standing by."

"Tanuki, standing by—"

"Phase 4 is go! Leaf team, get ready! Wonder Woman, Hulk, Beetle, move to Center."

"Beetle here. Roger."

"Wonder Woman here. On my way! Hulk's with me."

"Copy. Blades, you ready for traffic?"

"Yep. Blades over."

"Noodle here. Checkpoint one passed at—um—13:14."

"Good work, Noodle. Go home."

"I can hear them taunting him over the radio. *Fuck them.* Hit them as hard as you can. ...Avenger over."

"Red here. Maelstrom passed Checkpoint 2 at 13:22."

"Good work, Red. Go home. You kids be safe, okay?"

"I'll wait for Leaf. Noodle's waiting too. Red over."

"Troublesome..."

"Wonder Woman here. Hulk and I are in position. Waiting for Shadow."

"Healer here. We'll be there in five."

"Beetle here. I and my parcel are in position."

"Leaf here! Checkpoint 3 passed at 13:29! Do we have to go home?"

"*YES.*"

"Fine, fine... good luck, guys..."

"Beetle here. Average speed is 68km/hr. To make Checkpoint Alpha, Phase 6 may begin in approximately eight minutes, at a speed of 120-150 km/hr."

"Tanuki here. Roger."

"White Ghost here. Roger."

"Shadow here. I'm in place. I've checked and agree with Beetle's calculations. T-7."

"T-6."

"Avenger here. Overheard ETA change to 13:40."

"Beetle?"

"Beetle here. Continue as planned. Our math is correct. Their ETA is a poorly estimated approximation."

"Good. T-5. Healer, are you in position?"

"Yes. Healer over."

"T-4. If you believe in any gods, any gods at all, start praying now. Blades, get set."

"T-3. Phase 5, go."

"T-2."

"Beetle here. Blades has control over the first two traffic lights, is approaching the third."

"Blades has third light under control. Approaching final intersection."
"T-1."

"All clear. Beetle over."

"Phase 6. GO!"

Tenten jerked her car into a tiny side street, nearly running over a man in an apron taking a smoke break, and stared at the device in her hand.

It was an infrared transmitter programmed to override traffic light timers. With good timing and careful aim, she'd laid a trail of permanently green traffic lights, edged at each crossroad by permanently red lights.

Hopefully that was enough to keep random bystanders safe. Enough to keep Neji safe.

She'd made a race track, and Neji would be racing it in three...two...one...

Go.

Kiba caught his longboard, collapsed against someone's garden wall, and threw his arms around his dog. It was stupid to skate that fast. To skate that fast on a road. A busy city road. Almost as stupid as chasing police transport vans as part of a potentially destructive plot to give an accused terrorist a chance to go on the run.

Panting breath made thick clouds around them. Akamaru was trying to lick his sweat and fear away, and Kiba buried shaking, numb-from-cold fingers in thick white fur, mouth spreading in a hard, wild, wicked grin.

Now that he knew they could go so fast—leash and harness and fresh graphite on all wheels and desperate balance and the crazy gorgeous beauty of Akamaru in full sprint—he couldn't wait to try it again.

Sakura reached the intersection—the first after the beltway exist, deemed Checkpoint Alpha—and turned left, pulling to the side in a metro stop pick-up zone.

She could drive a motorcycle now. She could drive Naruto's motorcycle, and it was strong and fast and turned like metal on ice and she was more than a little in love with it. The spare helmet Shikamaru had worn swung from one handlebar; it had another head to protect. She shook—from cold or adrenaline or fear or all three—but managed to engage the kick stand and slide casually to lean against the bike, body turned to the subway entrance like she was waiting for someone.

Behind her visor, her eyes slid sideways, watching the intersection.

She caught a glimpse of Ino's black wig and Chouji's massive jacket through the windows of a cafe on the opposite corner. Shino would be hidden in the shadows of the parking garage across from
her, Shikamaru set up before the floor-to-ceiling windows of 5th floor corner office Neji had procured.

Neji himself was four kilometers away, with Gaara, bringing the manufactured rivalry the two had so masterfully spread across the internet to its carefully crafted conclusion.

Any second now.

*Please, she prayed, please, please, let this work, let him be safe, let Neji and Gaara be safe, let the police officers be safe, please can no one die today, please-please-

A roar of engines. Back on the bike.

... "I'm sorry," Neji murmured, indulging in a final, lingering caress of his dashboard. He loved his car. Loved catching the tells of incontinent envy in those who saw him with his car, and knew they could never, ever deserve her.

He was going to hurt her.

A wealth of envious eyes watched from the gathering crowd. The passenger window of the yellow Mercedes sidling up to his Aston Martin peeled down, and he lowered his own window obligingly.

Sabaku no Gaara waited for the telltale clicks of paparazzi lenses before raising a lazy hand to flick his shades down just enough for ever-intense eyes to meet Neji's own.

"Last chance. Wouldn't want to scratch that lovely matte on the way to failure, newsboy."

"These are my streets, Prince."

Dry lips quirked. "Prove it."

Hidden earbuds carried caution to both. *T-2.* Neji smirked for the cameras, let his window slide slowly up to cover it. Gaara revved his engine. Idiot reporters. If they stayed where they were, there would be no choice but to run them down-ah, the Prince was making that clear.

*T-1.*

*All clear.*

*Phase 6. GO!*


Neji had dreamed, secretly, shamefully, longingly, of driving like this. Pedal to floorboard. Buildings blurring. Green lights—*only* green lights, Tenten had performed perfectly, as expected—five, then four, then two common cars to swerve by, shock, leave braking; a brief glimpse of distinctive Mercedes tail lights—now *that* couldn't be borne.

Adrenaline lighting up a billion nerve endings in an eyblink-eternity electrical storm, finger bones creaking around a leather wheel, a seamless change of gears.

Side by side with streaking yellow, now, and *Don't break 180, heroes, or you'll miss,* slow and
salty in his ear.

Power. Precision. Perfection.

"Beautiful. BEAUTIFUL. Perfectly timed. Almost there. Start slowing-12 seconds—I see them—8 seconds—I see you—SLOW—5–4–3–2—BRACE."

A millisecond's glimpse of a red pickup just clearing an intersection, a half-second of the blue-and-white of the KPD van taking its place—the sudden screeching swerve practiced for hour after hour on the prince's simulators—

White.

CRACK.

Weight.

Impact.

HiTiH

Today. Today, baby boy, I see your face. Finally. Naruto. Seven weeks since Kushina had last seen her son—seen him in a memory-nightmare of rage and panic and the kind of terror that made every other emotion light, fleeting, irrelevant. She woke in the hospital room in a drugged fog, held onto the edge of Naruto's empty bed because her limbs wouldn't hold their shape, and screamed and screamed and screamed. Then there was Minato calling 119, calling their security team, Naruto's call; Raidou successfully tracing that call, racing through catastrophe-emptied streets, sirens wailing—their own, and a dozen others.

Swerving to a stop at the foot of a building she never saw clearly because other KPD were already there—were surrounding something, right there on the sidewalk, were beating—a flash of scarred face washed red, jerked upward by cruel hands, a gun, a taser, her baby's scream—

She was moving before she was thinking. Running, lunging, fury and fear fueling fists that were sloppy with lack of practice but wholly capable of deconstructing the face of the man who hurt her child. Which is what she was going to do, because Naruto was safe in Minato's arms and she would make sure he stayed there.

And then he wasn't. They took Naruto and Minato let them. They took her and Minato let them. And left her there, behind bars, until she'd started thinking again, which was smart of him—but that didn't mean she had to forgive him.

Her knuckles swelled and split and bled as she waited. She didn't let Minato wash and tend them like he'd wanted to, when he regrew his balls and bailed her out. She superglued the deep rips, dusted zinc powder over the rest, gave them two days to heal.

Then she trained. She felt old and soft and lost.

Her son needed her to be strong.

The hands that gripped the steering wheel now were not soft; they were strong and strained and
callused. She eased to a stop at a red light, turned to look at Minato. He was composed and handsome and cold, the way he'd been after their separation, the way he always was when no one believed him and he knew it and he was going to get what he wanted anyway. His eyes watched the road; the rest of this face was quiet, every muscle aligned by design, practiced and precise. It kind of scared her when he was like this. Minato was good and kind and patient and warm. Also: clever, controlled, calculating, cunning. Hard in a way she would never be. Knuckles could lie.

Green. Go. They were moments away. They were turning the corner that led to the courthouse. They were on the spiraling ramp of the parking garage, where they would leave this car and rendezvous with the others.

Obito was missing.

"He wanted to avoid his uncle and came early," Rin said briskly, confirming and double-checking everyone's positions and protocols as though she'd been commanding highly illegal semi-martial courtroom breakouts half her life. "I passed it by Minato-sensei this morning—should I contact him?"

"No," said Minato, but something flickered in his eyes that made Kushina want to smack him for his paranoid doubts.

Obito was her boy. He was inconsistent and reckless and emotionally volatile, but he was loyal. To a fault. To the point of losing an eye. Minato's hyper-wary secrecy surrounding Naruto's surgery had screwed things up, and keeping this operation solo and secret would have made it more impossible than it already was.

But it wasn't like Obito to avoid anyone.

They were moving again. Into the parking garage elevator, out into whipping, biting wind, out into the first whirling whiffs of snow. *I'll see my baby today.* She caught Minato's eye, and his frozen face thawed, just for an instant, just enough for a very small smile. He reached for her hand, paused, took his own hand back. Her throat went tight, her shoulders lifted; she stepped away. He just moved closer, tugging the black leather glove off his left hand with his gloved right, and then circled her cold, bare fingers with his warm ones.

Forward.

Forward, to the courthouse steps, to where she would see her son, where—NO—what looked like the entire KPD awaited, Uchiha Fugaku at their head, face cold and blank as Minato's own.

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TuXuT  
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"Freeze. Stay where you are. Any movement made without previous direction from a KPD officer will be treated as an act of aggression. My men have permission to shoot. Namikaze Minato, you are under arrest for conspiracy to commit terrorism."

They were surrounded. Minato pulled his hand out of Kushina's suddenly bruising grip, raised open palms slowly, a quick sideways glance his silent plea for her to do the same. "An arrest of this kind requires a warrant," he said quietly. "There is no evidence to base a warrant on. I haven't conspired to do anything more than being present for my son's hearing. Jiraiya?"
"He's right. You're making a mockery of justice and the KPD, right on the steps of the courthouse. Bad, bad move. I'd laugh if there weren't so many guns pointed at me."

Uchiha Fugaku removed a paper from his inner lapel, unfolded it carefully, and presented it to Jiraiya.

"The warrant. Signed and stamped two hours ago by the judge."

"That's—that's real—how—"

"There's no evidence," repeated Minato. "There's no evidence because there's no conspiracy. You're crossing into blatant corruption and abuse of power. There is no evidence."

Shimura Danzo stepped from the shadows of the ornamented courthouse overhang, the curl of his thin old lips curdling Minato's gut. "Oh, there is evidence. Conclusive evidence. Confessed evidence. It seems like you don't inspire loyalty quite like you used to, Young, Yellow, Flash."

Someone had ratted? They wouldn't—none of them—not when this was for him, for Naruto. You didn't trust them with Naruto's surgery, his inner compromiser mocked. You didn't trust them when you should have. Then you trusted them when you shouldn't have.

Fugaku was stepping close now, two special ops officers flanking him. Minato met his eyes. He used to know this man.

His trust had gone wrong there, too.

Fugaku's face betrayed little, but his eyes slid sideways, refusing Minato's own. "You may lower your hands. Extend them towards me."

It was a courtesy, Minato knew, to cuff his hands before him, rather than behind him. A courtesy he had very little mental space to appreciate. Reporters came to witness the arraignment were streaming out of the courthouse; the relentless click of camera shutters began. He had one glove on and one glove off; he'd taken it off to hold hands with Kushina. The cuffs snapped shut, and a thought tugged through the fruitless frantic rush of impossible solutions: No one else is being arrested.

Then they hadn't been betrayed. Fifteen people were involved in the last-option plot to free Naruto, and while half stood with him now, circled by a full platoon of assault-ready KPD with visible SWAT and K-9 backup units, only he was under arrest. It didn't make any sense, but there was still hope—Kushina's role was more important than his—he'd been prepared for this, just not quite so soon—

"He's not a terrorist." Wrists bound, Minato turned to catch Obito's eye, to warn him to keep quiet. Keep calm. Jiraiya was right. There were too many guns pointed at them, and that boy had always been reckless. Obito stared back, lips bitten bloody. I noticed that before, Minato realized. In the hallway, early this morning. I noticed, but—

"Sensei…I'm sorry." The breath Minato was exhaling choked him. A single dark eye full of things Minato couldn't understand left his, turned to Fugaku. "I provided evidence of a possible contract between Namikaze Minato and a wanted criminal. That's not terrorism. He's not a terrorist. He's just—just making a mistake. Out of love for his child. A really desperat-desperate mistake."

"Whilst you have been most helpful, Uchiha-kun, you are no legal expert. Ah-ah, Hatake-kun, until we have Namikaze-kun properly contained, we must insist upon complete compliance from all
present. Although if you'd like to confess to being complicit in this crime—"

What Minato saw on Kakashi's face crushed the bit of his heart that was still bravely beating; his own face felt stiff, frozen in an old mask of blank, affable calm. Rin reached for Kakashi, looking sick, one gloved hand covering her mouth. Kushina hadn't moved or spoken, and he turned worried eyes to her and found shock and grief and rage that reminded him, uncomfortably, that she had been trained to kill.

"I will comply fully. It shouldn't take long to reverse this misunderstanding. I assume—I assume my son's hearing will be rescheduled."

Fugaku's frown deepened. "There is no need to reschedule. While you will be detained, your wife and your legal team are free to attend. Under careful watch, of course. We remain unconvinced that you acted as independently as your associate insists. Now: there is no excuse for delay. Unit A, escort him to the transport. All other units, report as planned."

It was like a dream. A terrible dream where the only redeeming factor was knowing it was a dream, knowing you would wake. But Minato was halfway to an armored police van, heavy hands on his shoulders and cold metal chaffing his one bare wrist and a horrible, irrational shame rearing hot and red as reporters chased, shouted, mingled breath freezing into misting clouds through which cameras clicked, and he wasn't waking up.

It was beginning to snow.

He wondered what grand game Danzo was playing, with this strange and careful timing. He wondered what he had done to make Obito betray him. Had Obito really—really betrayed him? Obito? —He wondered what Naruto would do when he realized the arraignment was happening and his dad wasn't there. He wondered what Kushina's face looked like right now.

He wondered if he could bear to know, and chose not to look.

They had just opened the rear door of an armored unit car for him when the radios blared to life. All the radios.

"10-46, 10-46, we have a 10-101, ALL UNITS, 10-16 operation failure, 10-101 for 10-98—"

Everything came to a noisy pause as officers scrambled to radio back acknowledgements. Minato went very still, focusing on the codes he could hear being reported. If nothing had changed since his time as prime minister, 10-101 required emergency backups from all on-duty units. It was never used. 10-98 was—was—

"He got away." Uchiha Fugaku had hurried near, was staring right at him, hard, scrutinizing. "There was an accident involving the transport bringing your son here, and he got away."

Minato's mind processed "accident" and went blank. "Is he—is he okay? Naruto, is he okay?"

Fugaku wasn't looking away, this time. Wasn't pretending disinterest. And there was something—something they both understood, a way in which they were exactly alike-flickering in those dark eyes. Then something crackling over the radio broke Fugaku's attention, and he moved to answer. Turned to the officers flanking Minato, barked orders. "Unit C, take over for Unit B. Bring the prisoner inside. Put him and everyone else with a connection to the target in one of the secure waiting rooms. Keep them there until you receive further orders. Unit B, all other units, respond to the 10-101 as directed by HQ." When he looked at Minato again, his eyes were as flatly unexpressive as his voice. "is your Naruto okay? We'll know when we catch him."
There was impact and explosion and for a moment, Naruto couldn't see or hear or scream or breathe.

Then he got oxygen in and some sort of half-voiced groan out and his eyes caught shadows and shapes and his feet were up and his head was down and a body was slumped over his, moaning.

The van was on its side. There was blood and lots of little pieces of glass and a thick heavy body under him and a thick heavy body on top of him and eerie, eerie stillness from the front seats. 

Go.

His lungs expanded and his eyes focused and his head rang thick and dizzy but clarity edged one of a dozen rising panicked thoughts: A chance. Run.

Naruto ran. No, he couldn't run. Couldn't move. There were bodies and seat belts and he could see okay and then he was seeing double and his hands were cuffed and—

"It's smoking! The—the engine's—smoking! Get them out, get them out!" —Ino was shrieking and —

Ino? ...Can't—not—why here— why—

The man under him wasn't moving, but the one on top of him was. He rolled, and Naruto moved instinctively, shifting and pushing until his arms weren't trapped, then twisted (pain!—) to reach the seatbelt buckle. Fingers scrabbled, slick with sweat and—what if the man under him was dead —what if—unlatched.

Naruto tumbled into pebbled glass from shattered windows and one of the men—cops, they're —was asking for help and he needed—needed to get up—get up and run-I should help him— the door opened.

The door was up. Up, sliding side door looking at metal-grey sky, and Naruto was down. Down with four bodies and blood and glass and nowhere to run.

"Please—help—"

Don't help him. He's a cop. If he's got—gun— The cops had guns. There. Damned retention holsters. Damned damned damned. Now Naruto had a gun. He could hold off whoever was climbing through, and get past them and—

"You're okay, oh you're okay, Naruto—"

Ino?

"Don't shoot! It's me! Please don't shoot! You must be scared—when the crash happened I just—we planned for everything but the sound it made—"

Black wig and brown contacts, but those were Ino's tear-bright eyes imploring him. Naruto lowered the stolen gun, ears ringing.
"The cops're hurt," he said blankly.

"We'll get them help," she promised. "Soon as we get you out. Sakura's waiting on the other side of the van. With your bike. Okay. Cuffs. Did you see—"

"Front passenger seat cop as the keys," Naruto said, reaching, but Ino was quicker. "Left—left pocket—that should be them—is he—is he dead—"

Ino's hands were shaking. "I don't know. Don't, that's—that's Ch—Hulk—"

Naruto stopped pointing his gun at the up-side door, pointed it at the conscious cop instead. *If I kill him, he won't tell on Ino.*

Something big and soft hit Naruto. Something he recognized, something he'd seen on-on-Chouji?

"Hurry," Chouji whispered. "Naruto, I can pull you out. Crowd is gathering on the side the wheels are on, one of us is waiting for you on the other. You gotta steal the bike. If you can, go to Arena 9. Avenger's there."

"The keys are—they're tied to his pocket—I can't—*Get your hands here Naruto—*"

Stretch and strain and *aagh—my neck, it—a little—little more—*

Cuffs clicked open. Ino was still yanking at his arms, tugging Chouji's jacket up over his prison jumpsuit, zipping up to his chin.

"Here! Hurry!"

A huge hand around his, ripping pain as he was pulled upward, dizzy and seeing double for a second's crouch on the side of the van—*Is that—Gaara—*Chouji shoving him over the side, landing, jarring, rolling; brown-but-Sakura's eyes on his.

"There," she whispered. She was sprawled on the asphalt; his bike was on its side behind her. "Arena 9. Go."

"Are you—"

There were ladybugs everywhere. Why were there ladybugs everywhere?

Sakura's smile. "I'm fine. I love you. *Go."

It was snowing.

People were shouting.

"Wait—your hands! You're—where are you bleeding from—"

He was leaving bloody handprints. He stuffed his hands under Chouji's jacket, wiped them on the hidden jumpsuit, leaned down, heaved the bike upright. "It's okay. The cuffs-wrists must have gotten cut up by the cuffs, in the crash."

"It's *not.* It's too noticeable, it's too slippery, your hands will freeze, you won't be able to *drive.* Here—my coat—steal my coat-put your hands in the sleeves—"

They would know she was helping him. No one seemed to be watching what was happening on this side of the van, except a billion ladybugs, but—
Shouts as Chouji heaved a second cop out of the ruined van.

She won't give up. With Sakura, it was always best to just do what she wanted the first time. So Naruto staggered towards her, pulled at the coat she was wriggling out of. She flopped back to the ground, winked at him from a too-pale face, already shivering in the wind.

Her coat was so warm.

"Helmet. Don't forget the helmet. 'S on the handle. Go."

The key was still in the ignition. He was seeing better now, thinking faster. A chance. RUN. Naruto swung into place astride the motorbike his mother made him, jammed on the helmet his father bought him, hit the kickstand, revved, skidded, shot into the wind.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Here's key to last chapter's code names. Good job if you guessed right :)

Maelstrom: Naruto

Healer: Sakura (h/t to one of my favorite kdramas :D)

Avenger: Sasuke

Fang: Kiba

Shadow: Shikamaru

Blades: TenTen

White Ghost: Neji

Tanuki: Gaara

Beautiful Beast: my beautiful son Rock Lee

Beetle: Shino

Wonder Woman: Ino

Hulk: Chouji

Noodle: Udon

Leaf: Konohamaru

Red: Moegi

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There is an unintentional name parallel between an OC and a canon character. I love the name and its place in my themes too much to change it.

Warning: Birth scene, based very heavily on my own experiences with bringing babies into the world. It's honest and messy.

- please help

- i'm alone help
Hinata was burning.

She'd believed the book that told her that childbirth was natural, that her body knew what to do, that if she just breathed and relaxed and thought of beautiful things there would be pressure but everything would be perfect and beautiful because her intentions were perfect and beautiful and her baby was perfect and beautiful and her body was perfect and beautiful and everything was made for this and of this and there was no need, really, for fear or pain.

The book lied. It LIED.

The pain. How could there be a pain like this? Pain that didn't fit in her body—overflowed in gasps and tears and only expanded in the air—sucked back in with every sobbed breath. If there were words for what was happening to her, she didn't know them.

-sakura are you there please

She didn't want to be alone but she didn't want anyone else. If she called an ambulance - pain breathe BREATHE BREATHE AAAAAHHH - someone would come but no no no she didn't want them she wanted - wanted Kushina-oba - wanted Sakura to answer her calls or her texts - Sakura promised to help - promised she would come - wanted Naruto - wanted Mama -

Mama—

"Okay," Hinata whispered, weeping, slumped and sweating and shaking in the ebb of a contraction, "Okay, Baby-chan, okay, okay, okay-aaaaahh-AAAAHGGGHH."

Please... someone... help us...

.

ViUiV

.

The muffling of his helmet and the roar of his own frantic heartbeat made it hard to hear, but Naruto wasn't picking up any sirens.

It took him a moment too long to realize where he was. Where he was leaving. Because the road he was on was a beltway on-ramp, and he didn't want to be on the beltway. Would get caught. Not enough exits, and those could be so easily blocked. He needed to get back into the city, into Old Town with its labyrinth of by-streets and alleyways and hidden Gates.

And if they didn't catch him there, he would head west. Arena 9. Avenger's there. Who the hell was Avenger? Who unironically chose that for a code name and was older than six?—Oh.

Sasuke. That's who.

He was freezing and he was hurting and he was really fucking scared, but Naruto found himself grinning.

He watched his mirrors as much as the road, but if anyone was on his tail, they were doing a damned good job of hiding it. There was an exit coming up, and barring blaring sirens, he was taking it.
Snow was coming thicker now, and speeding into this wind was so cold it really freaking hurt. His lungs filled again and again with burn-freeze-burn oxygen whistling up through the bottom of his helmet and his heart quit tripping and stuck to strong hard beating and his wheels blurred away one kilometer, three kilometers, five, ten, twenty and he looked at the wide wide world and screamed.

Free. I'm free.

The exit came and he peeled away from the off-ramp and into a shopping center parking lot with three different exits, and there risked pausing long enough to switch to what Mom called Stealth Mode. No gas, no noise, just battery. It would cost him speed, and for a half-breath his frozen fingers stumbled, unsure.

Run? Hide?

Hide.

Because he could hide better than he could run. He made the switch, wrapped a second layer of Sakura's blessed coat around aching hands, listened, watched. Set off. Ghosted through streets turning smaller and quieter, every heaved breath too loud in his helmet. Main roads had security cameras at every intersection; these byways didn't, though there were black box recorders filming from nearly every parked car - collecting the video feeds from those would take the KPD days, if not weeks. He passed tiny row-house yards, one full of shrieking-laughing kids leaping at snowflakes. Whisked by an elderly woman at her mailbox. Sped up when two dogs took after him barking, racing joyfully along their side of a fence.

Only the dogs took any notice of him.

Arena 9. Avenger had to be Sasuke. Only Sasuke knew - well, probably. Arena 9 was as close to city center as an unsafe, half-secret, fully illegal establishment could be, a squat cement spider sitting on a half-dozen crossroads of the web that was the Gates, and no one knew its secrets like Naruto did. Didn't matter if he was followed in-just had to make it in. They wouldn't catch him behind Gates. Couldn't.

The buildings blurring by huddled closer, the sidewalks narrowed, the alleys shuttered blacker and bleaker. This had been part of his bus routes, once. He'd had half a dozen bolt holes within maybe sixteen blocks. This was the Konoha he knew by-heart-in-the-dark-half-starved-know-your-part.

They weren't gonna catch him.

Annnnd...safe. Down a side street, past the back end of a food-poisoning-sushi place with rusting dumpsters, the entrance to a state-funded high-rise, a tobacco shop that sold good knives, a massage parlor that sold more than massage. The scarred concrete wall on the left opened up into a loading dock, and he slipped up the box ramp and into the bowels of a working yogurt factory.

The Gates hid in funny places.

This entrance was only officially used during first-shift deliveries and last-shift clean-up, and a pause and a listen let the ready tension lifting in his shoulders slacken, just a little. It was easy to slide the bike into and through the sluice area where industrial yogurt tubs were sterilized, steal a glance at the latest batch's expiration date to work out the code for a keypad on the wall, type it in and - there - the garbage chute swung away, a wide black corridor waited. Naruto revved just enough to ease through: into the dark, into the Gates.

Ten timed seconds, and the hidden entrance sealed silently shut behind him.
Naruto listened: water in pipes, whirs and beeps from machinery on the other side of the wall, the low rumble of a heavy truck on a parallel street, the subtle creak of an old building adjusting to decreasing temperatures. And there, in the walls, a constant high harmony of electronic humming. *Safe.*

Naruto stayed still, breathed relief. Could find his way by the walls in the dark, but trusted Sasuke to have tripped an alarm if that level of caution was needed, and allowed himself his headlights.

A cavern of open basement with exposed brick and pipes and corridors yawning dark behind irregular support pillars echoed empty in front of him. There was new paint on the floor; recent fights, then, leaving stains that weren't worth scrubbing. Nothing much had changed: old armchairs ringed wide walls, the cage took up the center, the dented ice-cream truck with its safes full of liquor kept its corner.

Naruto had never fought here. No one underage came through Arena 9. Not for fights, not for sell. No drugs either. It was the kind of secret only stupid people thought was secret.

Excellent for pickpocketing.

One hand on the brake eased him down the long ramp, shadows chased by his headlights sliding over circulation vents and hidden doors. Arena 9 wasn't worth deploying regular watchers, but Naruto watched anyway.

*(Because someone got Han and Fu and Yugito and - )*

*(Because thinking you're safe is a really stupid way to die - )*

*(Because safe isn't real.)*

He curled around electrical-line-twined support pillars and behind the false wall hiding the largest corridor, and there, with some regret, he tucked into the corner, killed the power, hit the kickstand, disentangled frozen hands from the twists of Sakura's coat, slid slow and silent to stand on bare cement. Fished with numb-clumsy fingers inside Chouji's giant jacket, closed carefully around the handle of the stolen cop's gun hidden there.

*(Safe isn't real.)*

It was black-black-black without headlights. Naruto didn't need light. Three steps down the corridor, and his free hand found the old pay phone mounted there, lifted, balanced between neck and shoulder, dialed, heard.

Straight tones from clear passages, all except the fourth hall, and he was there in seconds in steps softer than his own stupid-thunder heartbeats, and someone was waiting.

"Clear," he whispered, and halfway up the wall on a ledge Naruto couldn't see, someone stopped breathing.

"Hey ya, Avenger-chan," Naruto said, grinning against the dark. The gun went back into the inside pocket. "What's my code name? I want a pretentious code name too!"

A pinprick of light - the searchlight from Sasuke's phone, barely piercing the dark of empty Gates - a huff, a leap, a slightly scuffled landing, and Sasuke was there, real and close and shoving his lit phone into Naruto's face, and before he could think not too, Naruto had grabbed him.

Grabbed and held on, fistfuls of winter coat snatching close, and once Sasuke was close Naruto's
arms could go all the way around his skinny back and grab new fistfuls there and the bastard must be even taller now because Naruto's chin barely reached his shoulder, and he buried it and his frozen nose there.

"Usuratonkachi," Sasuke said. Then: "Stop shaking."

"Cold," gasped Naruto.

"From the ride? Yeah..."

Let go, Naruto reminded himself, but Sasuke hadn't let go.

Until he did, with a jerk. Stepped back, one hand still holding onto Naruto's upper arm, the other poking at Naruto's chest.

At the gun tucked there.

"Is that—Naruto—"

"It was in the car when I was getting out," he said cheerfully, and a horrible unease he'd lumped in with all the rest of the panic and shoved out of the way to focus on getting away gushed up his throat, made his fingers clench and Sasuke wince, because he was still holding on. "I think I saw-Sas, was it Gaara who—"

"Neji and Gaara. That was their part in the plan. They staged a race—"

Fear lurched so thick he gasped to breathe. "Are they—they hit—"

"They're fine. I heard them both report in after the crash. They cut coms right after 'cause they were both surrounded pretty immediately, but Shika said he watched them get loaded into ambulances. Gaara was walking around - I think Neji came out worse, but I heard him talk. He's fine. They're fine. But—you—let's move. Need light."

Sasuke was already dragging him up the passage, and Naruto let him. There was this whirl of urgent things being a brain-tornado in his head, and bits of hooked need would peel off and catch at his focus as he moved from straight-simple-run to the slightly-emptier space of whatever was coming next. Mom and Dad and Sakura on the road and Everyone being stupid (for me) and Who's taking care of Hinata if they all—and Sasuke (safe) and Safe isn't real round and round and round as his body tried telling him things too, things about being really cold, and really hurting in some places, and being so, so tired.

He laughed.

"Tired," he answered, a little helplessly, to Sasuke's sudden sharp stiffness. They were feeling their way around a corner now, and then Sasuke was fumbling for a key code, and a doorknob, and there was a press of a switch and they squinted and hissed against blared fluorescent light.

They were in the Clean Room, where busted fighters got patched up by "doctors" (for a fee). Naruto looked at half-familiar table-chairs-sink-counter-shelves, thinking too fast to focus clearly, and shivered harder.

"You can't sleep. Disappear first." Sasuke was tugging away Chouji's coat and pulling at the bloody sleeves of his jumpsuit and swearing and Naruto joined in on the swearing because it was really fucking cold.
"Is this from being cuffed?" Sasuke asked, running a careful thumb over a thick curl of peeled-away skin where scraped-raw flesh leaked blood down his wrist. He looked angry when Naruto didn't react to the pain of the touch, and Naruto struggled to glare back. He felt too much to recognize separate pains, right now, and he was so tired. Sasuke made a sound that was a hiss or a sigh or- "Damn. Okay. Here's—" he pulled a duffle from the shelves they leaned against, pushed it into Naruto's arms, "-stuff to change into." Looked at Naruto, took it back. "No. We'll bandage your wrists first, before they bleed all over everything. Here."

Naruto shrugged out of the top of his jumpsuit, pushing his brain to catch up, focus, respond on time. "I don't think I was followed, but do we got time-"

"Is there time for you to get a horrible infection while hiding where no one who wants to help you can reach you? There's fucking time."

"Bastard. Ouch!"

Relief sagged Sasuke's shoulders. "Suck it up, crybaby. Fuck. Your arms—the bones—fuck. Itachi said they'd feed you—"

"They fed me. I just... threw it up sometimes."

The next look was so sharp it hurt, and Naruto avoided. Sasuke's voice came quiet. "Why?"

Naruto shrugged, winced, shrugged more carefully. "It was... small. My cell. Really really...small."

Muscles in Sasuke's arms bunched, pulsing tension that spasmed the fingers wiping iodine over scraped skin to clawed painful stillness. Then he took in air, a long sharp sniff up his nostrils, and got back to work.

"It's still so bad, huh? The claustrophobia."

Naruto's lips moved into a smile, though he didn't feel very funny. "Probably'll always be."

Sasuke was quiet, spreading ointment, unwrapping plastic packs of sterile bandages, coiling gauze around stinging wrists. It all came from that duffle, the first aid stuff, and something in Naruto felt very, very warm, imagining someone (maybe Sasuke, maybe even Itachi, but probably Sakura) preparing all of that. For me.

Why?

Sasuke finished wrapping his second wrist, taped down loose edges. "Now that you're not going to bleed on them, get your clothes. If you put on all of them, you'll be warm." He pushed the duffle along the metal counter until it bumped into Naruto, turned his back, looked back impatiently when Naruto just stood for a moment, still dazed.

"...You need help?"

"No," said Naruto quickly, and forced his eyes to focus, his fingers to distinguish between materials so he could find what needed to go on first. Concussion, he thought, something that had been coming up through his brain way, way too slowly. He wondered if he should say it out loud, so Sasuke knew to help keep him upright, keep him awake, but—he was gonna be awake. He was hiding, but he wasn't done running.

There were clean boxers and winter leggings and a matching long-sleeved undershirt and Naruto stripped greedily, teeth chattering and fingers fumbling but damn did real clothes feel good against
his skin. Double layers of socks and flannel-lined jeans and one of those turtlenecks dad had bought him that he'd never worn and a hoodie and a good coat and water-proof hiking boots that looked like Kiba's and a thick dark stocking cap and the leather gloves that went with his bike and there was still more in that duffle - more clothes and a tarp and a reflective rescue blanket and iodine tablets and knives. Camping gear, but dead useful underground.

"There's a backpack here," Sasuke said. "Food's in this pocket. First aid stuff's here. Take anything else you need. Gaara can arrange pickups or drops. He said you'd know how to make contact."

"Gaara's in the hospital," Naruto mumbled, guilt surging.

"And my family wants to kill you," Sasuke said, fast and flat. "Done with the pity, dobe? You got lucky getting here fast and clean. Stay lucky. Get out of here now and they'll never catch you."

Naruto shut his mouth, tucked a knife into his waistband and two more into the bulging (mostly with food) backpack and set out wiping every surface they might have touched. Sasuke already had his used clothes bundled and bagged.

"I'll get rid of those," Naruto said, barely-subsided fear rearing up. There were too many precious people too deeply involved. Sasuke was right - it was time to go.

"I got it," Sasuke said. "Need to move your bike anyway. I'll drop them somewhere on East Side."

"Sakura's coat," Naruto hissed. "I forgot - it's with the bike - it's got my blood on it - "

"Okay... I'll... hide that one. Maybe burn it. ...Or I could just wash it. Hey. I won't let them trace it to her. Let's go." He finished wiping the doorknob, the light switch, the edge of the door, tucked the disposable cloth in his pocket, pulled on his gloves.

His own gloves already on, Naruto reached for the wall, nodded. Sasuke hit the light, went perfectly still, listened, pulled gently on the door.

For several seconds they were well and truly blind, eyes straining, listening and barely breathing, but the corridor was as empty as they'd left it. Sasuke nudged him, and Naruto took the lead, moving back to where the bike was hidden. In the dark, his heart worked too hard, and he was so lucky, and so grateful, and he'd make it away, so why—

Don't wanna be here.

It was a stupid time to have every breath so suddenly thick with homesickness.

No walls. No bars. A chance. They gave me a chance. They took a really stupid risk to give me a chance and it WORKED and—

— and I'll probably never see them again.

He couldn't. He'd endangered everyone too much already. He'd known, most of his life, what he'd need to do to disappear.

It's time.

Acceptance settled, cold and sure and lonely. The peace of knowing what needed to happen. What he needed to do.

The Fox's Naruto, Namikaze Naruto, just Naruto - Naruto would disappear.
Sasuke could pretend it was the ghastly orange jumpsuit and the wicked glare of the fluorescent lights, but the fact was this: Naruto looked like death.

The way the shadows under his cheekbones matched the exhaustion-bruises under his eyes, the bitten-to-blood nails and too-short, too-pale hair, the stiff shoulders and never-ending shivering—even out of the too-big coat and bloodied jailsuit, looking at Naruto hurt.

*Almost. He's almost safe. Almost.*

If there was anything more than luck involved, it seemed to be on their side, for once. The plan had gone so smoothly. Naruto met up with him ahead of schedule. Ino and Chouji must've found a way to get his cuffs off in the transport van, so Sasuke hadn't had to try out either of the wickedly unsafe-looking power tools Kiba had "borrowed" from his mom. They were barely behind the Gates, but with good supplies and a fair head start, Naruto was as good as home free.

And they would have time. There would be a way to clear Naruto's name, a way to give him his life back. They just had to find it, figure out how to use it. Naruto would hide, and they'd figure out how to help him, and eventually it would be safe again and Naruto could come back.

Come back and stay back. It shouldn't even take that long. Maybe the adults hadn't figured it out, but to hell with the adults. It wasn't the adults who freed Naruto from a high-security prison transport.

*We'll win the tournament next year,* Sasuke vowed, almost smiling, and then he hit Naruto's back, because Naruto had gone utterly still.

"...Did you leave a phone out here?"

There was a phone on the floor by the bike, and it was lit up and vibrating.

Sasuke shook his head, trying to see every shadow, heartbeat leaping double when he saw the stolen gun reappear in Naruto's hand. The phone was still buzzing- "That's Sakura's," he hissed, nearly dizzy with relief. "Dobe. It must have been in her coat-

Naruto was next to it immediately, gun still in one hand, and then he was being truly, unbelievably stupid, and answering.

"Hina-chan? Are you—Hinata—Hinata—oh—wait—wait for me, wait for me, I'm coming, I'm coming—"

He was on the bike and revving the bike and Sasuke was running and this couldn't be happening.

"NARUTO! You can't—wait, WAIT—"

"I gotta go! She's—"

"NO. You don't go. You run. You got unbelievably lucky on the way here but that's not going to happen twice—LISTEN—"

The bike was up the ramp. Naruto was keying the door. Sasuke ran. Lunged. Grabbed Naruto, tried
"Listen to me. Listen to me. There are cops on every corner looking for you. Hunting you. I'll—I'll go to Hinata. Stay here—get into the tunnels—"

Wild, unreasoning eyes met his, reflecting the lights of the motorcycle's dashboard. "She's crying," Naruto said. "The baby's coming, and no one's there, and she's crying, Sasuke."

"I'll get her help," Sasuke said, pleaded, desperate—"You stay under, Naruto, I promise—"

Naruto had the door open. The sounds of the yogurt factory flooded in.

They were going to be caught. They were going to get caught.

"I'm coming," Sasuke said, because Naruto wasn't listening, wasn't thinking, and swung, swearing, onto the back of the bike, barely catching balance before they were roaring back out, into the factory, off the loading dock, onto the street.

It was snowing.

Thick, whirling, blinding, and if they didn't get shot down by trigger-happy cops, they'd make a nice steaming smear of fresh roadkill when Naruto turned too fast (like that) and flipped the wheels right out from under them on the slickly freezing road.

There was a helmet swinging uselessly from one handlebar, but neither of them had more than a stocking cap to keep their brains in their heads, and the wind was so stinging cold Sasuke thought of ice-knives and stabbings and how if he lived through this (if if if) Itachi was well and truly going to kill him.

Naruto drove like he was possessed, and maybe he was. they saw a cop car and swerved down a tiny dead-end alley and Sasuke saw death in garbage cans and bricks and then they were spinning - Naruto's foot on the ground, Sasuke holding on for the life he was about to loose - and bumping down stairs onto a parallel street a level below, and Sasuke heard sirens but didn't see them, and how Naruto was seeing anything, he didn't know.

They came out of Old Town on the wrong side, the side north of where they needed to go to get to Naruto's house, where Hinata must be, but Naruto didn't pause. Slowed down a bit, and got caught in the sights of another cop car, and Sasuke ducked his head and thought of what bullets through the back might feel like and now there were two behind them, and they came screaming up on a bridge over the Naka river. There wasn't much traffic, and it was all moving slow, except for Naruto, who went full slalom and shouted glee when they pulled in front of a delivery truck that would, at least for the next few seconds, block any bullets headed for Sasuke's back.

"Hold on!" screamed Naruto, and Sasuke swore back at him and it wasn't like he had much choice, his knuckles were probably permanently frozen in the sides of Naruto's coat—

—They shot off the road. Right where the bridge met the bank, and the guard rail tapered down. Off the slope of the mounting of an ornate street light Naruto took them sailing, and half of Sasuke's organs were fleeing up his throat.

They landed and were skidding sideways to where the Naka river roiled greedy and black before Sasuke's spine had uncoiled from the jarring, Naruto wrestled the bike, made it go forward more than sideways, and they screeched to a halt seconds later on the pedestrian boardwalk under the bridge, sirens howling overhead.
Naruto had that gun out again. The sirens faded, and he put it back, and Sasuke wasn't sure if he was gasping or laughing.

"Ready?"

Sasuke didn't answer. Gripped tighter, which was good, because the engine was revving, and they were tearing along the boardwalk half a panicked heartbeat later.

*I gotta drive this thing*, Sasuke decided, spiking adrenaline evolving from abject fear into giddy thrill.

"Naruto," he called, shouting into the wind.

"Yeah?"

"If you die, I get your bike."

He didn't quite catch what Naruto yelled back, the words snatched up by wind and water, but it sounded like Naruto was laughing.

And promising the bike to Sakura instead.

.

TuTuT

.

No one was coming.

A strange calm came over Hinata.

She had cried. She had called for help—called everyone she could think of (not Father, but how could she call Father—). She had let her finger hover over the number for emergency services between each contraction, almost ready to beg strangers to come.

She couldn't. She *couldn't*. Better that she and the baby die, safe, alone—and that wasn't fair, and it wasn't rational, and some small tired part of her knew it, but dying sounded okay.

It would make the pain stop.

*I'm not going to die. I need to be here—for—NO—NO—NOOO—*

When she came far enough out of the pain to see again, breathe again, think again, she was on her hands and knees, and the snow was thick and swift and silent through the window.

She reached over, and turned on the tap.

She'd prepared everything she could, before the pains came too fast and too hard to even breathe. There were stacks of clean towels, a juice box drinking straw in its little plastic wrapping because she couldn't find a suction bulb, a space heater in the corner making the bathroom cozy and warm. Clean sheets spread across the floor. The tub would fill, and she would get in, and maybe her daughter would be born into water.

It was almost time. She knew. Not an I-can-explain-why knowing. The way she knew she needed, or wanted, or feared, or loved.
The pressure began to gather, banding too tight around her thighs and up her spine and spearing down her core, and she panted and squeezed tears of dreading anticipation from exhausted eyes and braced her hands and rocked and fought to breathe as the pressure became pain, became fire, became unbearable—

_The water. Breathe until—until can get in—the water_—

And she was gasping and keening and her body was—her body was pushing—she could feel her daughter's body moving through her, splitting, stretching, tearing open—

It eased, left her shaking, sweating and sobbing and—the water could help, the water could help—

She pulled off her panties, climbed slow and trembling into the half-filled tub, her dress billowing around her.

Water embraced. Eased and caressed and soothed and warmed. She closed her eyes, sunk back. Small muscles in her face went lax, releasing little pockets of agony. There were tears, still. She let them come.

With her next contraction, she would not fight. She would join her body.

She would make will follow muscle.

She would break open.

Let Mirai come.

VbxdV

Naruto let the motorcycle fall in the snow, barely registering Sasuke's panicked shout as the other boy scrambled to get off before getting crushed.

There weren't many lights on. The front door was locked, and it took two tries to enter the key code, fingers shaking from adrenaline and cold and the sudden hollow horror that his parents must have changed the code while he was gone—no. No. It worked.

"Hinata? Hinata!"

Getting the cops to follow him out the opposite side of town had worked. After hiding under the bridge, he'd looped back through the alleys of Old Town, and the only cops they saw—parked and huddled over their dash—didn't see them.

Good. He didn't want to use the gun he stole but—but Hinata.

"Hina-chan! It's—it's Naruto—please—where are you—"

Why wasn't anyone here? Had they all gone to the court house? But the hearing must have been canceled—why—

He heard a horrifying gasping sound, followed frantically as it lowered into a moan and rose into a scream and—the fear that had sent him flying over icy streets in wind that cut like Haku's knives fled from fingers and toes and condensed into solid hell in his middle, and he leaped the last of the
stairs and ran.

"HINATA!"

 Barely hesitated before throwing open her bedroom door, stared wildly—he could hear her but —There. She's in there.

 He'd been freezing and now he was sweating. Tugging gloves off shaking hands, Naruto knocked timidly on Hinata's bathroom door. She wasn't screaming anymore—

"Help," she gasped, and there went the last of his hesitation.


He'd come. He'd come.

 She didn't know how, probably didn't want to—but Naruto was there, red-faced and panicky and covered in snow, and relief welled up so thick and sweet she didn't know if she was laughing or crying.

"Naruto! Did they—did they let you go?"

"I'm free! Are you—did the baby come—why is the water—what can I—"

"She's coming," Hinata said, and bit against the cry that rose up as her muscles went hard and the pain wrenched her raw. Through agony-dizzy eyes she saw Naruto's face draining pale and his anxious earnest face made her want to laugh and when the contraction finally ebbed, she did. "Naruto," she said, heavy breaths breaking up his name, and then she was sobbing. "You came. I'm so glad you came."

"I'm here," he agreed, and she saw the never-keep-me-down determination she loved most set his jaw. "Tell me what you need, Hina-hime. I got you."

 She wanted to just look at him. Just rest and look and look, because he was there and he was real and he looked different but looking at him felt the same.

Exactly the same.

 But the birth-rhythm was dreadfully familiar by now, a storm-tide of pressure and pain she'd been swimming for hours and hours and hours, and she knew she had only seconds before it dragged her under again, too deep to talk. She looked down, at the sickly green of the bathtub's water.

"My w-water broke," she whispered. "It's supposed to be clear but...but there must be something w-wrong...I read that—that—" it was coming. Her eyes screwed shut, her hands scrambled on the smooth bathtub rim, and she tried not to scream, didn't want Naruto to have to hear—but anguish voiced through clenched teeth anyway, and she could feel the hot rush of stained water between her legs, and if she hadn't already crossed every threshold of what she thought she could bear, she might have felt humiliation.

 There wasn't much left for her to feel, now. The contraction ebbed, and she felt strong arms holding her, and she felt relief.

 The baby shifted within her, and the breath she was sucking in became a shriek, and if Naruto
hadn't been holding her, she would have slipped, splashed back into that wrong-color water.

"Help me get out," she gasped, when she could make words again. "Need to be clean—"

Steady arms surrounded her. "Ready?"

She nodded, and slowly, carefully, they struggled upright. Naruto was still in his coat, and she was getting it all wet. He was asking her if she wanted to rinse off—

"I'm ruining your coat—"

"Oh, Hime! Don't worry about my coat!"

Thank you, she thought, filling up so full with gratitude that, for a heady, healing moment, she felt no pain at all.

He rinsed her and her sodden dress with the showerhead, face so focused and hands so gentle, and the dirty green water was already swirling down the drain. She felt the next contraction beginning, and pointed urgently to the floor.

He barely got her out of the tub before she was down on her knees, and the pain hit and raged and burned and her muscles pushed down so she bore down with them, and she was splitting wide and crying and when she could see again Naruto was still there and still holding her and still looked like he'd step off the edge of the world for her, but there were tears tracing his cheeks.

"I'm okay," she whispered. "I'm okay, Naruto-kun. I think—I think soon—"

"It's hurting you too much," he said, and the ache in his voice sent all his words splintering. "Does it have to hurt so much? And the water—it's green—it shouldn't be green? What can I do? What can I do for you, Hime? You need a real doctor—I'll—I'll call an ambulance and—"

She shook her head frantically. "No ambulance! The water—the baby—she must have—um—soiled the water in the womb—that's why—"

"Oh," he said, but he obviously didn't agree. "Let's get you warm, okay, and then tell me—tell me anything, I'll do anything—"

The next contraction hit as he was wrapping dry towels around her, and this time, she threw everything she had into bearing down from the beginning, and didn't cry. Pride unfurled inside her, strange and hot and strengthening, and she looked up through dripping hair and found his eyes and smiled.

"Hinata," he said, voice soft and still breaking, "Hime, Hina-hime, you got this. You are so strong. Much much stronger than me. You are amazing."

She'd barely breathed in past the still-spreading warmth when the next contraction hit, and every muscle she needed was so tired but—but she could, she would—

Hinata took everything that made her (hours on ice of falling and trying and falling and trying and hours on buses just to see a boy smile when he welcomed passengers with a tip of his driver's cap and every morning she got out of bed for her sister's sneers and her cousin's cold hate and her father's distant disappointment and loved them anyway and a strange-to-her woman with long red hair holding, letting her cry and another woman, long long ago, the one who always welcomed, always smiled, always loved—) and turned it to yearning, physical yearning. To open, to release, to free.
Something filled the space between her thighs, and her eyes and mouth flew open and shock shrieked and her fingers scrabbled at the heavy wet hem of her dress.

And there. There was—there was a head—

A silent head.

A silent, blue head.

Sasuke found them in a bathroom.

Hinata was pleading, kneeling knees-apart with naked legs and wet hair and wet dress and fingers clawed white against Naruto's ruined coat and Naruto was—was calling her Hime and praising and promising and there was something—something huge and hideous between Hinata's—Hinata's thighs—

"It's not okay, she's not okay, my baby, Naruto, my baby!" Hinata was keening. "Help her, help her —"

Naruto's eyes were darting around, his lips white with panic, and then he saw Sasuke, and sucked in a breath he'd probably needed two minutes ago.

"I hid the bike," Sasuke said, blankly. He should—he should leave—

"Hold her," said Naruto, and Sasuke was obeying, kneeling on stained sheets on a bathroom floor and reaching for a girl he'd barely ever spoken to while his brain was still processing the word *leave*.

Obey was what he always did, when Naruto's voice was like that.

She was completely naked down there, and Sasuke turned away, frozen face suddenly burning.

Naruto was reaching for the—the head, he realized, it must be a head. "Wait!" Sasuke blurted. Of all the times to think of this, but—"Did you wash your hands?"

Naruto looked at him like he was crazy, eyes still panic-huge, then blinked, nodded, and rushed to the sink. The exhausted body in Sasuke's arms tensed, strained, arched, and Hinata *roared*. It was a sound he'd never heard before. A voice that didn't sound human—it was too feral, too powerful, made him shiver. He held on tighter, awe expanding wide across his chest.

Her breath cut off, her cry with it, and Hinata's head lolled loose against his shoulder. His heart jumped fear, but—she was sucking sips of air, she was breathing—her eyes slipped shut, her mouth hung slack.

Naruto was crouched on the floor in front of them, coat off and scrubbed-red hands reaching, touching the lumpy thing that was part of Hinata's baby with very, very gentle fingers, and Sasuke looked at the trembling hunch of his shoulders and knew that he'd never seen Naruto so scared.

"You did perfect, Hime," Naruto whispered. "She's—she's mostly out. She has a—a hand—oh—oh, there's something—something a-around her n—"

Naruto's eyes found Sasuke's, pupils blown wide with terror.
Hinata wasn't responding. Sasuke's arms shifted, held her so he could feel her rib cage expanding and contracting, said: "What is it?"

"There's this—this green—rope—thing—around its neck," Naruto said, so desperately soft that Sasuke had to work to make it out.

"...The umbilical cord?" asked Sasuke, and Hinata stirred.

"Umbilical cord," she repeated, voice raw. "A finger—try to get a finger between her and the cord—see if you can—can pull it over her head—be careful, Naruto, oh, be careful—"

"Okay," said Naruto, and with that ready courage Sasuke could never match, hooked the smallest finger of his right hand around the too-tight loop of ugly yellow-green cord. Sasuke couldn't breathe and watch at the same time. Centimeter by centimeter, sweat beading and dripping down his forehead, Naruto tugged and eased and got the thing up and over the small, blue head.

"It's off!" Naruto cried, but Hinata's body had already arched, flexed taut. She shuddered in breath, fisted bone-white fingers in the denim of Sasuke's jeans, set her jaw, and sent that breath hissing through bared teeth, every muscle in her strong, exhausted body straining.

Naruto was yelling, his hands suddenly full. Hinata's eyes slipped closed, her next breath hitched on the inhale, sobbed on the exhale—

—A cry.

A high, strong cry, and the feeling that that tiny, heady bathroom was suddenly radiant. Flooding light.

"She's here," gasped Naruto, holding up two hands filled with messy purple skin that was rapidly tingeing healthy pink and four very small, very amazing limbs that were starting to twitch and kick and reach and there was a—a face, a perfect, perfect face, with two eyes and a little wrinkled nose and a pink mouth open very wide and how had he ever thought the word hideous?

Hinata's baby was beautiful.

"She's okay," Naruto said, again and again. "She's okay. Baby-chan, Baby-chan, you're okay—" he was crying freely, snot dripping down his chin.

The woman in Sasuke's arms was shuddering, gasping, laughing, reaching—"Give her to Hinata, Naruto—" Sasuke ordered, because anything this amazing Amazon warrior he witnessed wanted, she should definitely, definitely have—

Naruto laughed, pure joy, and didn't quite seem to know how to shift the perfect burden splayed across his shaking fingers without risking the most vital feat of balance he ever had or ever would perform. Slowly—slowly—with Sasuke's and hands hovering just beyond Hinata's as they moved to accept, ready to catch—that tiny little wriggling person ended up on Hinata's chest, and her delicate, dirty head was being covered with breathless kisses, and Sasuke looked around and found the clean towel he'd been looking for and tucked it around her.

Newborn cries soothed to whimpers, to silence, and they all leaned forward into the hush, barely breathing.

Fathomless eyes gazed past theirs, dark and startling against pink cheeks. Sasuke stared, and the awe that had unfolded in his chest burst wide into wonder. Her nose must be no bigger than his thumbnail. Her tiny pursed lips were perfectly formed. There were miniature nails on the delicate
hand curled against Hinata's chest, and all five of those fingers looked exactly right.


Hinata started to speak, then gasped, eyes screwing tight. Her body spasmed, just like when she was pushing the baby out—

"It's okay," she panted, after many horrible seconds where Sasuke pulled out his phone to ask the internet what to do but what could he even search for? He should just call an ambulance— "I'm not—not quite done. There's the-the p-placenta—" the pain seemed to ease, and she looked up at Naruto and the way she smiled made Sasuke's chest strangely tight. "I wanted to say—you—you know her name, Naruto-kun." Naruto became suddenly shy, uncertain. "Y-you n-named her."

Naruto's head bowed. A tremor ran through him, caught in his shoulders, and Sasuke watched a hand dart up, again, again, again, catching tears.

"Yeah," he said, looked up. Leaned slowly, cautiously forward, rested his forehead against Hinata's, smiled like the sun. His voice was so raw, it made the words sound like they'd never been said before. "Thank you."

Then he bent further, and kissed the gunky little head nestled under Hinata's chin.

"Mirai," he whispered.

_Mirai_, thought Sasuke. Something hot slid from his eyes, down his cheeks, dripped cold off his chin.

_Future._

NiMiH
"Otouto. What are you doing?"

_Trying to get brave enough to clean bloody sheets and a bloody floor and a freaking placenta,_ Sasuke decided not to say.

"Sasuke. Answer me. _Answer me._ Are you safe? What are you doing to stay safe?"

"Of course I'm—" Sasuke began, then stopped, something in Itachi's voice catching and sticking as his brother's words looped back through his brain. "I'm safe. Are you? Do you mean from the storm? What's wrong?"

There was a pause, then: "You answered. Do you know the terror I felt? That you wouldn't answer? Where are you? I'm coming to you."

"I'm at Naruto's," Sasuke said, heard rising fear and bewilderment tip his words high, couldn't care enough to hide it. "What's happened? You can't come to me. Blizzard? Remember?"

"You—" Itachi cut off, and the tension of that single syllable twisted guilt through Sasuke's gut, though he had no idea what he was guilty of. Enough seconds passed for that twisting to turn unbearably tight. Then, stilted: "You're reading this because I'm dead," Itachi quoted, and Sasuke went cold as the blinding white of the storm outside, _"just one more disappeared kid in Konoha. They might actually look for me, though._"

Itachi stopped.

...I am Uchiha Sasuke, son of Uchiha Fugaku, former Director of the Konohagakure Police Department. I'll make some unlucky inspector's job easier, and tell you some of the ways I probably died... Came next. Was what Sasuke wrote, when he was fourteen and stupid and playing behind the Gates because he was pretty okay with dying, really, but if he did—if he did, he was taking Orochimaru with him.

_Orochimaru, and everyone else._

...I've provided satellite map links to the locations of three bodies. Based on the patterns I observed, I listed estimates on where several more...

"I reset it," he said blankly, not really talking to Itachi, probably couldn't even be heard by Itachi because he'd pulled the phone away from his ear to check his alarms because he got an alarm twice a day to reset the publish date of that pipe-bomb blog post he was always on the verge of deleting, and he always, always tapped through to the app that reset the date for him, he didn't even think about it, it was more than habit, it was automatic—

Two missed alarms.

Sasuke heard his brother's voice rising distorted from his palm as he stared at a screen where there was no publish date to reset.

He'd published. Copied to every news source in Hinokuni.

"I didn't mean to," he said, tongue too thick, phone back against his ear, heavy when he lifted it and growing heavier still. "I didn't mean to, Aniki."
Along with dead kids, I hope you can find the ones that are still alive. Shimura Danzo collects children. Most were wards of the state, taken from foster care or group homes. I don’t know if their case files list them as deceased, kidnapped, runaways, or if their files disappeared. The system may be complicit. I suspect regional governor Sarutobi Hiruzen, whose friendship and regard for Shimura have been noted by the press...

There was shattered silence on the other end, and he imagined Itachi’s eyes closed, pinched tight.

Sasuke had set his phone on silent when he went down the tunnels, hadn’t dared pull it out while waiting for Naruto. Couldn’t risk light, sound, distraction. The first alarm would have come and gone. The second one-

"...You’re at Naruto’s? Big Breakfast Naruto’s?"

—When he had looked at his phone again, he’d been frantically asking the internet what a placenta was. Tapped right through that second alarm.

"Yeah, we’re...stuck. Even 119 said they couldn’t get an ambulance out here—"

"An ambulance."

_Oops._ "Ah...Hinata had—Hinata had her baby. Here. We helped her—"

He could actually hear Itachi breathing, which he didn’t think had ever happened over the phone, and it sounded too fast, too strained. "Aniki? Shouldn’t you—shouldn’t you use your inhaler? You sound—"

...Kimimarou, 16. I don’t know what his surname or birth name was, but he remembered the family he had been "rescued" from. I hold Yakushi Kabuto responsible for his death...

"Otouto," said Itachi, with a sound that was a laugh or a sigh or maybe just a really strained asthmatic wheeze, "as long as you’re breathing, I’ll find a way to do the same."

There was a pause, though, and a muffled puffing sound that was hopefully the inhaler, and Sasuke felt marginally better.

...The crimes I list are not limited to murder. I put the murders first to get your attention. Get to the bodies before they do, or there’ll be nothing left to find. More evidence has been destroyed than I’ll ever be able to uncover...

"When did you write this, Sasuke?"

"Two years ago," he said, repeated, trying not to mumble the second time. "I, uh, updated it like...three months ago. Didn’t change much, just..."

"You didn’t need to do this." Stress tugged edges around Itachi’s voice, but it was difficult to discern more than that.

"Do you understand?" Sasuke said, a little too loud, suddenly urgent. "Do you understand why I- why I made everything worse? Itachi? At least—at least something—"

Sasuke’s throat closed up, trapped all the words (which words? What could he say that hadn’t already—) _Damn it, Aniki, why couldn’t you see me, see what you were doing to me!_

"I always understood," said Itachi, quietly, and Sasuke swallowed hard against the stupid lump
...I read the report, written by my brother, used to arrest my father, fourteen-year-old Sasuke confessed. To the whole freaking world, now. All of it. I did not believe it. But my brother was not likely to lie. I had to learn for myself. I went behind the Gates...

"If I say that you did not devote much energy to considering the consequences of this expose of yours, Otouto, how close to the truth would I be?"

...The Gates of Konoha are the gates to hell, and everyone in power is profiting from it...

"There better be some fucking consequences! The whole point was to—look, I'm not as stupid as I was, I know my death wouldn't be as big a deal as I thought it would be, but there need to be a freaking hell of consequences, Aniki."

...My father was a scapegoat. A cover-up, incarcerated for covering up. Do you get the irony?...

"And for you?"

...I'm dead. There's not much more they can do to my family. So take my list. Prove it or disprove it. Don't be scared of the big names.

You'll look, right?...

"I wasn't going to be around."

...Kimimaro is under the pipe ditch dug for the east fountain at the Sarutobi estate. They hid him there while the fountain was being built. Workers poured concrete two days later. Tayuya: female, fifteen. Survived two years, ran. The guys they sent to catch her accidentally killed her. She's buried in a real grave. Not her grave. This one (In case the link's broken: Memorial Park, row 10, plot 28) Pretty sure the woman whose name is on that headstone is alive. Some bodies were sold...

Itachi's sigh was so painfully drawn that hearing it made Sasuke's too-taut jaw ache. "You really didn't mean to publish it today."

"I told you—I told you. It was a mistake—"

"I thought it might be a plotted part of the very dangerous and reckless choices you made today. It clearly wasn't written recently, so the timing—"

"I was delivering a baby!"

Silence, then sound, and he couldn't tell if Itachi was laughing or crying. "That is too absurd to be anything but true...ah. Sasuke. Are you—are you okay? Really okay? The—the mother and child—is everyone well?"

...Underground fight rings often featured fights between children, or children and adults. I fought (usually) by choice. As described above, I was one of more than a dozen participants sponsored by the man I know only as Orochimaru. Most underage fighters, including those I fought with or against, faced some level of coercion. Income went to sponsors and handlers, and depended heavily on gambling-related profits. Matches were frequently stacked...

"Yes," said Sasuke, and his throat and chest finally opened all the way, made enough room for the stress he couldn't help and the oxygen he was really starting to miss, and he was glad even if it left him gasping. "Hinata knew what she was doing. She is...a good mother. Very, very...Itachi,
Mom..." the tangle that was too-much-for-words burst all warm and reaching across his chest again, and Sasuke struggled to shape syllables that would explain everything. "I'm grateful to Mom," was what came out, and it wasn't even close to enough, but it was also everything.

"Would you tell me about it?" Itachi sounded strange, hesitant, like he was expecting rejection.

Sasuke did not tell people about things.

...Haku lost the fight. He was approached by his sponsor soon after leaving the ring, and offered no resistance as he was physically punished for losing the fight, the money gambled on him. His opponent tried to intervene, but Haku died from internal bleeding later that night...

"We burned the umbilical cord through with a candle," Sasuke said. "We didn't have clamps or sterilized scissors. She's—the baby, they named her Mirai—she's so small. She has good lungs. She came out blue but turned pink. She has fingernails. And a lot of dark hair."

"She seems to have charmed you already." There was something unbearably vulnerable in the gentleness wrapped so carefully around each syllables: offered as a gift. "I thought you were pretty amazing the first time I saw you."

...My brother was right about our father. Father is part of the system that makes deaths like mine unaccountable. But sending Father to jail didn't bring justice. Not to anyone. I lost my father, my brother, most of my mother, my life, and yet it's nothing compared to what the system my father was condemned to protect does to people with no power against it.

I went into that world by choice. You could say I deserve this. The kids I told you about? Kimimaro, Haku, Tayuya? They didn't choose. I told you where to find their bodies. I wonder where you'll find mine...

"And right now? What are you doing now, Sasuke?"

"...Cleaning. I guess. Hinata is resting, I think the—the baby is eating. Or trying to eat. Hinata's...breastfeeding, so I left. Naruto's with her, but he's asleep—"

"Then he is there."

"Um. No. Definitely not. I said that wrong."

There was a long enough pause for Sasuke to realize that he was reeling, light-headed, needed to sit down. He slumped against the wall, peeked around the doorjamb into the messed-up, witness-to-miracle bathroom, shuddered, turned away quickly. Maybe he could just leave it? Real adults had to show at some point.

"Sasuke. Otouto. ...I love you. I love you. I'm scared for you. And I'm—I'm proud."

For the second time in as many hours, something hot and healing unscrolled broad and strong inside-across Sasuke's chest. Filled his eyes, spilled warm down his cheeks.

He had Itachi. Still—always. And for at least a little bit, Naruto was safe. Just had to get out. Before anyone else was moving, as soon as the storm let up enough for it to be mostly safe—once Naruto was behind the Gates, he'd be okay. Hinata—Hinata was checking off all the right boxes on the painstaking notes Sasuke had made of things the EMT said to keep an eye on—same with Mirai, who wasn't even crying, just wiggling and reaching, testing out this vast new freedom she'd come out into. He and Naruto had both taken turns holding her, nervous hands cradling a head so small it perfectly filled a palm, and she stared at each of them like she was a thousand years old.
and knew everything. Hinata took a real shower and got settled into bed on layers of clean towels with a soft clean blanket on top and a great many pillows behind her, and Naruto made sure the baby cot was right there next to her, though Sasuke doubted Mirai would spend much time in it. Naruto was right there too, asleep on the floor—

_Mother-Mom!_ "Itachi? Itachi—" this was urgent, he had to— _"What about Mom? She hasn't—she doesn't think I'm dead too? The storm—I don't think Father's home—"

"I will disable her internet," Itachi said, after a quick, thick silence. "I am unable to do anything about the television, however. She may turn it on to check the status of the storm. ...I will send her a reassuring text."

"Maybe I should send it," Sasuke said, dryly, as he tried to think of a time when a text from Itachi came off reassuring and came up blank. "Or I can just call her."

"...That's probably best."

"Where are you? Are you at your apartment?"

There was a pause, and Sasuke figured Itachi was weighing the pros and cons of admitting the truth.

Not his apartment, then.

"I am at the courthouse."

"What? Really? And Father—?"

"No one else is aware that I am here. But, yes, Father is here."

"And Namikaze and—Naruto's parents, all their people, are they still—"

"They are all here, yes."

"Ah. Good, I guess."

"Do you wish me to let Father know of your continued survival?"

"No," said Sasuke, sharp and hard and too fast. He sucked in air, surprised at his own denial, but everything that came welling up with it just twisted its roots deeper. "Let him know what it's like, to lose a son. See if he cares."

"Sasuke—"

It was Naruto's face Sasuke saw: a thousand memories of everything Sasuke was there for; bleaker, blacker things he'd guessed, read in scars and flinches and big bright grins. Fear and grief and agony-aloneness and shy, bursting hopefulness and _Ask your mother, little Uchiha._ "No."

"He cares, Sasuke."

Maybe. Not likely, but—"Hn. Sure. If he does, even better."

Itachi's reply came quiet, unsure. "This is not like you, little brother."

_Oh, it is_, Sasuke thought, guilt and satisfaction twining darkly in and through the thought. "I'll call Mother," he said instead, "and if Father calls me, I'll answer. If he calls her, she'll tell him. I don't
believe he has my number. And he won't call her. And he's not going to call you."

"I see," said Itachi, syllables sighed, tired. "I will let you go. Call Mother. If—if there is anything I can do, for you or Hinata or—it was Mirai? Call. I will monitor the effects of your publication. I am also watching the happenings in this building. If I learn anything that might be useful to our friend, I will pass it on to you."

It was a promise to communicate anything he might learn in the courthouse that could help Naruto, and some of that warmth made of relief and gratitude curled back up, reached around the darkness and anger. "Okay. I hope you guys stay warm in there. And don't starve. Is there anything to eat? It could be hours—"

"So long as we can survive on vending machine rations, we shall, indeed, survive. Goodbye, Otouto."

"Yeah," whispered Sasuke, and pulled the phone slowly from his ear, staring blankly at the Published status he'd never intended to see.

Then he called his mother.

"Hi, Mom," he said. "I need to—to say thank you. Today, I, well, you'll never guess what I did today—"

. vHIHv .

Misery pressed in and Obito pressed back, well-practiced and determined.

He'd secured his goal: no-one was dead. Hate him? Sure. Look all heartbroken and confused and betrayed by him? Yep, and damn did it hurt. Was anyone bleeding out on a courtroom floor because his adoptive family hired an anarchist assassin to take on his biological family and free their anarchist probably-assassin kid? No. Nope. He'd saved them all.

And if saving them felt an awful lot like when he lost his eye except without all the desperate promises and the tearful gratitude and the "how could you be so stupid (I love you)"s—well, it's not like he was any stranger to loneliness. Or despair. Or misery.

It had just...been a few years. Quite a few years.

He was getting too old for this.

Minato-sensei was too old for this. When was Sensei gonna get that he didn't always need to be a fucking hero forever and ever? Even Kushina had finally (broken) given up on saving people. Until Naruto came back, anyway. Now she was going to go through hell all over again. She didn't deserve that. No one deserved that. Sensei didn't deserve jail. But Rin could die—they all could die—and—

Naruto was tough. From the start, Obito recognized him. He and Naruto, they were the pretty similar. If he'd asked Naruto if he should let Sensei and Kushina sacrifice everything to save him, Naruto wouldn't for a second have considered it. Would've begged him to stop it. Would've turned his parents in himself if that's what it took to save them.
(Or, more likely, would've found a way to take everything on all by himself. And he'd fail, but—)

Obito knew, Naruto knew, that sacrificing yourself was the simple choice. The easy choice. Maybe the only time when the right thing to do was also the easy thing to do. Was it selfless or selfish? He'd never really figured that one out—

*Sensei's going to jail, because of me.*

*Will he know, does Kushina understand, that it's worse for me than for them? They get that, they do—*

*(Is it really?)*

*Doesn't matter. He's alive. She's alive. Rin's alive. They're all alive.*

*That matters.*

"Sir, there's—there's something you need to see."

Even from the farthest corner (betraying those one loves most may be an honored family tradition; not honored enough to be seen as more than an unfortunate Uchiha bastard-) of the ad-hoc KPD duty center set up in the snowed-in courthouse, the hollow panic in those words caught and held. Obito raised his head and stared, along with everyone else.

The sloping lines of Fugaku's tired face tugged tight, but in the breath it took him to mark his spot on the search array he was plotting and turn to the addressing sergeant, he resumed perfect composure.

"Report."

"I—Sir—forgive me—I believe it would be best to—read for yourself—privately, perhaps." The proffered tablet trembled.

"I don't have time for reading, for privacy, or for your fetching impersonation of a shaking schoolgirl, Sergeant."

The hand holding the tablet dropped, and a certain cold hurt hardened the corners of the young officer's face. "It's your son, sir," he said quietly.

Impatience soured Fugaku's scowl. A single sharp glance jolted the attendant audience into pretending that they were most definitely not an audience. Obito stared on with the shameless impudence of the permanently shamed. "And you assume this qualifies as urgent. Whatever Itachi has done, it will have been done too cleverly to undo immediately. Send it to PR for damage control—"

"I came from PR, sir." The officer stood straighter, cold lines that looked to Obito an awful lot like revenge pulling him up tall. "This is—this is about Uchiha Sasuke. Reports that he is dead. And made a hell of a mess. Sir."

Fugaku went still, and the cold of the blizzard shifted, seeped through the walls and deep into Obito. The tablet was snatched from the officer's hand, and Obito waited, dread pooling bitter, for familiar poisonous rage to stretch taut all the downturned lines of that cold, proud face.

But his uncle went pale, cheeks flapping soft and slack. The finger scrolling the tablet screen began to shake.

No, thought Obito, No, they're all alive, no, no.

"Media sources are already reporting," the young officer said, a careful step back from where he'd stood at attention to debrief. "It seems they have the entire transcript. All the media. PR is preparing a statement."

What have you done, Sasuke?

"Deny it," Fugaku said, and it was a command and a plea and it made the skin on Obito's arms prickle, the back of his eyes burn. "Deny it! I will call my son at once, put an end to this foolish drama. This is not real. This is histrionics, blackmail, base manipulation."

Fugaku was staring at his phone, and Obito knew what he was seeing.

There was no Uchiha Sasuke in his contacts.

There was a Nerdy Lil Cuz Sasuke in Obito's contacts. In the phone Shimura Danzo had confiscated, claiming it was simply a procedural precaution, as necessary for Obito's protection as for the integrity of the investigation.

Horseshit. Horseshit, all of it, and the half-desiccated corpse knew it, and what had Sasuke done? Media sources, the smug officer said. Sources. Plural. A suicide might be reported (but Sasuke wasn't dead, wasn't dead, that was—) but with everything going on right now? A major traffic incident involving the Hyuuga heir, the Suna prince, and the escape of a high-security prisoner en route to be condemned a terrorist. The overly dramatic arrest of Namikaze Minato. A winter storm that came in fast, grew far more powerful far more quickly than predicted—what could the kid have possibly done, to compete with all that?

"Are—are you sure, sir? I don't know if PR can—"

"Are you questioning orders under a Code Red, Sergeant? I said deny it. When falsehood like this comes in—it's not true, it's not true! Not a word is- Go!"

There was a computer in front of him, and Obito pulled himself together, typed Uchiha Sasuke into the browser search bar. A quick look around caught everyone with a visible screen doing the same.

And there it was. You're reading this because I'm dead, and his eyes kept moving, passing words and words and words to his brain, and each word scraped a jagged little edge at his gut, shredded shredded shredded.

It was there. All there.

All the ugliest secrets. Murder-kidnapping-human trafficking—here's where they hid the body. Drug dealing, blackmail, bribery, money laundering—all organized, almost hilariously so: titled and subtitled (so many names of untouchable people), ranked, paragraphs of scathing condemnation interspersed with ordered lists and neat charts with live links to alleged evidence. Bullet-pointed. Fucking alphabetized.

And some of it, Obito knew—a lot of it, probably most of it—was true. Irredeemably true.

Fugaku stood. His chair tipped, crashed, smashed echoes through the not-even-breathing tension of
"Get me Namikaze," Fugaku said. Was at the door, was prying apart gritted jaw to let out each word. "No. I'll get Namikaze. Get me Namikaze's phones. He has two. Who has the keys to the holding room? Here. Now."

Obito got up. Followed.

"Sit down, boy," Fugaku hissed at him. They were in the corridor. Someone with a key was hurrying ahead of them.

"Never followed your orders, never will," Obito said, big wide smile spreading easily, automatic and fake. Fugaku rounded on him—and there it was: the rage Obito expected from the start.

Maybe if he blew up at Obito, Fugaku would have cooled back to almost-rational before they got to Minato. Because Minato-sensei was cuffed, guarded, had promised cooperation. But Fugaku was just staring at him, bloodshot eyes wide, mouth twitching with things he either couldn't find words for or was restraining the words he wanted to use for—

"Don't think I have, for so much as a millisecond, held the smallest amount of trust in you," Fugaku said. "I don't know, yet, what game you're playing, turning on Namikaze as you have. I don't know whose side you're on, if anyone's. But if I find you have played any part, any part at all, in harm coming to—to my son—my sons—I will—"

"It's not about sides," Obito snapped back. "That's the whole problem, everyone's freaking stupid problem—freaking rabid tribalism—but that's not—I would never hurt Sasuke. Never." He closed his eyes, took a step back, tugged up equilibrium with quick, secret, not-quite-conscious cruelty. His calm would hit harder than screams or swears. "Could the same be said of you, Uncle? Another cousin of mine died just the other month. Barely older than Itachi and Sasuke. Shall we talk about Shisui?"

His uncle stared at him, nostrils flared wide, and his jaw must really hurt from all that grinding. But he grew cold instead of hot, looked grey and wrung and—sad. Despairing.

Fugaku turned, and Obito followed him to the room where Sensei was being held. The corridor filled up with their footsteps and the wracking grit of Fugaku's teeth and a whole lot of words swallowed down unsaid.

The lackey with the keys got the door open for them, and Fugaku stepped through, hand on the gun on his hip. Obito's pushed in close. Had to get between Fugaku and Minato, jammed right into his unyielding back when Fugaku drew up short.

Kushina was in the room.

Minato wasn't even cuffed, not anymore, and Kushina was in the room. Of course. Of-freaking-course she was.

Fugaku said: "So this is what your 'full cooperation' looks like?" and Sensei reached guiltily for the abandoned handcuffs. Quick careful blue eyes skimmed right over Obito, and he pretended he couldn't feel fear-as-bile burning up his throat.

"Ah, well, I told her I should probably keep those on," Namikaze said, all pleasant and sheepish and, Obito knew, very very close to his most dangerous. "For the sake of marital harmony, however, I focused on other, larger issues also at stake. You understand."
"Not a good look for him, I'm afraid," Kushina said, face pale and eyes bold and watching the fingers hovering over Fugaku's holster, weight balanced, ready to leap. "Now, in very different circumstances, I might feel differently about that, but I doubt you want to hear about that, ne, Fug-chan?"

Obito was almost between them.

"Kushina," said Minato.

"Privacy was too kind a courtesy," Fugaku said, and there was too sharp an edge to the words. "You will lose it." Turned to the hall, snapped: "Move quickly, Sergeant," and then he was two steps closer, Sensei's phones in one hand, naked gun in the other.

"Open it," he said.

Sensei looked at the phones, the gun, settled on Fugaku's face.

"I do intend to fully comply with all legal and protective procedures," Minato said carefully, "though I cannot speak for or control the actions of others," a quick, lightning-blitz-fond glance at his wife, "but I know my rights, Uchiha-San."

His sensei and his uncle stared at one another, and Obito felt an itch start up under his skin from the sheer emotional pressure in the room.

Fugaku shifted first. "Out," he commanded quietly, and the lackey with the keys and the lackey who delivered the phones vanished, and Fugaku shut the door behind them. Turned.

"You have no rights. I have a gun. Unlock the phones."

Kushina was going to kill his uncle.

"It's for Sasuke," Obito said, too fast and too high, but it worked, because all the lines of emotion and antagonism shifted. "He needs to reach Sasuke, because Sasuke declared himself dead, and he doesn't have a number to try to reach him by, and he expects you to have it, Sensei—"

"And you fed Shimura bullshit that got Minato arrested as a fucking terrorist, Obito, so I'm disinclined to go along with whatever your current agenda is," Kushina said, but there were those lines squinting the corners of her eyes that meant she was worried, and he knew she also, suddenly, wanted to hear from Sasuke.

"Sasuke is in danger?" asked Minato, and whatever answer he read in Fugaku's face, he accepted it.

They all stood, and tried to breathe, and the ache of fear for two lost sons was so thick in the room that Obito could nearly make out Sasuke and Naruto's ghosts in it.

At last, Fugaku lowered his gun.

"Please," he said, and it would have been very bitter, had it not been so terrifyingly honest. "Just—write the number. Any number you have. The rumors—I must put an end to the rumors."

"Put away the gun," said Sensei, testing, "and I'll call Sasuke right now."

"I will call my son myself." Uncle was so angry. So scared, and so angry.

"My phone will not leave my hand unlocked. I'll not hold it while doing anything as attention-splitting as writing, either. Surely I am not the only way to your son's number? I doubt I'm even the
"My phone was confiscated, too," Obito said when Minato looked at him, and hoped Sensei would draw more conclusions about taking sides and loyalty than he could really fairly hope for.

"Just—call him," said Fugaku, and the gun was up again, but his voice showed all the ways he was broken, and this time when he and Sensei's eyes met Minato nodded, and reached for one of the phones.

He put it on speaker.

The room filled with the repetitive chimes of a busy signal, and they all recoiled from where they'd leaned in, hunched stiffer with stress. Minato hung up, dialed again, listened to a half second of the busy signal, dialed again.

"...Yeah?"

It was Sasuke. It was Sasuke.

Fugaku made to grab the phone, held himself back with great effort as Sensei said: "Sasuke. I am glad to hear you. Are you safe?"

And Uncle said: "Son—Sasuke—my son—"

Short seconds stretched tortuously in tense silence.

"...Father?"

"Son," said Fugaku, face as close as possible to the phone his prisoner held tight. "Son. Run."

"...What?"

"Please," said Fugaku, and it was no less jarring than the first time he'd said it. "Son, you need to hide. As soon as you can—wherever you are now—leave. I have heard that you know The Gates. Go to the Gates. I will send someone to find you. Protect you."

"Is that my parents? Hey, ask th—"

Minato's thumb flashed, hit the end call button, Naruto's bright voice cut in half.

Fugaku was reaching for the phone again. Obito looked at his face, moved to get in between—

—Minato locked the phone, let it go.

"Well," said Kushina, "you look very pale, Fugu-chan."

"Get out," growled Fugaku. Caught himself on the impossibility of his order, clenched his teeth harder, moved furiously to follow it himself. Obito read the warning on Minato and Kushina's faces, twisted helpless and hollow inside, moved after his uncle. Barely made it through the door before it was slammed. Locked.

Obito stood in the hall, quite alone, for a long time.

So many moves made, in today's turn at the chessboard on which they all played this terrible game. So much had shifted, including all his own roles.
Obito didn't care. He may be just another pawn, but so were all the others, and today—at least for today—they were all still here.
"I wish we had saved all of them," Rock Lee said solemnly. "I am truly sorry, my friend."

And he was. Every life was precious, and these small brave ones had been sacrificed to a battle they should have played no part in.

Thousands and thousands of ladybugs, and he'd worked so hard - for almost an hour, alongside Shino - to save all he could. They swept them up with little wastebaskets and brushes, but many had remained out of reach in the street, and were crushed by cars and officers and bystanders. Those they collected were packed back into their containers with snow and gravel and bits of shattered glass because that couldn't be helped, and none of them were moving, and he really hoped Shino was correct, and they had merely gone into hibernation mode from the cold.

Of course Shino was correct. Shino was an expert in all insect-related things. If Shino said his family kept bags of ladybugs in refrigerators, and that all those ladybugs happily woke again to help in their gardens and greenhouses at the appointed times, Lee could trust in that. They had gathered all they could, brought them to the hotel Shino had arranged to deliver them to—a very honest alibi. They would sort them, clean them, repack them in new containers, and the hotel would store them until spring, to be released into their rose garden and butterfly pavilion. A good life still lay ahead for many of these little beings. Lee swallowed several times, willing the ache in his throat to recede. The ladybugs were okay. Would be okay. Some of them would be okay.

Sakura-san prone on the street, Neji in a neck brace on a stretcher, a police van Naruto had been inside of smoking and shuddering on its side, every window broken—They will be okay, they will all be okay...

A hand on his arm, brief and light: "I am grateful for your help, Lee-san."

Their part had been simple. Chouji reaching into the van was their cue: Shino stepped into the crosswalk, Lee came running from the opposite direction, both stared, in apparent distraction, at the accident; they collided. Lee punched, as swift and hard as he could. As Chouji was hefting Naruto out, containers burst: three thousand ladybugs went flying.

They were so bright, so out of place: more than enough to distract the attention of the gathering crowd as they exploded into a fluttering cloud of orange and red. In only minutes, though, every single one had fallen, too cold to fly.

It was unexpectedly depressing, and Lee's cheeks still stung from tears, though he'd listened gladly to the cries of celebration pouring through his earbuds as their team celebrated. Naruto was free. They did it. They did it.

Two of four police officers extracted from the van hadn't been moving. They'd been loaded onto stretchers, too.

Am I an accessory to murder?

Rock Lee didn't have any doubts about the rightness of freeing Naruto. He didn't even have doubts about using violence to do it. He knew the Konoha Naruto knew, saw clearly the forces his dearest friends chose to stand up against, was unflinchingly proud to stand with them.

Every life is precious.
"Oh," said Shino, so oddly, baldly surprised that Lee jolted, startled from both the dark depth of his thoughts and the careful work of his bare and freezing fingers, combing debris from the nearest crate of ladybugs. He hurried to his friend, peered carefully at the phone screen held towards him. There was a—a face? A red, squished—

"Is that a baby?" he blurted, astonished.

"Yes. That is Hinata-chan's baby," said Shino, and he sounded a bit astonished, too. "It was born." Shino paused, collected himself, corrected himself: "She was born. About—fifty-five minutes ago. In Naruto's home. It seems only Sasuke and Naruto were there to help her."

"Then they are—! They are safe! But shouldn't—shouldn't Hinata-san and—and the child be in a hospital? Is there a doctor there as well?"

"No one was there." Shino's mouth snapped shut, jaw clenched, anger quick but carefully controlled. "Why? We do not know. Naruto and Sasuke should not have been there either. Had Naruto not accidentally acquired Sakura-san's phone, had Hinata-chan not attempted to reach Sakura-san, Hinata-chan—"

Shino stopped, and Lee nudged his friend in silent support. His own thoughts and feelings were getting a little too loud, a little too angry and doubtful and confused, and he closed his eyes for just a minute, breathing and imagining little boxes to put all the hurt and questions safely into, just like he'd learned as a little boy. He would take them out later, one by one, and be fair to each of them. Right now he could be strong and calm and smile and listen to his friend, if Shino wanted to talk.

It seemed Shino didn't want to talk, but he did continue to share his phone screen, courteously glancing sideways before scrolling down, making sure Lee could follow along as their secure chat room lit up.

red: CONGRATULATIONS! r u sure nee-chan's ok good baby tho

healer: She is perfect and beautiful. Tell Hina-chan congratulations. Are you sure you can't get an ambulance through? Or an on-call midwife or

this just doesn't seem like something you should be handling alone

avenger: 119 can't send anyone, they tell me what to do over the phone

shadow: I'm glad to see you online, Healer. Means you made it home to your computer, as you don't have your phone, yes?

healer: Yes, I made it home. Took the metro, then my mom met me. Took us 35 min to go 6km. I'm in deep shit too

shadow: Cause the coat and the phone or…?

healer: Yeah. And lying about hockey practice. And apparently everything else. Let's talk about the GORGEOUS BABY THOUGH HOLY SHIT

fang^^: Is hime (im gonna call her hime here k) ok though is she awake can we see her

shadow: I see Beetle online. Beetle is Lee with you
beetle: Affirmative. We finished our delivery. Will stay here through the storm.

shadow: I've spoken with White Ghost and Tanuki. We're all accounted for.

shadow: Well, plus one.

wonder woman: shit guys I can finally breathe thanks Shadow

avenger: image.jpg

wonder woman: THAT IS A BEAUTIFUL BABY CONGRATULATIONS HINAHIME YOU ARE A QUEEN avenger show this to her okay

fang^^: HIME YOU LOOK AMAZING YOU ARE AMAZING

fang^^: AND THAT IS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL BABY I EVER SAW except for akamaru but for human babies 100/100

wonder woman: look at you gorgeous and smiling! and that baby! you're the real wonder woman here and i'm so so so happy for you! rest up good okay okaaaayy

healer: I'm literally crying okay I'm so proud of you just take good care of yourself and your beautiful beautiful child got it

healer: and good job avenger and maelstrom really

healer: i'm glad you're there it's worth all the deep shit

shadow: Congratulations, Hinata

beetle: Your daughter is very beautiful. She strongly resembles you.

beetle: Beautiful Beast enthusiastically agrees.

red: TT nee-chan ily you look good pls be ok and we hope ur baby is ok too noodle n leaf say congrats too

hulk: congratulations

hulk: avenger you better take care of her

hulk: ok i looked up pics of newborn babies and ur all definitely right hime's is much better looking than most of them

hulk: congrats hime

hulk: get some rest ok

shadow: avenger what's the plan

shadow: for after the storm

avenger: you got a suggestion?
shadow: One I feel confident in? No.

shadow: …anyone else?

healer: On a scale of 1-5, 5 being acceptably good, how is Maelstrom?

healer: okay the long pause is not reassuring

avenger: 2

avenger: hes sleeping

wonder woman: he looked awful let him sleep

wonder woman: one good thing about this storm

fang^^: he talking? His head ok? that was too long to be locked up fuck

avenger: hes ok

avenger: obsessed w/ the baby

blades: i mean who wouldn't be

wonder woman: XX! hi!

blades: N's resting pretty comfortably, thought I'd check in and let you all know. So glad to see those pics, thanks, avenger

blades: hi ))

blades: so we all good?

shadow: yeah. for now

shadow: you got ideas for when the snow stops blowing, put em here

shadow: this isn't over yet

healer: We got this far, we'll get the rest of the way. love you guys.

Shino pulled his phone away then, stopping Lee from excitedly returning Sakura's love in Beetle's name. Instead, he scrolled back up to the picture of Hinata holding a baby. Her baby. Her daughter. Hinata-chan looked very tired, so so tired, and also radiant, like there was a light source inside her so bright that even Sasuke's cell phone camera couldn't help but capture it.

The baby's face was very pink, her eyes very dark, and it looked like she had lots of dark hair. There were streaks of something thick and white stuck on her skin and in her hair, and that was kind of strange. Maybe it was a cream or medicine or something. There was a third hand cradling the baby, and Lee was pretty sure it was Naruto's. Lee looked and looked and looked at the picture, and something changed inside him: made him feel soft and warm and also restless, almost desperate. That little face was beginning to look very different to him—special, familiar, important—tears spilled down his cheeks. Shino glanced at him and shifted uncomfortably, but Lee had long ago accepted that sometimes he had to let his emotions happen, and how other people responded...
was up to them. He would make their discomfort up to them every way he could, given a chance.

*Every life is precious,* sang through him again, and the truth of it ached deeper than ever, made him tremble. The word *PROTECT* formed behind his eyelids, and he realized that that was what he felt, looking at the picture. The picture of Naruto and Hinata and Hinata's baby. That was what that combination of softness and restlessness was. The warmth of it flared in his chest, another flame in the fire he stoked to fight off the blackness of everything awful in the world.

Lee knew a lot about that blackness.

He turned the word written across his conscience into a vow, burning very bright, rebuking all those shadowy things he knew to fear.

When Lee opened his eyes, Shino was offering a handkerchief. A clean, pressed, sandalwood-scented handkerchief. Because Shino was a very gracious person. Always. Gratitude surged up, spilled out with the other tears. He sopped them all up, thanked Shino with all his heart, and went back to picking gravel and glass from buckets of ladybugs.

UiTiU

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Hinata floated on flurries of hope, pain and wonder, anchored only by the feather-soft weight of the life cradled in the curve of her arm.

She was really tired. *Sleep when the baby sleeps,* the parenting advice books and blogs said, one of bewilderingly few things they agreed on. He needed to sleep. Again and again she slipped, lifted up and out of her body, like she might evaporate from exhaustion. Her cheeks hurt from smiling and everything from shoulders to knees hurt from contractions—they were still going, and she was still bleeding, and she was still split open. There was more time, now—eighteen minutes, twenty minutes, twenty-two minutes—for her eyes to shut and near-sleep to nearly-numb, and she bobbed on little waves of rushing rest. Until (always): pain tugged back. A tide, dragging and pulling, heavy and shadowed with panic and too-new memory. Contracting, retracting, wringing together the great blown balloon of her hollowed womb—wrenching her in, stealing breaths and rushing heartbeats until recognition reached overflowing awareness: she wasn't empty: her arms were full.

Here, in her arms, glowing: Mirai, her Mirai, warm and pink and breathing, and from Mirai into Hinata spread peace. A peace of warmth. It came so softly, delicate as silk around her shoulders, seeped into muscles that remembered—they didn't need to hold so tight, so still. She could breathe. She could *breathe.* In the breaths, Hinata's-still-stuttering, Mirai's-snuffling-sniffling: everything was perfect.

Even Hinata.

"Thank you," she whispered, and: "Mirai," again and again, adoring each shape the name made, the way it began with a soft press of lips, spread a smile across her tongue, trilled against the back of her teeth, breathed free. Simple shapes, simple sounds. In them: all the love she'd ever loved. With an exponent of infinity.

*You're here.*

She lay on her side, uncomfortably conscious of the press of thick padding between her thighs, the heat of her own blood, the unsteady burn of an open wound. She kissed her baby. Her cheeks, her
nose, her chin; every perfect finger and the back of a very tiny hand, curled tight and strong around Hinata's smallest finger.

She didn't know what she was doing. Maybe she was doing everything wrong. What did she know? She studied for birth like she studied for exams, stretched and primed her strength for it like she did before learning a jump with a higher difficulty level for a figure skating routine, because what else could she do? She was not brave enough to put her body at the mercy of a stranger-called-doctor—or, maybe, finally became brave enough. Honest enough. To accept her own limits—respect her own limits.

So she'd known what the two most highly reviewed obstetric textbooks and four different midwife's guides had to say about off-color amniotic fluid and umbilical cords wrapped around necks and—and hundreds, hundreds of other things that could have gone wrong and didn't, but those things did go wrong, all the time, and she knew what the books said and she knew, fear-panic-relief knew, that she was so very, very, very lucky. Because Mirai was here, and she was breathing, and Hinata would never, ever forget how she first saw her daughter: blue and silent and unmoving, death instead of life, and it might have been Hinata's choice of No Doctors that made it so.

She would never forget that.

She lifted up a little, and it was hard and it hurt, but she only had to get high enough to see over the edge of the bed—yes.

He was still there.

She looked at Naruto and her chest hurt—one more hurt, piercing, distinct, known. Craved. She felt too much when she was near him, always, and right now she was all burst open, bleeding and glowing, all emptied out and filled up again with light too big for her skin. She thought it might ignite a wide blaze behind her, the love in her: wings through a chrysalis. Too bright to see.

Then she put her hand over her eyes, and laughed breathless laughs, and knew that she really, really needed to sleep.

Naruto was sleeping. His mouth was open, and his eyelids were dark, because he hadn't been sleeping enough. It was strange to see the natural paleness of his hair, the unnatural paleness of his face, the thinness of his cheeks. She'd seen it happening, week by week through bullet-proof glass, but it hurt most here: where he had been safe, spoiled, loved, home.

She didn't let her mind wander to where he was supposed to be. It wasn't here, and it wasn't fair that it wasn't here, and she knew that soon, blizzard-wind would stop blinding all their windows, and Konohagakure would go back to a rush of coming and going and seeking and finding, and Naruto would leave.

For now:

Naruto slept with his mouth open, which he only did when he was really tired, and felt safe enough to sleep anyway. He explained once—he explained once why it was bad to sleep if you're really tired but not safe, and she remembered secretly disagreeing with him but couldn't remember what he'd said.

He was here. And Mirai was here, sleeping pink and warm and making little grunting sounds sometimes that Hinata adored from the very center of her chest, and even if Hinata didn't know what to do—Mirai did. After the birth, the shower, the awkwardness of trying to fit clothing and
paddling around a body so aching and swollen and distended that it felt barely attached to all its parts, Hinata did what the book told her to do. The book that lied about pain: she opened her robe and lifted her daughter to her chest, between bare breasts. Naruto was there—handed Mirai to her, so careful his hands shook, and she should care that he saw her, but she didn't. She waited, barely breathing, to see if a miracle would happen.

It did happen. Chains of miracles held up today. This one: Mirai, about twenty-five minutes old, opened her eyes very wide. Her tiny fingers began to open and close, to reach, pulling spindly arms with them. Little bowed legs began to push, pressing into the vapid softness of her mother's belly, and Mirai moved: in centimeters, with focus, stopping a few times to rest, starting again—until one clever little hand reached a nipple, and a warm tiny mouth followed it.

Mirai ate. Just as she breathed in the same second her throat first touched oxygen, her tongue found milk and she latched on like nothing was ever going to detach her ever again. Her perfect tiny eyebrows went up and her little chin worked up and down and that was how they spent the rest of that hour: Mirai eating, determined and steady and radiating vivid content, and Hinata and Naruto watching and, in little fits and bursts, giggling. Laughing because of bubbling joy, and helpless awe and—laughing because that was how breaths came out, when your body released that kind of relief.

Hinata didn't know what she was doing. She told Naruto and Sasuke what she'd learned from the books because they knew even less, and they wanted to help so bad, and she felt unsteady with need and power and pain and fear and reeling, wheeling helplessness. Still. Still: she'd never felt less helpless. Less defeated. She won. She won.

This moment: no world but white beyond the windows, the boy she loved sleeping safe beside her, her daughter she loved more with each breath in her arms, fed and warm and breathing and real, and Uchiha Sasuke's obstinate, almost aggressive need to hear and help—this moment she tucked, second by second, into her heart. Next to her mother, living there in faded images and never-fading light.

Hinata drifted. She dreamed of a snowglobe, fragile and beautiful, and smiled inside it.

ViHiV

"I'm going after him," Minato said, and Kushina looked back at him with her jaw hard and her mouth small, but she didn't argue.

"You waiting until they lock you up so I can bail you out, or you want me to get you out now?" she said, sparing a glance for the man she'd knocked and left in the corner. Three and a half minutes until he recovered from her choke hold, probably.

"Could you?"

"There's a Gate in the courthouse."

"...Of course there is."

The look she shot him was impatient and sharp, and she was wound up all tight again, arms crossed and teeth clenched.
They experienced life very differently, the two of them, but their passions tended to meet (ignite) in the middle.

Same with their fears.

"I'll give them two hours," he decided. "Two hours after the snowplows get working. I'm willing to bet that—what with Sasuke's everything—charges will be dropped. I'd like for things to go that way, anyway."

"Kids are safe," she said, like she was agreeing with him. And trying to make herself believe what she said was true by saying it like it was. "Sasuke answered his phone. Wouldn't have, if he didn't feel safe doing so. Naruto's with Sasuke."

"Any guesses where they are?"

He was hesitant, and her mouth softened, just a little, to answer him.

"No...out of the weather, I hope. Sasuke didn't sound cold. But not anywhere with a Gate, or they'd be behind it already. And cold, probably, and also without cell reception, probably. Sure you wanna go down there?"

"Of course I don't want to go down there. I was hoping to never see those tunnels again."

"And yet, I get the feeling you're gonna be begging for maps before the minute's up."

"...Naruto's there."

"I know, darling."

"Think I can find him? I'm not you."

She thought about it. "No," she said, "but I bet he finds you." His wrist was in her hand and she was already drawing, a puzzle of rectangles and triangles and intersecting lines that he'd have no hope of figuring out, had she not taught him to read it many years before. "It's who else could find you that scares me."

"That why you're not going with me?"

"Gotta give 'em something else to chase," she said, voice quiet, shoving up his sleeve to get at more skin to ink her map on. "And hope I've guessed their priorities right. Good thing I was down there not too long ago, not sure I'd still have everything memorized..."

"You'll be following Sasuke's clues?" he asked, words barely whispered. Her hair sifted over his fingers as she worked her way up to the inside of his elbow. The man in the corner stirred. He was an officer sent by Fugaku to keep them separated; Kushina hadn't been ready to be separated, just yet.

"Yeh," she said. "All this time I've been looking for evidence? Well, kid's provided evidence."

"If he knew something that could help Naruto," whispered Minato, troubled, "wouldn't he have shared it—weeks ago? Like Itachi did."

"Just 'cause Sasuke doesn't think it'll help Naruto, doesn't mean it won't help Naruto. Kid's trying to protect our kid, Minato, by leaving him entirely out of it. Everything Sasuke's tied up in, Naruto's tied up in tighter. Naruto should've been in at least half of those little 'so this is how we fought and
died and got buried in sneaky, creepy ways' write-ups."

Minato shuddered, and the tip of the pen feathering over his skin slipped, then stabbed.

"Hold still, Mina," Kushina said crossly. "M almost done."

There was an oxygen-deprivation headache-awareness groan from the corner. Kushina's head snapped in that direction, and whether the man was conscious enough to read the threat in her eyes and staked his life on pretending, or subsided to semi-consciousness naturally, Minato could only guess. (The former, he decided.)

One last line, a flurry of small squares and triangles, and the pen disappeared back to wherever his wife was keeping it. "We're here," she said, pointing out a very small circle circumscribed by a slightly larger circle. "North is your elbow. This—" she bit down, missed a breath, stabbed at a dashed line that formed one side of one of a dozen identical rectangles— "is my best guess of where Naruto would meet up with the Fox. If."

If that's what Naruto was going to do. It was their best, and worst, guess.

"You remember? Triangles are Gates—" more breath than words; the warmth of her cheek against his.

"I do."

"All right. Well. I'm leaving. Again. Two hours?"

"Two hours," he promised. "Good luck."

She straightened, looked down at where he sat in the chair he'd been chained too, hours and hours and hours ago. Fugaku hadn't bothered with replacing the cuffs, so, there was that.

She was pale and pinched again. "Don't know if I'll check in or not—may take off soon. We'll see. But I'll be back, if it's not looking like they'll let you out on their own."

"I love you."

"I know," she said. "I'm not fighting with you because you gotta give him a reason, you know? A reason to come home."

"I know," he said.

She left. Through the reinforced metal door, the same way she came in, and if the guard on the other side had the same objections he'd had the first two times, he kept them to himself.

A safe set of minutes later, the man in the corner got up, brushed himself off, and returned to his post at the door. Minato quirked an eyebrow at him.

"I won't tell on you getting knocked out by my wife if you don't," he offered.

The man looked at him, rubbed at his neck a bit, and offered a short, chagrined smile. "Sure," he said, resigned.

Not all Uchiha were bad.
Naruto shouldn't have slept. He knew he should have said something, told Sasuke that he probably had a concussion, probably needed someone to watch his pupils and make sure he didn't do anything—erratic.

He knew this from experience.

He shouldn't have slept, but he woke up, and he was feeling better than he had since he'd woken up in a pool of Yugito's blood.

That was...a while ago.

Didn't feel like it. But he hadn't dreamed about it, for once, because for a few hours—for a few hours he got to be with Hinata, huddle in the bubble of warmth and support she never seemed to know she was creating, and he slept.

It was good. It was so good.

He stole six ibuprofen from his dad's medicine cabinet. First he pocketed them, then he got second thoughts as his muscles burned and twitched with every simple movement he made to wash and dress and repack his bag with time to actually think about everything he put in there.

He ended up swallowing them. All of them. Then he went back for the bottle, emptied it into a plastic bag, and pocketed the bag. He could move fast when he was hurting, but it was harder, and he didn't need the distraction. If anyone had guessed where he went to weather the storm, they'd be waiting for him.

He'd need to be fast.

He opened up the gun, counted the bullets. Full magazine, one in the pipe—sixteen shots.

Lucky.

The snowfall was slowing, the whirls on the wind mostly drifts, picked up and set down again and again, like the wind was playing. Naruto shuddered, cold just from lingering near a window, and tried not to think about how much he didn't want to leave.

Didn't matter what he wanted.

No, he wouldn't think like that. Think about what you want most. That's what Iruka-sensei told him, when he was learning to read and he couldn't do it and his head would go all hot and his eyes wouldn't focus and shame crept up from his guts and clogged up his throat. I know you want to stop. It's okay to stop. It's okay, Naruto. But what do you want most?

What do I want most?

He wanted everyone he loved to be safe. He wanted them to be happy. That was what he wanted most, and it made the tiles under his feet feel steady again, got his body moving again, his brain putting together orders that made sense. Find a new coat. Check in with Sasuke. Say goodbye to Hinata. Say goodbye to Mirai.

Say goodbye.
He took a wool coat from his father's closet—it was too big for him, and that would help, when he needed to sleep in it. More importantly, it didn't make much noise when it brushes against itself. It smelled like Dad. That probably wouldn't help.

He thought about what he knew. KPD was after him, obviously. Akatsuki was in full cooperation with the KPD, probably. Akatsuki would kill him if they caught him. They got Han, and Fu, and Yugito, and they would get him, easy. He needed to run ahead, hide better than they could find, turn the hunt back on them. Set traps, lure them in, pick them off, one by one.

Get rid of Akatsuki, then deal with the KPD. There: a plan.

Naruto hated the plan. It was an awful plan. It was the plan where he became everything he fought the Fox to not become.

It was the best plan.

Naruto took a moment, head against his father's open closet door, staring unseeing at neat rows of clothes he'd almost imagined himself growing into, breathing in carnation and cedar and cinnamon, and let each breath come out a little shaky, a little bit laughing, a little bit sobbing.

His knives were all there, all lined up on the top shelf.

He took them. Closed the door. Imagined, for half a second, walking through the whole huge house, saying goodbye to each room. He never thought of it as his house, but there were memories—a lot of memories that felt like home.

Which meant they might look for him here. What do you want most?

When his breathing was even, he went to find Sasuke. Sasuke had been a little off, ever since he answered a phone call from Naruto's dad—no, there was something going on before that. Sasuke was nervous before Naruto woke up.

Should he push?

Yes, Naruto decided, he would push. Sasuke had to be there for Hinata. If there was a reason Sasuke couldn't do that, couldn't one-hundred-percent take care of Hinata, Naruto couldn't leave. Not yet.

"It's you," Sasuke said, harsh and flat. "You're—they're—you have to go, Naruto. If they find you—"

"I'm asking about you," Naruto cut in, exasperated. "There's something bothering you—"

"Yes! It's you, here, with really fucking few viable ways to run, right where they'll look for you. Get the fuck out, Naruto, and I'll be fine." Sasuke finally met his eye, when Naruto took a step back from him, and his voice came back down to normal. "I'll take care of Hinata. I swear, I will. You can go. You have to go. I swear, Naruto."

He was lying about something. But not about taking care of Hinata, and he was right about everything else, so Naruto just—just had to let it go.

"Yeah," he said. "Gonna help me dig out a manhole? The one around the corner is probably least likely to be noticed."

Sasuke sagged. "Shit," he said. "We're gonna be shoveling for hours. Do you even know where to
"I paced it off once, but yeah. Can't tell where the sidewalk ends and the road starts, so…"

Sasuke stared hard out the window. Still snowing, swift flying flurries buffeted by killer-cold wind, but at least they could see the lamppost across the street now. If he went out in it, he'd be able to find his way back inside. "Fine. Go see Hinata, if you're gonna see her. I need more layers."

Naruto went. Cracked her door open, centimeter by centimeter, saw her eyes closed, body curled around the tiny bundle beside her, hair splayed out behind her. He hesitated, but he wasn't that strong. Not strong enough to go without slipping into her radius of warmth just—just one more time.

She woke when he knelt beside her, and was smiling before her eyes were all the way open, but then she really saw him, and her smile disappeared.

"You're l-l-l—"

"Yeah," he said. "Gotta go."

She blinked hard but the tears came anyway, and Naruto's chest filled up and up and up, an ache that got his diaphragm all still and stuck so he couldn't breathe in anymore. He looked at her and he felt home like he had the first time, the very first time he had to leave her alone in his apartment and came back and she was there—there, waiting for him, anxious and warm and happy. Happy, just because he was there.

It hurt. He looked at Mirai instead. She had a little hat on her head, and a blanket wrapped tight around her, arms and legs all tucked inside, and she looked so very, very small, only her little face showing.

Naruto leaned forward, still not quite breathing right, until his face almost touched Mirai's, then glanced up to check with Hinata. She smiled at him again, bottom lip trembling a little, and he smiled back, finally able to breathe again, and kissed Mirai's face.

When he looked up again, Hinata was there, not making a sound, tears streaming across the bridge of her nose, over the side of her face, soaking into her pillow. "Can I?" he asked, looking at the curve of her mouth, and the words didn't make it all the way past the ache in his throat, but she nodded. He braced his hands on the edge of the mattress, leaned forward, kissed her.

Kissed her with his mouth open, lips soft and he could feel the tremble in hers, and he didn't know much about kissing but—but it was good. So warm, and so soft, and all the things he knew about her and wanted her to know: the blaze of hope she built in his chest, the power of peace he hadn't known, before he'd known her, they were all there. There in the heat held in her mouth and his.

He fell back, cheeks hurting from smiling so hard, but his heart was beating so fast and alive, he couldn't help it.

He was lucky. So, so lucky. What a life he got, with so many—so many precious people. And he had parents, and he met Mirai, and he kissed Hinata.

"Hime," he whispered, "um, remember, you're—you're the most beautiful—most good, um, amazing, beautiful—part of the world. The whole freaking world," he said, quiet so he didn't wake Mirai, and she was still crying, and without thinking he kissed her again, her face, to catch her tears.
Then he stood up, before he got confused about what he wanted most. Whispered goodbye at the door, shut it gently behind him.

The dream was over: time to go.

TuXuT

Kurama watched a walled white world, and wondered when his boy would come.

He would come.

Kurama was a boy once, and they taught him about power. Being powerless is an effective place to start.

Naruto was never what he was. For all the boy's parents failed, in keeping and training and protecting, they must have done something—given something, inherited or taught, that gave Naruto power.

Power to stand up.

Naruto stayed Naruto when everything else about his existence changed—was Naruto in Kurama's brain, with a never-uttered Uzumaki in front of it—because Naruto stood up. To him. To the Fox. And to everything else.

Three years old, so small and broken and hurting and desperate, and he stood up. Kurama saw everything taken from that child. Could have given most of it back to him. Chose not to. *I'm Naruto*, the child said, *That's my name, Naruto*, and it didn't matter if he was hit for it.

It mattered to the boy. His name. Mattered more than protecting himself. A lot of things mattered more to Naruto than protecting himself.

And so the Fox lost, and Kurama gained. That was Naruto's power.

As the boy grew, so did his power, and the Fox shrank. He should have killed them all—every last Uchiha, each and every potential collaborator, and then everyone who rose to fill that noxious vacuum, until someone got lucky and killed him back. He found his grandson on a table, stitches over his heart, unconscious body twitching as they pointed infrared remotes, one after the other, *calibrated*, they said. He feared them and he hated them and he killed them and he should have relished killing them, but the child was there, and the child needed him.

That was Naruto's power.

How the Fox shrank. Shriveled and hid, cowered loathing in Konoha's deepest shadows, loosing his hold on thread after thread of influence and power lest they lead to him and through him—the child. The boy.

His boy.

He tried to teach the boy, there in the shadows. Tried to make him strong and fast and cruel and wily, to give him power.

He wanted the child to survive. Wanted it more each moment he spent trying to make him strong,
and the wanting was a weakness.

He still wanted it. Death and Kurama were close companions. He witnessed many deaths, caused many more. Those who stood by him, followed him and learned from him, his Tailed Beasts—he let them die.

Even (brave, loyal, unbending) Yugito.

They knew, following him, that he wouldn't save them (dependence is willing relinquishment of power).

But he could have.

They made their own choices. Those too weak to make their own choices did not live long in the face of the Fox; his Nine-tails lived long.

Well. Relatively.

Power corrupted. The Fox killed to clean that corruption. Power corrupted. Naruto killed the Fox.

Not yet—not yet. Kurama let the Nine-tails die, all but a few (and they would die too, if only his intervention would save them) but the Fox had his own prizes to hunt, and all his cowering and limping was part of the play.

Let them lure him. Let them think the boy would bait him. They thought him weakened and wounded, unable to protect what was his. This was how he set his trap; his Nine-tails died for this trap.

They would die. They had do, because Naruto—Naruto could not die.

Kurama would not let him.

And so they waited, Kurama and the Fox, for their boy to come home. And he would come.

He had nowhere else to go.

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Chapter 34

It was hard to get the manhole cover back into place—it ground and slid against numb hands, and he barely yanked his fingers away fast enough to avoid being crushed when it fell into place.

Then it was done, and Sasuke was scrabbling at its edges, ripped off a glove to get at it with his nails, because he'd just seen Naruto go down there and it was dark and cold and wrong and he needed Naruto back—

A fingernail snapped, ripped at skin and a million nerve endings, and the pain screwed up into his brain and Sasuke sat on his ass in the snow and asked himself what the fuck he was doing.

Of course Naruto was down there. The whole point was Naruto getting down there. They'd shoveled for nearly forty minutes, he couldn't feel his face or his hands and his feet stung with pins-and-needles and his back was killing him and he'd just ripped off a fingernail trying to undo everything they just did.

He was cramping up inside, thinking about what Naruto was doing right now, and, sure, maybe Naruto needed to get behind the Gates, but the sewers were the worst. There was the time they had to go through a tunnel and even with flashlights they couldn't see the walls because every fucking centimeter was coated in a creeping mass of cockroaches—

Better than dead, he yelled inside, it's better than being dead, don't think about it, don't think—

A light flashed just around the corner, reflecting red in the snow, cycling round and round—cops —he was up, scrambling away and trying to kick snow over the manhole cover at the same time. Picked up and dropped the shovels, scooped them up again, got a couple meters away, remembered his glove, leaped—

There was the building roar of an engine and the lights were so close and he wondered if they'd shoot first or—

oh. Oh.

It was a snowplow. A snowplow.

Sasuke got out of its way, shovels and gloves pressed to his chest, even managed to duck around behind one of the trees lining the sidewalk so he didn't get blasted with snow as the plow went by.

The plow passed, and he'd got his breathing almost right even if his brain will still panicked and scattered and wrong. The manhole was covered by the same thick tire-tracks that went up around the corner and down that road as far as Sasuke could see, and the bank of blown snow heaped along the sidewalk hid most of their footprints. Tracks pretty much covered, Sasuke felt mostly okay about heading back inside. He only checked four times to make sure he took everything with him.

If he was hollow and aching inside, it was because he hadn't eaten in hours. Dawn couldn't be too far off. He just needed breakfast. And to check in on Hinata. Once he'd seen for himself that she was still fine, and Mirai too, and counted her pulse and brought her more water or tea or diapers or towels or whatever she needed—then he'd rest for a bit, and then he'd be fine. He'd stop making KPD vehicles out of snowplows.
Fucking snowplows.

He reached Naruto's locked front door, and realized he didn't know the door code.

The shovels clattered loudly on the frozen tile of the sheltered entryway, accusing clangs echoing into spiraling panic. He was freezing. He had so many things he needed to do. Hinata and her baby were waiting for him. Naruto was crawling through sewers without him. He'd told every news agency in Hi no Kuni that he was dead.

*He couldn't open the door.*

Flushed sick with failure, Sasuke fisted numb hands on polished wood, rested his aching forehead against them, and whispered *shit* until his teeth were chattering too uncontrollably to enunciate the word right. Then he turned around, head thunking back, slid down until he knees met his shoulders, stared at the nearest streetlight with eyes too tired to see only one of it.

It was so cold. So fucking cold.

He couldn't stay in the cold.

Okay. Options. A: down the manhole. B: knock on one of Namikaze's neighbor's doors, hope they didn't turn him over for not being dead. Would they do that? Maybe if he played up the tragic backstory a bit—No. Idiot. C: Break in through a window. *Helpless baby inside, can't do that.* D: ask Hinata to open the door.

*She just had a baby,* he yelled at himself, staring at her name on his phone screen. *She's—she's still bleeding.*

His feet were numb now. Here he was. Helped break his best friend/accused terrorist out of prison, survived a police chase on icy streets on the back of a motorcycle, supported a girl giving birth, held a newborn child without dropping or breaking it, comforted his insane overprotective brother over his own reported death, willingly called his own mother, spoke to his father for the second time in two years, dug out a manhole in the tail end of a blizzard, was undoubtedly the newest, hottest target of every criminal organization in Konoha—and he was going to freeze to death because he couldn't unlock a fucking door.

Sasuke's phone buzzed. *Hinata.*

"You okay?" he asked, stuttering from shivering, chest going hot with the embarrassment of what he was going to have to admit to her.

"Yes," said Hinata. "Did you—did you leave?" Her voice was so small.

"No, I'm here," he said quickly. "It's just—I—don't know the door code—"

"Two eight two eight ten," she said.

Oh. *Oh.* He could have—could have just asked her. Sitting here freezing, because he didn't want her to get up and leave Mirai alone and make it across half the house just after giving birth because he couldn't open the door on his own, and all it would have taken was a ten-second phone call.

"The door code is two eight two eight ten—wait—isn't it working? I'll come—"

Sasuke got himself upright, punched two-eight-two-eight-ten into the keypad. The light blinked green.
Inside was so beautifully, beautifully warm.

"I'm in. Don't get up. I'm coming."

He heard her relief as she agreed. His eyes were watering, and his nose started running. Because of the temperature change. Definitely because of the temperature change.

He hadn't been this useless, this dumb, since the last time he got really drunk. He kept hearing his father's voice from the phone, sounding like it did when he spoke to Itachi. Had Father said his name? Maybe he did think he was speaking to Itachi.

Anyway. Sasuke had other promises to keep. If the adults came home and took care of things like they were fucking supposed to, he would follow Naruto to the Gates. If they didn't, he'd be here.

He didn't tell Naruto about everyone who mattered knowing everything Sasuke knew about the Gates. Naruto was an idiot who tried to protect everyone. He only left because leaving would protect everyone else. When Naruto found out about Sasuke, he'd try to protect him, too, most likely by being close enough to take hits that weren't meant for him.

Idiot.

So he'd stay here, protecting the ones Naruto trusted him to protect, and hope hard that Naruto would put that much more effort into protecting himself.

If he got the chance, he'd run. He'd get behind the Gates and find Naruto and maybe, back-to-back, they'd both come out alive.

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UiHiU

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The sun came up, and they let Minato go.

Jiraiya dealt with the legal headache while Minato catnapped in his waiting-room-turned-holding-room-turned-waiting-room, and summarized it as: "city's blowing up in their faces and they don't know if formally charging you will make it better or worse, plus their heads are real deep up their asses, so the charges against you have been suspended."

What that meant was that there was still a warrant out for his arrest, but they weren't going to use it. For now. They'd find another incredibly innoportune moment to spring it on him, he was sure.

They'd have to catch him first.

"Don't go home," Jiraiya advised, looking him over critically. "Come to my place. Press won't look for you there. I'll get you kitted out for your little jaunt in the sewers. Tell you what I can about the characters you may meet down there."

Minato wanted to go home. Wanted to go home, tuck his kid into bed, crawl into bed next to Kushina. Wake up and remember that the nightmare was over. He'd complain to his therapist about his vicious, violent, unforgivable subconscious, then go crash Naruto's hockey practice. Naruto wouldn't have any nightmares of his own, wouldn't have any scars, because Minato would have protected him, always. He'd be spoiled and entitled and convinced of his own immortality and unbearable and delightful.
Nothing at all like the Naruto Minato was privileged to love. And that centered him, finally: that love. Fierce, failed, forever: for the boy he had, not the one he’d lost.

"Yep," he said, feeling lighter, like he’d dropped something he'd grown calluses carrying. "Lead on, Sensei."

Jiraiya gave him a long, intrigued, irritated look, and led on.

ViXiV

An afternoon, evening, and night in a courthouse without peace, sleep, privacy, or much in the way of food had taken a toll on Kakashi, and it was only Rin's determined sweetness keeping him from taking it out on everyone else. She’d been betrayed too, seen Sensei arrested too, spent the night in the same uncomfortable room, watching Kushina break in and out and using the laptop Kushina "borrowed" from the KPD to read, analyze, and draft responses to Sasuke’s dramatic little manifesto.

They'd seen Sensei, briefly, tagging along behind his sensei; Kushina disappeared before that, before the morning got far enough along for the streetlamps to go out, and never came back. Rin had keys to both cars, so now he had one and she had one and they were crawling cautiously along just-plowed roads, bodyguards split evenly between them, to check on an empty house.

Not empty. Hinata should still be there. Poor girl. They didn't mean to forget about her, but with everything going to shit—not an excuse though. Naruto was going to kill them for this. Not much got that kid truly angry, and he forgave all too freely, but this—this was not going to blow over.

Maybe he wouldn't find out. Should be pretty busy watching his own back. Should.

Wasn't, though, and Kakashi was sure of that. Self-preservation and Kakashi's favorite knucklehead were not on speaking terms.

So. Get home, check up on Hinata, convince Rin to take a break that included both food and a nap, make sure the security team had their shit together, shower, nap.

Then check on Hinata again. He would set reminders on his phone and everything.

Sakura was going to find out about this. About Hinata, pregnant and left all alone during a blizzard, because all the adults were busy trying to free a terrorist before he could be carted off to the high-security penitentiary. Which they didn't even manage, because someone (Sakura? He'd believe it) got to him first.

Sakura would hate him. Sasuke already hated him, with dedication and consistency, so he was three for three.

WoF mentor of the decade, right here.

His standards for success were set even lower. Just let them be alive, stay alive, he willed. Winning competitions, reaching personal goals, progressing in their athletic careers, shit, just graduating from high school—those were wins he could live with losing.

They just had to live. That was all.
Rin made it through a stop light he got stuck on the red side of, leaving him several minutes behind. As he was tapping tense fingers on the steering wheel, waiting for the automated gate of the Namikaze mansion to finish rolling open while Iwashi and Raidou fended off staked-out reporters, she called him.

"Kakashi," she said, and her voice sounded so strange. "Kakashi, there's—there's a baby."

He was still processing those words (Kakashi, there's a baby) when he made it inside, right into the glare of one seriously pissed off Uchiha Sasuke. And there, cradled absurdly against Sasuke's chest, was...a baby.

A real, live, blinking baby.

"Nice of you to show the fuck up," said Sasuke, by way of greeting.

"You can give her to me," Rin said, sounding like she'd said as much several times, now. "I've just washed my hands."


He looked wrecked. Exhausted in every way a man can be exhausted. And Kakashi really did not want to hold the baby, did not want to even breathe near it because he wished it too well to do that, but Kakashi knew his kids, and Sasuke was not going to give that baby to anyone else.

"Hinata?" he asked, hedging.

"Sleeping. Let her fucking sleep."

"Has—has she seen a doctor? Have either of them?" asked Rin.

"She doesn't want a doctor." Sasuke's scowl burned more furious. "Don't do that to her. If I have to stand between Hinata and a freaking army of doctors, I will."

"No doctors," Kakashi agreed, a little too quickly, because Sasuke's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "I'll...I'll wash my hands. Should change, too. You want to sit down?"

"She cries when I sit down," Sasuke said, looking a bit like he might cry himself.

Kakashi's stomach sunk further, and he left Sasuke staring forbiddingly at Rin, and went to get changed.

He could take a full shower in a minute and a half, so he allowed himself that small level of avoidance, and took one. Raided Sensei's drawers for clean clothes, wrapped a towel turban around his head, muttered bracing words to the mirror, marched to his doom.

Now there was a baby in his arms. Sasuke was critically adjusting the arrangement of the small (so, so, so small) body on his, hissing at him to properly support the head, suggesting he offer a finger for awfully tiny fingers to hold. "I saw pictures of you holding Naruto when he was a baby," Sasuke said accusingly. "I know you know how."

He was trying, really hard, not to think about holding baby Naruto. Ah, sweet students, so skilled at stabbing their old sensei in the heart. They didn't even try.

It was looking at him. The baby was looking at him.

"I'm going to sit down. Even if you cry," he told it, frowning.
This was a lie. He waited for Sasuke to scurry off for a shower before saying it. He didn't sit down. He was...bouncing, softly, from foot to foot. This happened without any advice from his brain. His brain was entranced by how small the baby's ear was. Rin was making a large pot of coffee.

She was so very, excruciatingly lovely, Rin was.

He hid the coffee mug when he heard Sasuke's footsteps. No need to add a lecture about the risks of drinking hot coffee while holding a baby, even if the coffee was in a lidded travel mug, because apparently Rin harbored similar doubt in his skills.

Genma looked up from where he was reviewing the night's security tapes on his laptop at the kitchen table, and laughed at him. Rin hid a grin behind her own mug.

Kakashi hated them all.

Maybe not the baby. The baby was okay. So far.

Sasuke had returned dressed for an expedition into the arctic, and was just standing there, glaring.

"Hey, you're safe here," Genma said. "Especially now. No one knows to look for you here. Especially since no one knows you're not dead. You could go back to bed."

When Sasuke didn't say anything, Genma said, seriously: "Worst case scenario, we hide you in the panic room. With snacks and movies and everything. You'd survive a zombie apocalypse in there. We can keep you safe, Sasuke. If you let us."

"Listen to him," Kakashi said. Shouldn't have, because whatever Kakashi suggested, Sasuke was immediately compelled to do the opposite of. Always.

"That's good—get it ready for Hinata," Sasuke said, "just in case. I'm going."

He looked up at Kakashi, for a half-beat open and desperate, and said, "You'll take care of them, right?"

The ridiculousness of anyone expecting Kakashi to care for living, breathing beings burned the back of his tongue, but Kakashi held his student's gaze and swore: yes.

Sasuke nodded, short and sharp, about-faced with equal precision. He was almost through the door when Kakashi called out, arms tight around Hinata's baby.

"Look, I know you and Naruto know what you're doing, mostly, down there," he said. "Just...do it. The things that will bring you back alive again."

He didn't really expect Sasuke to answer. But he did. He said: "Sure, Sensei," and the back door had slammed before Kakashi pulled himself together enough to swallow a too-big, too-hot mouthful of coffee, hoping to wash away the complicated knot of anxiety and sentimentality clogging up his throat.

"I'll make sure the paparazzi don't get him," said Genma, bless him, already half-shrugged into his coat.

Kakashi looked at the baby. Its eyes were closed. Asleep, maybe. Safe to sit down, probably.

He didn't sit down. He kept gently swaying, and sipping coffee, and watched Sasuke scale the garden wall while Genma set off some sort of noisy distraction on the other side of the house, and
tried to think of another time—any time—Sasuke had called him Sensei.

So maybe this was the first.

So long as it wasn't the last.

VuMuV

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Neji fell asleep with his right hand nestled between both of Tenten's, and succumbed to unconsciousness feeling very pleased with himself.

He woke to an unhappy lessening of pain meds, no one holding his hands, and Tenten looking like she needed to fight someone.

It would be best, he felt strongly, to go right back to sleep. Unless there was a nurse nearby to administer a renewed dose of narcotics, which could only help—no. No. No nurse.

His uncle.

His looming, glowering, granite-eyed uncle, facing off with Tenten. Several swear words presented themselves for this ideal opportunity for use, and it was probably good that his tongue was...stuck, somehow, and he wasn't able to tell his uncle just how much he should get used to losing, if he was truly, prodigiously stupid enough to take on Tenten.

Ohhh, her face. The one that made a sneering, hostile, unethical judge attempting to rattle the two of them half an hour before taking the ice in a high-stakes competition take two steps back, backpedal ineffectually, and walk the long way around the arena just to avoid the possibility of further eye contact. He was incredibly fond of that face.

He was also very much a coward in comparison to Tenten, a fact he'd long accepted, though it made it no less unpleasant when Uncle's furious face snapped to his, and the body he was just beginning to re-orient in through the dizzying unbalance of pain drained cold.

Then Uncle's face changed, and Neji was far from full cognitive capacity but he was far too adept at reading people to feel so confused—

"Neji," he said, and Neji wasn't having any more luck interpreting his oddly restrained voice than he was his face, which was concerning— "Do you...recognize me, son?"

This was far too bizarre to discern rationally. Not without a thoroughly refreshed cocktail of drugs, anyway. Play along, he decided. Maybe things would start to make sense if he just...pretended they did.

"Of course I know you, Uncle," he said, in an embarrassingly dry and croaky voice. "Is there a reason I...shouldn't?"

"No, no, you simply appeared— nevermind that. With the standard of care being as pitiful as it is, one must second-guess the reassurances of the medical 'professionals'. A condition report, if you would."

Tenten was rolling her eyes over Uncle's shoulder, and Neji almost smiled at her. He was already
rolling awareness in careful focus from scalp to soles, focusing and assessing what he could of each muscle group as he went. When he opened his eyes again, his uncle was still staring at him, and Neji thought he could pick out one of the emotions tightening those hard eyes: anxiety.

"I'm in pain," he said plainly. "The pain is concentrated in my chest and neck, and radiates from those points through my back and thighs. My left hand burns a bit. Head hurts. Appendages are mobile."

"So what the doctor said," Tenten said, pointedly. "Sounds like you could use some water?"

"Please," he said, and gave up his inneffectual perusal of his uncle, grateful. Focused on sipping water, feeling the sting of abused neck muscles he wasn't accustomed to being aware of. Began to worry about Tenten being here. He strongly preferred she not witness the verbal abuse Uncle would shortly unleash on him.

It wasn't that he couldn't take it, because he always could. Uncle was just so very...precise. Needed so few words to cut so very deep.

It would be easier if she didn't hear those words.

"Maybe you could give us a moment alone," he said, pleased with how much more human, more controlled his voice was, throat soothed. Tenten was so tense, looking at him, protective, but she rarely questioned him—didn't now.

"I'll be back," she promised. Glanced back as she shut the door; he did smile, this time. He was pretty sure that was what his lips were doing, anyway.

Neji cast his eyes aside. Waited. He'd already been disowned, true, but Uncle was ingenious enough to come up with something worse.

"You were right."

Neji was staring, Uncle was staring back, and his words were bouncing around Neji's skull, and Neji was—angry. Or something approximating angry, because his body hurt and nothing was happening the way he predicted it to happen.

"I have accepted my error, Nephew. I have begun reparations. You were right to take sides. You were right to take the side of your friends. I...stand with you."

He paused to allow for reply, but Neji had no reply to offer.

"Neji. Do not—do not throw your life so heedlessly in harm's way. I accept the risks of taking a stand, but there are less...violent ways of doing so, I assure you."

Being called out for crashing his car in a street race was among the reprimands he'd expected, but this...benign variation of concern was one he was very much unprepared for.

Hiashi stepped forward; Neji flinched back. A small tell, pressed against the mattress as he was, but its echo contorted the small muscles of his Uncle's face.

"I promised," said Hiashi. "I promised your father. I promised to protect you. To defend your life with my own." Another step forward. Neji controlled himself, as much as he could; confusion and physical discomfort muddled his usually reliable composure.

A hand on his shoulder. It was gentle, hesitant, and, to Neji's distracted wonder, warm.
"I began to break that promise. I have since...regretted, deeply, my words to you. Fate has granted a second chance. I will keep my promise, Nephew. Neji."

"So." The hand lifted, Uncle stepped back, the warmth remained. The air between them felt cleaner. "It seems that promise involves throwing my lot in with Namikaze Naruto's."

Uncle smiled. Very small, very grim. Fierce. Frightening.

"So be it," he said. "Do you feel well enough to strategize?"

Neji groped for the button to further raise the upper half of his bed, disregarded the increase of pain as his torso moved. He was in no fit state to strategize.

"Of course," he said.

It was a brilliant system, really. Simple, even primitive, given currently available technology; but maybe that was why it worked so well when Kushina taught it to him twenty years ago, and seemed to be working just as well today.

It had taken longer than he liked, to find a dial-in point. He'd prioritized stealth over speed, and that was probably the best choice, as he didn't belong here, but it would never be his first choice. Minato held a strong preference for fast, decisive action, striking and moving on to the next target before opponents could effectively counterattack. Creeping and literally crawling through the dark, dank, stuff-of-nightmares tunnels that made up the secret byways of already secret passageways seriously cramped his style.

This was Naruto's world. He wouldn't shrink from it.

Nearly four hours spent on finding that first listening point. May it not be too late.

He was belly-down on a ledge a meter and a half off the ground, ninety paces past the access walk of a defunct subway station, and he could hear electricity humming through the central conductor rail of tracks without trains. (He could use that, if confronted. Wouldn't take too much leverage to maneuver most attackers onto the tracks, unbalanced into metal that would instantly electrocute—of course, the same could be done to him—.)

The plastic of the ground-line phone receiver was chipped, brittle with age and varying temperatures, the numbers on the keypad long since worn away. The inked skin of his forearm stung from cold, and the penlight held in his teeth trembled when they chattered. He double-referenced Kushina's map, dialed the next number.

A truly fascinating system. An ad hoc wireless mesh network, static radio nodes wired to break-beam sensors, data translated to tones played live over channels one could call—if one knew where to pick up a phone, and which numbers to dial.

Every passage had a three-digit number coded to it, preceded with digits indicating cardinal directions and suffixed with numbers representing distance, one unit for every ten meters. This would feed you tones for the nearest fifteen break-beam feeds, implanted in corridors at patterned intervals and staggered heights, rising correspondingly in pitch. Single tones meant empty corridor;
broken tones of varying pitches could track someone or something moving past the sensors, how fast they were moving, and even sometimes—depending on how they moved and how skilled the listener—size and numbers. Add a hashtag and additional location codes, and one could combine tone data for up to six feeds at once.

Minato was better at this kind of listening than Kushina, something she had yet to forgive him for, as she'd taught him. If Itachi's accounts were to be believed, Naruto was better still.

And the Fox hardy seemed to need it, this system he built.

So far, Minato had found five tone signatures. Was actively tracking three. Two traveling together, following—or hunting—the third. The third was signalling—breaking tones in deliberate, repeated patterns—and Minato felt, with an awful scoop to his guts, that there was a very good chance he was hearing Naruto.

Jiraiya hadn't known about this network. Itachi had deducted an alarmingly accurate estimate of what sort of system must be in place, but admitted to never having found any recon points, though he had discovered, and experimentally dismantled, several infrared break-beam sensors. They were replaced within forty-eight hours. He had not shared his theories with the KPD. If that's what made Naruto the Gatekeeper, he'd said, testing, intense, it's also what kept him alive. I feel strongly that it should remain...uncompromised, should it be needed in the future.

So the KPD didn't know, and Jiraiya didn't know, which meant most people of the Gates didn't know. Itachi knew because he had a dangerous talent for understanding things he'd be better off not understanding. Minato knew because Kushina knew. Kushina knew because the Fox taught her.

As he taught Naruto. Who was running, now, tones breaking staccato allegro as Minato listened, dialing and re-dialing—and the others behind, steady, gaining, hunting. Minato was guessing, but—his son was calling the Fox, if he was guessing right, and he knew where they were, if he was reading the map right, was estimating speeds and trajectories and his own ability to get from A to B down here, he could catch then. If he moved now.

He may hinder more than help. He had Jiraiya's pistol and he knew how to use it, though he'd really rather not. Not down here, with very low visibility and very high chance of deadly ricochet.

One last hard look at Kushina's map, blinked into memory under the unsteady light of the tiny torch in his mouth, tone tells shifting fast and discordant as Minato hung up the phone. Pocketed the torch, shifted, estimated, braced, leapt into the dark.

He ran with one hand brushing the tunnel wall, very aware that any misstep could send him toppling onto electricity-live metal. The door he needed was barely a freckle away on Kushina's map. One-seventy paces, two-hundred, two-fifty, three hundred. He tried to quiet his breath, pull calm around the sharp edges of his mind and heart. Three-eighty. There: a door.

There was a—howl, maybe. The sound echoed strangely. Minato's skin prickled; his heart
thundered. He had to slow down, against everything his instincts screamed to do—had to find the next door, dismantle the next trap, traps set for fools who ran the Gates without belonging to them. Fools like him.

It was a tripwire, this time, and blocks missing from the floor. Barely-there black wire, functionally invisible, sharp enough to cut into bone. He found by it dragging his boot along the doorjamb. Stepped over it, found ground a half-meter deeper than expected, nearly got himself neutered on that same evil wire (Kushina would hardly forgive him).

It was a narrow trench, not three paces wide, and he checked thoroughly for additional hazards before switching his torch off, listening carefully, and stepping up and out the other side.

He moved barely-breathing-quietly, now. Step-after-step-after-step. Gut instinct told him he wasn't alone, and while being unable to confirm this suspicion with any of his more reliable senses was creepy as all hell, he wasn't about to ignore the warning spiking shivers up his spine.

Maybe it was the smell...?

His next step splashed. Small, just a scattering of droplets, and hardly unusual when half of these tunnels were sewers, but the tang in the air sharpened, and he was sure, now, that it was more than fear bringing it.

Back to the wall, safety catch off and pistol aimed in what he desperately hoped was the right general direction, Minato switched his light on.

And there it was, twitching, bleeding.

Bleeding too much to be much of a threat, probably, but Minato went gun first, listening. Listening hard.

And the smell hit him. Sour like sewers, bile, blood, and Minato's hand clamped over his mouth and nose. He was gagging, stomach cramping, other hand pointing the gun—shaking.

The mounds of—stuff bubbling from the torso—he'd keep the light off of that, focus on the face instead—the eyes were watching him.

"Who is it, who has come to read my last rights?" said the corpse, and Minato bit down hard, teeth bruising through the glove.

"My last moments, my glorious final breaths—ah, yes—" it was wet, the voice, and rasping and—amused. "Come, come, my child, witness the glory—the pain—"

Details of the grotesquely grinning face in the circle of torchlight filtered past the horror exploding blank in Minato's brain.

"Hidan of Akatsuki," he said. It came out almost...nonchalant. Okay. He could fake this.

"You know me!" it—he—was delighted. "A blessing, a final blessing in this mortal purgatory, to be truly witnessed as I fucking ascend. It's only fair that you return the favor, don't you think?"

There were wheezes, hitches of agony, between those calm—jovial—words. Minato focused on the pain in his own teeth, pressed too-tight in a too-taut jaw, wrestled to control his unreasoning fear.

The man was dying. He was—eviscerated. Had more organs on the outside than the inside of his
body. He wasn't going to hurt Minato.

He'd been hunting Naruto.

Suddenly calm, Minato removed the hand from his face.

"The Fox caught you?"

Hidan laughed (gagged, gurgled, grinned). "The Fox? The Fox, yes. Such a wicked Fox. Such a wily, wicked Fox...and we were so close, so very close. Almost had the Little Fox. Runs so fast, that fucking little Fox..."

Minato thought. Retreated to logic, did his best to smother rage with reason.

"Shall I kill you?" It would be a mercy.

"Kill me? Kill...me?" more death-thick chuckles. "Fuck you. Trying to deny me my final...glory..." teeth stained in laughed-up blood bared broad, hands lifted, dripping intestines. "I...earned...this death..."

Eyes rolled up. Minato stepped back, cast the torchlight forward.

"You," said the corpse. The eyes were back. Staring. Glossy, focused, knowing. "Hunting the Fox too, aren't you? Run, run, run...run faster than the Little Fox...Fox will catch little Fox, yes fucking yes..."

Laughter.

"Run, run, run...run...ru..."

Minato ran.

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A/N: I hope the explanation of the Fox's Gates-monitoring system makes some sense. I spent a long time devising and refining it. Not sure how realistically it could be applied and maintained, but all the technology is real. Please review if you can! Thank you so much to those of you who do!
Once upon a time, Kushina used Minato to take apart the world.

They were all young idealists, then. Recent graduates of WoF, navigating university, apprenticeships, relationships; scattering towards their different futures, stubbornly regrouping for long nights of cheap wine and impassioned politics.

Kushina was just there for the wine. She had no intention of sitting around to talk about changing their corrupt, oppressive government.

She was straight-up changing it.

Couldn't change much on her own, though. And no one liked her. She laughed when they weren't trying to be funny and got angry when they were. She made sure they knew how patronizing their intentions tended to be, how the words they used bought into the same oppression they sought glory avenging. How truly detached they were from the entrenched misery their essays so neatly resolved. She wanted them to win. She really did. But they had to get their heads out of their asses to do it, and she wasn't against yanking them up for fresh air by force.

So no one liked her. She won too many arguments, used her fists to decide what relentless fact-checking wouldn't, drank too much of their wine.

Except Minato. Minato liked her. And they loved Minato. Idolized the shit out of everything he did. Even when everything he did ended up involving her.

She'd've laughed her head off about that...but she saw him that way too.

So what do you do with a golden glowing genius leaking metric tons of extra-virgin charisma with a weird fetish for following you into every Fantastically Bad Idea like a particularly well-groomed retriever puppy?

Use him.

"What do they need?" she'd demanded, slapping hot tears from cheeks stung red with rage. She'd protested all day, gone door to door, made her knuckles raw with knocking, cajoled signatures for a petition to appeal a conviction for a clearly, clearly unjust ruling. A drunk driver veered onto a sidewalk, hit a pedestrian. The pedestrian, now paralyzed from the waist down, was being fined for obstructing traffic. The driver, a Hyuuga, walked free.

Every day in Konoha. Every day. Those born with the right last name lived above the law—and those who needed its protection most, the most defenseless, more vulnerable, were crushed—

"Evidence they can't pretend not to see," Minato said, shoulders hunched, that sweet, pained, fucking adorable twist to his face that he got when he really desperately wanted to make her feel better, but knew better than to try. It made her guilty, unloading all her stupid emotional shit in front of him, but it wasn't like she would cry in front of anyone else.

No one else knew she could cry.

"What kind of evidence?" she'd bawled. "Because the true kind, the irrefutable kind, that's what they use for toilet paper, the shitheads—"
Minato didn't say anything. Offered a fresh pack of tissues. He looked blanker than usual. It meant he was deciding something, probably.

When he turned to her, newly-broad shoulders set straight and chin set hard, she knew he'd decided.

"The public kind," he said. "The kind the other families in power won't let them hide. If we play them off each other, we can use their own suppression systems against them."

Sounded nice. Sounded impossible.

"I can do it," he said. Quiet. Unshakeable. "Something new. —It will work best if we start with something new. Something shocking. Is there something that hasn't been in the papers, that their PR teams don't already have responses for?"

Kushina stared at him. Thought about laughing at him, ignoring him, protecting him. "There is," she said instead. "There's so much."

The smile that set his face, easy and brave, twisted her up inside. "You get the evidence," he said, "I'll make them see it."

And he did. Namikaze Minato, WoF wunderkind, national heart throb and hockey star, law school valedictorian and part-time model, took all the love that just seemed to happen to him and turned it into a weapon. Did all the things he avoided doing—partied, charmed, gossiped; bartered, blackmailed, politicked—until when he opened his mouth, all the big people listened. And when he opened his mouth, Kushina's evidence came out.

She ran the tunnels, broke into homes and offices and straight-up lairs. Haunted the pitch shadows of the glittering elite: gathering, recording, stealing—and, once Minato really began to accumulate enemies—threatening.

(And somehow, against ridiculous odds, surviving. Kushina had her own shadow, and it had nine tails—.)

Minato drew the spotlights, the camera flashes, the greedy ears. Then he spread out the secrets she brought him, made them naked to the glare.

Carefully, of course. Cleverly. She just wanted everyone to know everything. **No more secrets.** They fought about it, sometimes, when he held some things back, manipulated their resources to balance his ever-changing ranks of allies and enemies. To set things up for moves three turns ahead, things he couldn't possibly predict accurately enough to risk what he did.

He was right, annoyingly. Thankfully. Almost always. And when he wasn't, she was there, covering his blind spots, guarding, protecting, until he could fight back and win.

Minato did a lot of winning. Too much winning.

(She'd watched him, the night he was elected Prime Minister. Prayed he wouldn't win.)

She used him. Used Minato, used him like a jeweler's diamond-tipped chisel, chipped away the mortar connecting centuries-set stones. Sprung a leak in the dam.

Lost everything in the flood.

Lost Naruto.
Because of course she wasn't the only one who wanted to use Minato. They figured it out. And they figured out how to get to him: they'd always been a package deal, Minato-and-Kushina, and then they were three, and Minato-Kushina-Naruto, and Naruto didn't have teeth and claws like she had.

Naruto was baby.

*My baby. My baby, they took my baby—*

(They took apart their world; they burned away hers—)

'They' had a name, now. Uchiha. A name not-entirely hated, because Uchiha Sasuke found her son in the dark, stood side-by-side with him there, gave him a reason to fight his way out.

(And Mikoto...)

Sasuke was Naruto's friend. A good friend. That was enough on its own. Extra-special bonus: the gift Sasu-chan didn't know he was giving, when he typed up his "Everyone You Admire is a Sexual Predator or Perhaps a Cold-hearted Serial Murderer With a Hand in Organ Trafficking" report ('A-' for content, she could teach him a thing or two about binding evidence; almighty 'A+' for effort): an enemy of her enemy.

The Uchiha wouldn't have evidence she could find. They were professional like that. Shimura Danzo, on the other hand, would.

It was perfect. Perfect. A decades-old power rivalry, twisted right through the very core of Konoha's police force and justice system, each building a damming case against the other.

Evidence. Oh, would Danzo have evidence.

Deep beneath KPD Central, in tunnels even the Fox needed good reason to trespass, Kushina's lips curled wide.

*I'm coming for you, you corpse,* she vowed, decisively snipping the final wire to disengage his fancy-shmancy security system. Or blow herself up. Always a bit of a gamble.

*Eight seconds. Nine seconds.* Ten. Kushina breathed again. Took four whole steps forward, went still with a gun to her head.

She was still alive, so she took her panic and made it hyper-focused listening, hoping for hints that would tell her who might have caught her, and how she could use that to get un-caught. *Speak,* she willed, steady and ready, fingers twitching with the need to grab that gun.

They spoke. Too soft, too polite, too young: "Are you here to kill Danzo-sama?"

Fury welled. "No," she said. Kindly, because this was a *child.* "I mean, no promises. But I prefer not to kill."

A pause. The cold metal brushing the base of her skull didn't tremble, not even a little.

"Oh," said the voice. "I thought you would kill him."

Were they...disapointed? "...I want his secrets."

"Oh!" A touch of air across the nape of her neck, the press of gun-muzzle disappearing. Kushina kept her hands spread, open, still, just in case.
A whisper of cloth; near-silent footsteps. There, a floating quarter-moon reflecting recessed light: a pale, pale face.

"I'm one of his secrets."

Spilled-ink eyes met hers, limpid above a vacuous smile.

"Do you want me?"

Kushina looked. Looked and looked, until she had a decent guess at what she was seeing. Her teeth met, hard.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, come with me. But we need the other secrets first."

The moon-pale face tilted, features as untelling as they would be in death.

The silence was beyond uncomfortable. Her skin itched. The child—a boy, she decided, Naruto's age, maybe a little younger—tapped the finger on his trigger. That smile again: empty.

"Okay," he said. Lowered the gun cradled so comfortably in his palm. Turned quick and sure, and padded into the dark, blending like wet ink into all the other shadows. Kushina watched, heartbeat bruising. Thought about options.

When two more steps would have taken him past where her eyes could follow, she moved. Quick, quiet, on the balls of her feet.

The child paused. Watched, unblinking, until she was very close. Smiled. Said: "I have a name. It is Sai."

"I'm Kushina," she whispered back, after not-nearly-enough deliberation. "So, Sai. Listen. I'm gonna tell Danzo's secrets. I want to make sure he can't hide. Never ever again. Are you sure—sure, very sure—that you want to go against him? Because I'll understand if you can't. If you don't want to. You can still come with me, when I'm done. But maybe we need to split up until then."

He did the head-tilt again; it looked wrong, like a doll with a faulty neck joint.

"You're Naruto's mother," he said.

Question-reactions crowded the back of her tongue; she didn't feel right about asking any of them. Stuck to nodding instead.

He smiled at her. It was the eeriest smile she'd ever seen.

"I can help you kill Danzo," he said. Very pleasantly, like he quite enjoyed a murder or two on a breezy winter day. She fought to repress the revulsion souring her throat.

Do you want me? and she'd already promised.

"Thanks," she said. "I could use the help."

"Danzo-sama says only the weak avoid death."

He paused, poised on the top half of a step, steady as a dancer on the ball of one foot. Glass-gloss eyes met hers.
"I am not weak."

Whatever he saw on her face meant something to him, because in the half-heartbeat it took her idiot self to get all anguished over the ghosts peeking round the perfect practiced tilt of that painted-happy mouth, he was slinking off into the dark again.

He could've killed her. Should've killed her. Killed her before she finished noticing he was there. So maybe it wasn't as stupid as it probably was to follow this moon-faced foundling into Danzo's depths. Maybe.

She was still alive. She was still alive, so she went. Step after step after step, silent in the shadows.

TuMuT

Minato kind of wished he'd found more corpses. He'd guesed wrong at a turn and lost Naruto's trail; hadn't quite fought off the self-castigating frustration that came with that. He back-tracked to the first dial-in point, as the odds were slightly higher that he would save more time getting back to it than by searching out another hidden telephone.

He found assassins. Lamentably whole-and-healthy assassins.

"You're not the Fox."

"Not even the Mini-Fox, un. You kill him."

And here he was. Ten meters from the entrance to the subway tracks, bare minutes from the dial-in point and his best chance at finding his son, and Akatsuki was in the way.

"He looks annoying," said the first. Dark red hair. Really creepy eyes. Akasuna no...something. Akasuna no Sa—eh, doesn't matter, he uses poison; that matters— "Exactly the type to bleed all over me. You kill him."  

"Uuuughhh," said the other, young—far too young, should be rolling his eyes at a long-suffering parent, not a partner-assassin— "as if I'd blow him up here. Don't trust these walls. Fine. Fine. You herd him into that big tunnel, I make him go bang—"

Bang, agreed Minato, and leapt away from the stinger grenade he'd rolled in the half-second they'd looked at each other instead of at him. Turned, sprinted, reflexively dodged a dart (poisoned? Presumably-). Crashed around the corner he'd snuck around a half minute before—tripped on the concussive blast as the grenade detonated. That was fine. He needed to be down low. Tear gas floated up.

Screamed swears and stinging rubber pellets chased him, ricocheting off too-narrow walls. A sting like concentrated menthol hit his skin, and he breathed shallow, fingers in his scarf, tugging it over the rest of his face, pulling tight. Crawled shoulder-scrapping-wall, tried to estimate paces. Even with the scarf up, he started burning. Eyelids, nostrils, throat, lungs, the tender insides of his lips.

Good. If it burned him, it burned them. Probably wouldn't stop them—These are baby grenades, kid, don't think you'll get away with setting off real ones down those crumbling ratholes— but his next idea might.
When he could breathe a little better, he dared switch from 'frantic worm' to 'unusually graceless gorilla' in gait. And finally—back and knees shrieking protest, like he was old—to a full sprint.

He ran until the risk of hitting traps matched Akatsuki catching up to him in deadliness, then set about trying his hand at the former. These tunnels had a draft, he was on the right side of it, and he was going to be Kushina-levels of stupid and use it. If he could loop around behind his Akatsuki hunters, trap them—it might buy enough time. Had to buy enough time.

Six burning trioxin fuel bars later, the tunnel's walls radiated heat and flame and deadly fumes and Minato was fifty paces around a corner and de-trapping the door that could save him. This one was straightforward: a lock to pick, electrified steel trip-wires waiting on the other side. Nothing else, hopefully. He vaulted the wires, slammed the door behind him, and gave in to the urge to cough until he couldn't breathe. Sucked in air, forced control into the rhythm of the exhale. Checked the map on his arm, tried to trace his path through it—with the next breath, hope came too.

_Dial-in point._

_Go._

_Wait for me, Naruto!_

.ToNoT

.Akatsuki caught Naruto before the Fox did.

There'd been two too close when he hit the main runs, and maybe his desperate signalling had helped, because now there was only one.

Naruto had never been outrun behind the Gates before. Had never failed to lose a tail who wasn't a Nine-tails. This was his turf. He had his own secret passages between everyone else's secret passages—and he couldn't fit in them.

He was too big, too _big_, and this was something he totally should have thought about but hadn't—because running the Gates wasn't something he _thought about_. It was just something he did. Listen, hunt, trap, retreat. Intruders unfortunate enough to meet him made the stupid assumption, over and over again, that he didn't belong here—was too small to survive here.

Maybe it was kind of funny? Everything being opposite. Because he wouldn't survive.

Because he was big.

How much could he have grown, in just a few months? Or maybe it had started way before his parents found him, because while he'd been behind the Gates for fights and sometimes to run messages, he hadn't lived in them.

Not since he won. Not since he was ten-or-twelve, and ended a fight with his knife in the Fox's belly. Sliced up into the middle where the ribs swept up to meet the sternum and the old man looked down at him, grinned like he wasn't maybe-probably gonna die of sepsis, which was a really awful way to die, Naruto had _seen_ it, and Naruto screamed that he'd won because his hands were shaking and he might start crying and if he did, he would die—he would really die, this time —
and the Fox said, "So you have. What do you want?"

That was it, wasn't it? The end. the start of the end. Naruto chose.

He didn't choose the Gates. And now he kind of wanted to laugh, because he was going to die here. School-Sasuke-foster families then Iruka-sensei: and WoF and getting emancipated and getting his own place and going from loser to awesome in hockey and having a home to offer Hinata and Dad and Mom showing up like all his stupidest, sweetest, most horrible childhood dreams—and he was going to die here.

He couldn't tell if it was sweat or blood burning his eyes, and now there were tears, too. So maybe they would wash them out. Make it so he could see again. Fighting blind wasn't gonna win him any seconds.

_Dodge. Get close. Use the wall—_

He'd made a mistake. The lamest, stupidest, most avoidable mistake, the kind of mistake even an idiot like Naruto didn't usually make. Not when his life was on the line—but it was, and he ran for an old hidey-hole no one else could find, and definitely couldn't follow him through. Because if he was gonna take on Akatsuki he was gonna do it on his own terms. The aqueduct tunnels would give him time, and he'd set up his traps, lure them in, pull the trigger. Or maybe just drop from the ceiling and—

—and he couldn't get _in_. Well he could, but he couldn't turn. Both shoulders scraped the wall at the same time and his head hit the ceiling in a belly-crawl and he wasted so much _time_ before his brain managed to get enough past the panic to say: stop. He could get in but he couldn't close the hatch. They'd see where he'd gone. He'd be too slow crawling with his elbows mashed into his ribcage and his legs half-bent. Even if he got past where they could see him, reach him—around the next bend, maybe, so they couldn't see to hit him—it would be so easy. So so easy. A single smoke bomb would do the trick. He'd suffocate. They wouldn't even have to touch him.

He wasn't dying without taking a chunk of Akatsuki with him. So he'd backed up, banging his head and bruising his knees and breathing too loud, and the moment he'd writhed both feet to the floor and wrenched his shoulders free of the pipe, he ran. Ran with a hunter's heavy footfalls echoing closer-closer-closer, fast as his heartbeat. A freaking half-minute of head-start lost, and these Akatsuki freaks knew their _shit_. Knew these tunnels and eased through traps—like Naruto couldn't. Couldn't because he didn't know where his feet were safe to fall, now.

The Gates had changed, and Naruto had changed, and now he was going to die.

Akatsuki caught him.

He'd heard the footsteps thunder too close to hide, heard the _snap_ of attack and dodged low. Something hit him anyway. Stung along his scalp, snaked back as Naruto whirled, gun out.

_A whip. A fucking _whip_. So this was—what had Gaara told him about this guy? Practically immortal, Gaara'd said. Kaku-something.

Naruto shot him. Was pretty sure he hit him, too, and then the gun was flogged from his hand, and he screamed. Charged. Slipped a knife into one hand—switched hands when the first one started bleeding, flayed by the lash. One touch and he couldn't even hold a knife right. He had to get _close_.

He did. He did get close, and went for the hand holding the whip and his heart was beating in his head and it spilled out where that first flick of whip had split his scalp. Poured hot down his face.
Got his shoulder up to take a blow meant to break his jaw, got his knife into something that resisted like muscle, went blank with shock as the force of that blow shuddered through him.

Forget his jaw. Hit like that would break his neck.

*You coming, Fox?*

Knife didn't come free on the first tug, so Naruto left it stuck wherever it was stuck. Shoulder, maybe? He'd aimed for neck—caught the wrist of the fist coming for him, used its momentum to roll himself up its arm. *Breathe in: knife from waistband, click open, listen. Breathe out. Stab up.*

Something hit his ribs as his knife sunk in. Too hard. Too narrow. Not a fist. It hurt. It fucking *hurt.*

This guy should be hurting too, with that stab. There was a grunt, a shift in weight. Just enough of a flinch for Naruto to duck low, scrape under a grab at his scalp, lunge away.

Get his feet under him, skip back. Choke on blood hissing hot from his scalp snorted up through his nose on a gasped inhale, running into his mouth with the exhale—

——*gun get the gun get the gun,* and he needed to *see,* and the pain from his ribs was curling up and around his spine, his throat, his brain. He couldn't think. His eyes were tearing up and he had to see to find the freaking *gun*——

——flicked fire slammed, coiled, seared ankles and calves. Jerked tight.

Kakuzu was laughing. Naruto was falling, legs bound, caught up under him, wrenched.

He got his hands out, palms slamming first and flat. His head still hit, the *crack* of his skull ringing in his ears. There was no air in his lungs. His diaphragm wasn't working. And then: pain.


Whatever this zombie-freak had done to his ribs—feeling it just might kill him. Except he was being reeled in, dragged along cement with casual tugs of a wicked whip, and whatever the zombie-freak planned to do once he'd yanked him close enough—that'd probably kill him first.

Air wheezed in, seeped down a throat squeezed small from pain, and Naruto floated free. Up. Left limbs limp and all their pain with them; looked down at his own body, at an assassin's hand reaching out—telescoping on a long-long-long arm, fingers so slow, so thick and strong and wrapping around Naruto's neck——

Naruto slammed back into his body. Slammed his skull into Kakuzu's face.

One impact: his head and the zombie-freak's head and from every other direction: all the pain he'd disconnected from. Exploding, and he was blind again, and falling again, and he hit the floor and couldn't see or breathe but—but his hands scrabbled, his hips twisted, and he was thrashing away, gaining space, kicking the whip off his ankles. Good hand scraping, scratching, seeking. Because he'd seen it, for a moment. Between blood and tears, he'd seen dull black glint close——*

*Here. Here—*

He could see a—a shadow, looming-reaching-reaping shadow. Fingers closed around something cold. *Find the end. Hit the safety. Slide's forward, up, look, go*——
Bam.

He wasn't ready, wasn't braced, and the recoil made the pistol jump in his hand, and the shadow was still reaching. The grip slipped across a palm slick with blood.

He entire arm was shaking.

Bam! Bam-bam-bam-bam!

The looming shadow wavered, staggered, fell one way. Naruto fell the other. Stared up from somewhere very, very deep, made air go in and out. In and out.

Wanted to escape again. Float. Won't. WON'T.

The infinity he was seeing swirled into cement, became meters instead of eons away. Shuddered. Went still.

Gods, he hurt.

Get up. Get up, everyone's coming, made so much noise, bam-bam-bam-bam-bam so much NOISE and I'm not dying. Not now. Not now. Get up. Get up.

"Still fighting, kid?"

The shadow—the shadow was getting up. Grinning. Dripping.

"Not a half-bad fake-out, that. But you won't fool me twice."

I killed you, Naruto thought, and his stomach swirled with guilt. Even though he really wished it'd worked.

The shadow sighed. "I'm bulletproof, brat. Now that you've broadcast our position, I don't need to bother with keeping things quiet."

Gaara'd warned him. Warned him about the Akastuki freak who shook off bullets like an undead. Wrapped up in forty kilos of kevlar, I reckon, Gaara'd said.

Then again, maybe Naruto hadn't even hit him.

"So," said the shadow. Kakuzu. he'd know it was Kaku-something. Good job, brain. Come on, eyes— "How about you, ah? You bulletproof? Let's find out."

The same trick, the same searing flick of the whip, and Naruto let the gun go rather than have his fingers go with it. Fresh blood warmed his arm.

Kakuzu plucked the gun from from the writhing tip of the whip.

Naruto threw his second-to-last knife.

"Sorry," he mumbled, as Kakuzu fell. Fell, and didn't get up.

Naruto heaved onto hands and knees, crawled far enough to retrieve the gun. Reset the safety. Tucked it back in his jeans.
"I'm sorry," he said again, miserable and swallowing bile, flinching with the sucking of his knife sliding free of a human eye. He wiped it carefully on the not-blood-drenched bit of Kakuzu's scarf. Pulled out the other knives: from the shoulder, from the neck. His stomach heaved. He cleaned all the knives.

"I need these," he explained, and pushed his teeth together really hard so he wouldn't cry. So he wouldn't scream when he forced his knees to brace under him, his hand to press into the wall for balance, his spine to hold up his head, his legs to shudder straight. Hold. *Breathe.* Move.

Naruto left Kakuzu behind, took Kakuzu's shadow with him (with Haku's, with—). Stumbled into the dark.

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Chapter 36

*Mama, Hinata prayed. Mama, I feel you.*

She wondered if what she was feeling was real, then shut her doubts away. Whether it was real or not, she needed it. Mirai needed it.

Mirai slept on her chest. Sunset seeped through half-drawn window shades, lit the floor in narrow bands that didn't reach the bed. On the bed, Mirai and Hinata glowed with light from a less visible star. Light so thick and warm it wrapped round them both over and over and Hinata knew: knew it was Mama's arms.


The way your heart exploded a whole new universe and that entire universe was all just one being. *I love you,* she whispered, again and again and again and again. Sometimes giggling, sometimes weeping. She said it over and over because the words she needed—she didn't know them. Somewhere between mine and hope and everything.

Maybe.

Or just... *I love you (love you love you love you love you—).*

They were so warm, circled in a lightyear of love-light, and nothing could touch them. She whispered thanks, made-in-her-bones-gratitude, but her heart—her heart kept leaping out, out into the dark, pleading.

*Help him,* she asked, *please, please, Mama, help him— I don't want him to be alone—*

She was tired, but she couldn't sleep. She'd slept a lot earlier, entrusting Mirai to Sasuke, returned to her by a beaming Rin. Rin loved Mirai so visibly that Hinata suddenly loved Rin, but then Rin made a doctor come.

She made it as safe as possible. Dr. Shizune was very kind. Gentle. Considerate. Careful. Trusted by people Hinata trusted. But she had—she had to make sure Hinata wouldn't get an infection. Wouldn't need stitches. Wouldn't bleed to death.

Hinata fought the memories as hard as she could. They haunted each touch. She didn't win. Dr. Shizune's examination ended, and Hinata shook until they brought Mirai back—Kakashi held her, and she was wide awake, and had completed her first poop, and squinted up her whole face to protest the whole world with a wail that Hinata knew meant she understood.

They'd made it. They'd made it, both of them, and now, real or not, they were not alone. They were in their own little fortress of invisible light.

*Naruto, too, Mama,* Hinata begged with her heart. Mirai sighed in her sleep. Love cradled closer, like a promise, like light.

ToHoT
Minato found footprints. Not many, and not whole prints—scuffled impressions of the front left of a boot. Naruto's boot, which he'd carefully removed the price tags from before giving because price tags that big made Naruto really uncomfortable—really cool boots, each tread a tiny, stylized skull.

Smeared onto concrete in blood on a day like this, those little skulls really didn't seem cool anymore.

At least there was a good chance it wasn't Naruto's blood. That corpse he'd just found had plenty of its own. It wasn't mutilated, like Hidan—like the one the Fox caught. Which meant—which meant—

*Find him,* he thought, forcing back thoughts and fears and half-digested protein bar. That would only make him slow and vulnerable and useless. *Naruto. Find Naruto. Find Naruto. Find Naruto.*

As if the miracle-plus-aftermath of the past five months never happened.

But it did. It *did.* He would go the way the footprints went, prints he knew because he found Naruto.

*Find him again, Minato,* he yelled at the suppressed chaos and panic that filled the places reasonable, helpful thoughts were supposed to fill. *You found him once, you'll find him again,*

*and again,*

*and again—*

As much as it takes.

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odMbo

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"You sent Akatsuki to protect Sasuke. Protect."

Fugaku frowned at his son. It was a surprise, a good surprise, that Itachi had approached him. It was not a surprise that his son's understanding and motives were skewed.

Years of frustration poked at the forceful barrier of calm in his mind, and the words he'd said many times—too many times, too many useless times—slipped over his tongue even as he thought: no. No, we do not need this fight again.

"Do not concern yourself with Sasuke."

Before, there would have been blankness. Terrifying blankness, a head bowed in affected acceptance, hatred twisting like venomous eels under the surface of Itachi's black irises.

This time, Itachi's face changed.

"I don't have time for this," Itachi said. Quiet, controlled, no hidden anger—it was right there, bared in the set of his mouth, in the bitten edges of those words. "Tell me what you told your assassins."
"My elite guards accepted an assignment to find and shield Sasuke. Why you seek to obstruct this, of all things, I cannot fathom."

"Akatsuki, Father. You hired Akatsuki. You presume to command the loyalty of mercenaries whose agenda does not match your own—"

"And what do you know of Akatsuki's agenda, son?"

The pallor of Itachi's face reflected fluorescent light, small shadows harrowed and haunted. "More than you," he said.

Fugaku set his jaw, seeking calm. Calm. He could not afford the fear sucking oxygen from the steady protective burn of anger.

"I will always concern myself with Sasuke," Itachi said quietly. "With or without more information, I will go. Do not send me blind. Please."

_I do not want to lose my son again_, Fugaku thought. _I do know want to lose my sons._

He tapped a password into his phone, two more passwords into the Akatsuki's preferred encrypted messaging app. Felt his fingers tighten reflexively, making it difficult for Itachi to accept it even as he offered it.

"You have five minutes."

The relief on Itachi's face made his son look young again.

"Thank you, Father."

Fugaku turned away, uncertain beneath the weight of the tempest unfurling around and within him.

Some storms should not be held back.

"Itachi," he called, when his phone was back in his pocket, and his child was reaching for the door, a man again. A better man than his father. It took some time to let his mouth soften enough to speak. "You are a good brother."

Itachi looked back at him, a child.

The door closed. No righteous anger remained to warm the pit in Fugaku's chest. There was weakness, and fear, and he was cold.

_Be safe, child_, he asked. Of whom, about which child—he could not answer, so he pretended he'd never asked.

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ViTiV

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Kushina followed her silent-stepping doll-shadow-guide all the way to Danzo's office, leaving four unconscious guards behind. Sai had warned of each one in advance, then stood back, uncaring, not helping, as she took them out. Hog-tied them with clothesline and zip-ties. Once they were bound, he would produce a syringe from somewhere within his scant black uniform (he must be cold, so so cold, and so accustomed to being cold—) and inject right into the joint of the neck.
"You're not killing them, are you?" she'd demanded, reaching out to stop him. The second time.
The first time, it happened so fast, his moves so economical and precise, that she didn't see what
he'd done until after he'd done it. And even then, she hadn't been sure. She'd watched far more
carefully, the next time.

"Do you fear death?" he asked instead of answering. Punk. Dangerous, creepy, gutsy little punk.

"Yep," she'd said. "Don't wanna die. Don't intend to."

He did the head-tilt. "I did not do anything to you," he said. Doubtfully, like she might be too dense
to have noticed if he had.

"And you won't," she instructed. "But I pretty purposefully knocked those guys out without killing
them. You should try it sometime."

"Do you want to fight them again?"

"No. That's why I tied—you know what, we don't have time. Next?"

He moved forward obligingly, but had one more inflectionless comment to add.

"If you don't want to fight them, and you don't want to kill them, you could perhaps cut their
hamstrings. They will not stay tied up, of course."

Of course.

The last two guards were in well-lit corridors, posted near a bullet-proof door. Sai opened it once
they were done, muscles roping thin arms.

He led her into Danzo's office. Where Danzo waited.

"You have completed your task well," the Nasty-Creep-of-all-Creeps-aka-Shimura-Danzo
commended. Her little guide stood very straight. "Return to your post."

And so creepy-gutsy-do-you-want-me Sai, having led her successfully into the mouth of the trap,
abandoned her to it.

"Little Kushina," Danzo said. He looked like he might feel happy. The thought of Shimura Danzo
experiencing any emotion approaching happiness sent a mega-sized chill up her spine. "Mito's
disgusting little secret. The harm you have done to honorable Hashirama's city echoes the dishonor
of your existence."

Kushina cocked an eyebrow at him. "Know about that, do you? Clever you. Any other juicy secrets
you feel like monologuing on?"

"Yes, your lack of respect fits you," he said coldly. "Tell me, bastard child, whose secrets you came
to thieve?"

Kushina helped herself to a chair, after brushing imaginary dust from it with extra disdain. "I mean,
there aren't many I couldn't use, one way or another. But I do have a specific target in mind today."

Danzo peered at her with his one eye, far too keen for one so vile. "The Fox, perhaps? It is far too
too late for your little Naruto, you know. The little monster has returned to its master."

She took the rage she wanted to spew and crushed it between her molars. Skewered him with
determination-fired-through-the-eye.
"I'm going to bring down the Uchiha."

He looked her over in thoughtful silence, and if she had to put a name to the judgment he settled on—she'd say approval.

It made her scalp itch.

"So impudent," he said. Softly, consideringly. "So crude. So bold. The work I have given decades to—and you seek to take my victory as your own. Had you not survived my assassination attempts, I would consider you too stupid to justify the problems rippling from your existence. And yet, we have this one goal in common. Perhaps you could be of use, for a little while longer..."

"Do you still believe," she asked, sort of morbidly fascinated, "that you are 'saving' Konoha?"

He smiled. "I do not need to believe, girl. I do. I do what no other can do."

"Steal children?"

He turned the sleeve of his crippled arm. Just a little. Just enough for her to see the tip of the silencer on the gun hidden there. Just enough for it to point unerringly at her chest.

She kept on looking him in his creepy beetle-eye. "You make children disappear," she said, her own personal hell-fires burning the words.

"Not all children can or should be saved," he said. Serene in the poison he breathed. "Every beautiful thing has a terribly ugly cost. Most are too foolish to move beyond the moral distractions of cost to see clearly the limited absolute value of each human life. There is a fascinating sentimentality placed on the relative shortness of a life—as if having been born later makes one somehow more precious. As if every child is wanted, cared for, loved. Truly fascinating, the deceptions our sentiments make one prone to. In reality, there always children who are not missed."

"Children are precious."

"Objectively, yes," he agreed. The gun was still pointed at her chest. "Moldability, adaptability, potential—these are objective strengths of young humans." He looked so thoughtful, so reasonable. "Truly something to be protected. To be used. To be used effectively, the oversight of experience, of one whose greater worth has been proved through survival, must be applied. Survival is an objective measure of worth." He shifted the gun a little higher.

Kushina stared down the barrel, determined to keep living even if that bullet went right through her head. (She'd make a damn fine ghost, if her skull was blasted into too many pieces to break his with—.)

"I offer a deal," he said, that scummy approval of his smearing itself all over her skin again. "I'll give you Uchiha Madara. Remove him from this game, and you will continue to play within it."

Kushina laughed. The scratchy kind that hurt her throat.

"Is that what you think I do? Play assassin?"

"Do you have some other name for it, perhaps? Something more piously framed, lest it offend your sensibilities?"

"Oh, I have another name for assassin," she said coldly. She stared hate into his eye. "Murderer."
"Ah. And how does it feel, to be the mother of a murderer?"

"I wouldn't know," she said. Was careful not to look at the flicker of too-much shadow emerging from the wall behind him. Made sure her own shifting registered as a bigger threat. "I am the mother of a soldier." *In a war he didn't choose and never, ever, ever deserved.*

"Call it what you like," he said, amused. "I do not abuse the illusion that giving a different name changes objective value."

Kushina narrowed her eyes at him. "Recruit me or kill me, that what this is?"

"You came to me, my dear. Recruit you—to follow me? An--allowably amusing—impossibility. I will consider a temporary alliance, for our mutual benefit. After which our regular contest for survival will naturally continue."

Kushina looked hard. Read the story of his face, the crippled soul in the eye, the imagined maggoty hole where a heart should be. Swallowed cold fear and burning fury.

The shadow behind Danzo flowed closer, closer.

Kushina chose.

"Do what you want with Konoha," she said, resigned. Tension bled from her face. She reached out slowly, obviously, until he could easily accept her proffered hand. "I want Madara."

He watched her. Cradled the arm with the gun like he'd remembered to keep it crippled again. She wanted blood, and that pleased him.

"How fitting," he mused. "That you—well. Hashirama haunts him, you see. Or shall I say—he haunts Hashirama?"

"Can't resist the cryptic crap, huh?" she asked—but she knew. She knew. *Why thank you, Shimura-san.* She took his hand—

—kicked the desk up, *hard*, bracing back with all her weight as it smashed, trapped the firing gun against his chest. From behind, the shadow descended.

The hand in Kushina's death-grip slackened, slumped sickly toward her, its arm shredded by the bullet he meant for her. The shadow-named-Sai leapt free of his master's back, and Danzo toppled, jaw hanging, eye wide and rolling, spine cut through at the neck. Kushina let go of the hand just in time to avoid finishing its amputation.

Had her taser out, got her back to the wall, eyes shifting from Sai to the door and back.

"I said I would help you," said Sai—confused, almost-helpless, mostly blank. He'd already checked the corpse. Stabbed it a few extra times. For insurance, or—just to make that eye stop rolling, maybe.

The way he was watching her—she had to hold that gaze. So she just listened. Listened really hard for more betrayal. This was Danzo's personal sphere of influence she was blowing up, after all.

"I am not weak," said Sai, and did that—that thing he probably thought was smiling.

"Okay," she said. "Okay, Sai."

When standing there with all her senses on screaming hyper-alert really didn't seem to be
accomplishing anything, she made her breath fall even. Let her muscles ease loose. Made her brain give back the prioritized list of probable highly-incriminating-document hiding spots she’d created while chatting with Danzo.

"You gonna stab me if I go after those secrets?"

"No," her guide said, almost-confused. "Why would I want to kill you?"

*Why did you kill the man who most likely raised you?* Danzo deserved it. He really really did. But this kid...in Kushina's long history with messed-up kids, she doubted she'd met one this far up the "yeah that's really screwed up" charts.

Not even Gaara (maybe Naruto).

"Just not sure you'd have any reason not to," she said. "But I'd really rather you didn't. And even if you do, I want to thank you first. For not letting him—" she conscientiously avoided looking at what had become of Danzo—" get me."

He accepted this in silence, and she began her search. After a bit of him watching her tap walls and floorboards and wrestle with the "decorative" fake potted tree apparently for fun, he went to the desk and expertly keyed open three secret safes built into the walls. This involved cutting off Danzo's mostly-blown off arm and using the fingers to get past finger-print scanners, but she tried not to watch that part.

She kept waiting for someone to come. And someone did, eventually. Another child-sized shadow, wearing sunglasses in the dark, short hair making tight coiled curls that reminded her of Naruto's friend Shino. This new shadow shifted uncomfortably around her, and stared for a long moment at Danzo's corpse. Kicked it once, recoiled like he'd kicked himself. Exchanged some kind of rapid-fire sign-language with Sai, fingers trembling, then set about helping him open a fourth compartment they'd been struggling with.

Kushina went back to stuffing her backpack with secrets. Not that she was going to take the time to look, but somewhere on these CDs, mini-disks, SDHC memory cards, flash-drives, freaking floppy disks had to be something she could use. There weren't many paper files, and those she stopped to rifle through; taking pictures of some, stashing what she thought she could carry into her quickly-filling bag.

It would work. It had to work. So long as she didn't somehow leave what was most important behind.

When she couldn't think of anywhere else to look, when her silent companions stopped offering handfuls of digital memory devices, she looked at them, shrugged, and headed for the door.

They came out after her, flanked her.

She smelled gasoline. Unease seeped in sweat down her spine.

As they neared the exit that would take them into a more shared Gates thoroughfare, three other not-grown shadows joined them. Like Sai and the maybe-Aburame, they had packs of their own. Something passed between them, in silence and hand-signals, and then Sai said: "We will need to run."

The child who'd kicked Danzo's corpse held up a fire-starter.

"Stop!—" cried Kushina, and wanted to recoil when five very pale, very blank faces tilted to hers.
"We need this place for evidence," she said.

The one with the fire-starter clicked it on—jammed the little switch, so it couldn't click off.

"I believe the purpose of your pack is to carry evidence," Sai said.

"There's more, and Danzo's body—" they didn't move much, but something about four out of five stances turned hostile, and her mouth snapped shut. She pulled in breath through her nose. *Definitely gasoline.* "We're beneath the city," she pleaded. "Look, this could get really out of control, so many people could be hurt—"

"The other blast doors are sealed," said one of the children. Male or female? She couldn't tell. Hair as pale as their face. "The structural integrity of this compound is designed to withstand multiple explosions. Oxygen will run out. The fire will die. Any damage will be contained within."

*Oxygen will run out.* Factual, toneless, in a thin, high voice. Kushina's fists clenched.

"There are people here," she whispered. They'd passed two of them—guards she'd incapacitated and hobbled with zip-ties, only for Sai to inject them with whatever it was he jabbed in their necks. She was sure she'd seen one breathing, and she'd been so relieved—

"We'll burn them away, and they'll never touch us again," said the fourth of the shadow-children. Her voice was not flat. She held the hand of the fifth child, their knuckles knotted white.

"Are there—any other children?" Kushina pleaded. "Anyone who—even if they fought us—"

Fives sets of eyes flickered, met, stared forward again. Sai spoke. "They are gone."

"I don't want to do this," Kushina whispered. "Not like this. I'll help you catch the people who hurt you, make sure they get punished—"

Something set, hard and horrible, in the third child's almost-blank face. Kushina's stomach flipped, horror pouring out in another plea to stop—his arm telescoped back, the fire-starter flew free.

Three children were already slipping around the door; he disappeared after them. Sai didn't move. Looked at her, eyes big and black and blank.

Fire exploded behind them. "Come on," gritted Kushina. Gripped the small, cold hand that slipped into hers. Whipped them both around the closing edge of the door.

Half a second through and small hands had it slammed shut behind them. There was a hiss of air as it sealed.

"Well," said Kushina. Five blank faces blinked up at her. She reeled: pity, horror, guilt, hate. Turned and spat that last one at the door.

Her spittle sizzled. "Burn in hell," she said, by way of paying final respects. Set her shoulders straight beneath the secrets they bore. Turned to five human ones, gazing up at her like deadly brainwashed puppies.

Well then.

"You guys hungry?"
Behind the Gates, Sasuke wasn't Sasuke. There was no space to be scared, weak, young, lost, dependent—not down here. So he wasn't.

He scared himself sometimes, the way he fit into the dark. He'd never been in the fights that left bodies in tunnels they'd only be recovered from if someone else wanted to use that space and didn't want to deal with the smell. Cage fights were different. They felt life-or-death, were meant to feel that way—but they weren't, not really. Dead fighters didn't make money. Managers didn't like it when their investments ended in a body-bag.

Outside of the cage, war raged. An old war, quiet, tired. Vicious. Fought with cruel human creativity and raw animal instinct. Up above, it was about power and influence and public perception and control—but down here, down here it was *don't touch mine, and I'm taking yours.*

Naruto hated it. Naruto was supposed to take and take and take, had the training and the skill and the back-up to be pretty near untouchable, had motivation, justification, reason—everything, everything but whatever it was that made most humans capable of looking at other humans and seeing life less valid than their own.

Sasuke did not have this struggle. Other people rarely felt real to him. (When he was little, he cried whenever a character on his mother's TV dramas cried, and she'd kissed him for it—.) People felt like obstacles. He'd never killed; he knew he could.

If Naruto didn't kill, he'd die. Die behind the Gates he'd fought so hard to escape.

And maybe it wasn't that Sasuke wasn't Sasuke down here. Maybe it was the opposite. Because something woke in him, when he dodged a trap or set one; when he ran the passages fast and sure so no one could ever catch him. He *wanted* to fight. Wanted to know who would win and who would die. Wanted the sensation adrenaline like a billion volts of raw current threading his veins, no-fear-no-hesitation just freedom and lightning and—

_What was that what was—_

Shooting. Someone was shooting. Sounded maybe—two corridors away, but sound echoed strangely in these tunnels, and the dry pops of gunfire pounded his ears long after their origin sound had stopped.

_Naruto. Got to be Naruto. Need_*— running into a fight you couldn't see was a deeply stupid idea—*need to breathe.* Doubly so behind the Gates, exponentially so when guns/Naruto/Akatsuki were involved. *Need to think.*

So: he wasn't going to run. He was going to come in strategically, with enough of a handle on the situation to let Naruto recognize him before reflexively killing him, and at a moment when whomever Naruto was fighting wouldn't take the opening to get rid of one or both of them.

_If he's—HE'S ALIVE NARUTO IS ALWAYS_*

"Well this is convenient."

Instinct had Sasuke turning before his still-ringing ears registered that someone was speaking, but all he saw was shadow. Very tall shadow.
"'Catch the mini-fox', they said. 'And deal with the original' they said. 'Oi, Kisame, babysit the baby Uchiha while you're at it,' got tacked on there for fun, but hey, who's going to get employee of the month? Hoshigaki Kisame, that's who. I'll pop round to see if the Zombie Bros have botched things as badly as it sounds like they have, finish up mini-fox 'cause it sounds like they haven't, and be right back here to protect your ass. Sit tight."

Sasuke stepped into the center of the corridor, between Naruto and Hoshigaki Kisame. Knew how stupid he was being. Shifted the knife in his hand.

"No."

"Haha. Okay, kid." And the man stepped forward like he was going to walk right through him.

"I'll fight you."

"Sure you will, and kudos for not peeing your pants and all, but a) I don't waste time and b) that doesn't mesh with the 'protect the baby Uchiha' thing all that well—'baby' being you, in case you're feeling too big and bad to figure it out. Come on, kid, out of the way. Lots of baddies running around, you're gonna get blasted in the crossfire, please have the modicum of intelligence required to figure this out."

Be alive, Naruto, be alive, be alive— "No."

"Stupid AND stubborn. Aren't you a blessing? Ah well—"

Sasuke dodged the dart flicked at him. Rolled, came up just short of grabbing range but hopefully too close for easy clubbing distance. One head-blow from the metal bat slung casually over Hoshigaki's shoulder would take him out, easy. And that was all the thinking he had time to do, because the kick he launched off the wall to aim at the hand holding the bat was blocked and then he was landing, blocking, blocking, shifting just out from under the weight of each massive blow and into answering attacks with electricity shrieking through him and oh this guy was good. So fast, probably as fast as Sasuke but he wasn't taking him seriously yet and when he did Sasuke was screwed but right now he felt his face stretching. Teeth bared—grinning—Naruto—but no time to think, just block-blow-balance and he was pretty sure his opponent was laughing. Let him laugh. As long as he was underestimating Sasuke, he wasn't bashing up Naruto. He caught a fist, let its momentum push him back, kept going. Breathed in. The bat was on the floor; the assassin was grinning at him, looking genuinely pleased. Breathed out. Rushed. Used the wall again, but spun, making his kick come from a hopefully-surprise angle; punching this guy did about as much damage as punching a wall, meaning only Sasuke seemed to feel it, and he could barely feel his arms from attempting it (and all that blocking—block—). The kick landed, and its victim...chortled. Sasuke landed on his hands, vaulted back to his feet. Again. Took the knife from his teeth.

Launched forward again, the flat of the blade scraping along the wall, making sparks—good, he's watching—. He was in the air, his heel slamming into Hoshigaki's chin. He saw himself connecting—his opponent dropping—coming down with him, landing heavy on his chest, sweeping in with the knife—

He didn't connect. Huge hands wrapped around his right ankle, his left heel. He twisted, vision blurring, twisting—twisting— the hands on his legs hoisted high. His head wasn't slamming into the ground. There was a booted shin in front of his face: helpless, furious, he stabbed it.

Aim higher, he thought. Jerked the knife out. Femoral artery—

"And Father couldn't understand my objections to his choice of bodyguards," cut dead-pan through Hoshigaki's insufferable chuckling and Sasuke's furious hissing, and Sasuke's blade was clicked
back into its handle and shoved guiltily up his coat sleeve before his brain was done registering who was speaking.

"Itachi!" cried Hoshigaki, and dropped Sasuke, sounding delighted.

"If he landed on his knife—"

"Oh? He had a knife?" And rough hands were hauling him up, brushing him off. The man winked at him. Gave him a pat on the head, then a pat on the back that sent him staggering into his brother.

Should've gone for the femoral artery, Sasuke thought, with great regret.

"See? I did good! No blood, guts all on the inside, ten fingers and judging by how it feels to be on the end of them I'm willing to bet all ten toes are in there too!"

At the same time, Itachi's hands were flying over him, touching, pressing, counting. "Are you bleeding? Do you feel sharp pain anywhere? Have you hit your head—"

Sasuke shoved him away. "Nothing's wrong. Not with me. Aniki—Na—" he shot a look over his shoulder at the looming, entirely-too-happy giant he'd been fighting, lowered his voice to barely a whisper—"Naruto—"

"He's not there," Itachi said, not at all helpful. But he was still talking, watching Hoshigaki now, face was smooth and dangerous. "Hidan and Kakuzu are dead. I passed both bodies on my way here. Sasori is critically wounded. Deidara has disappeared."

If Hoshigaki was at all upset over the reported deaths of his partners, he didn't show it.

"Yeah, I guessed they'd fucked up," he said blithely. "Mini-fox got 'em, huh? Kid's a menace!" and he laughed like he'd said something funny. "Hey, so, shall we ditch junior? Make this the second date?"

Sasuke's mouth did something strange where it tried to make a word but his brain supplied no word to make. No one noticed because Itachi was saying: "No. And that would require the historical reality of a first date."

"Oof, cold!" chortled Hoshigaki, looking not in the least bit chilled by Itachi's death glare. "Well I thought it was the best first non-date ever. But if you want to take that as a challenge—"

"Kisame," said Itachi, and his voice actually had inflection—cracked open just enough to show he was tired, and the way he said that name was like—like—"you have dead teammates, injured and missing teammates, and while I certainly have no qualms with certain of your contract terms remaining unfulfilled—I am not convinced that you feel the same."

"Unfulfilled? Who's unfulfilled?" asked Kisame, starting out wounded and ending on a leer. "You're here for your kid brother—yeah I knew he was yours, that's why I volunteered to babysit, by the way—so obviously he's gonna be protected. And you said the fox brat's gone, and he killed four of our guys so who am I to take him on alone? I'd ask you along hunting him because honestly? Great date, but something tells me that wouldn't earn me too many points and I gotta earn that second date, so. Yeah. Where d'you wanna go next? I'll cover your back."

Had Sasuke's knife even gone through that boot? He really hoped it had. Hoped the thug was bleeding out down there. He looked really closely, hoping to see red pooling up over the rim of the boot.
No such luck. *The artery*, he mourned. Why didn't I get the artery?

Itachi was already walking. So was Sasuke, his brother's crab-claw fingers clamped around one wrist. "Naruto," Sasuke said, "We need—"

"No," hissed Itachi. And then, as Sasuke gathered courage to start a fight he couldn't win, turned just enough to catch Sasuke's eyes with his own. "Naruto's family is looking for and after him. I am looking after mine."

There was nothing else to say. Not for Sasuke and Itachi. Hoshi-freaking-gaki Kisame had plenty to say.

And Itachi didn't seem to mind.

Fine. Itachi wanted to allow the quality of the very air he breathed to sink to unprecedented levels—let him. Sasuke could wait. As Itachi tested the waters of wanton stupidity for the first(?) time, Sasuke would save himself and his best friend and get the hell gone.

VvUvV

.

Getting his pack out of the aqueduct pipe he'd hidden it in was painful enough to kill the semi-hopeful idea of hiding in them himself. No one was following him right now, and his head was still bleeding, which was one of those problems that spirals really fast into something that can't fixed.

First he had to hide. Ribs made the pipes a no-go, so off he went, shuffling towards Plan A.

Plan A was—UnHome. The place he grew up in. Trained in. Lived in. Akatsuki-wouldn't-get-him in.

Fought almost-free from.

It took a long time. How long? Shouldn't be this long. He had to lean on the wall—and that left marks, sometimes, rusty bleeding-Naruto-was-here smudges, should be avoided. *Here I am, come kill me*, his tracks scrawled out behind him. He'd got through and re-set one Gate. Should slow 'em down. Two more—fuck. Ow. Blink until he could see again, push off the wall, fill up with oxygen, keep going. Two more Gates, and—and he could rest. A little rest.

One Akatsuki. One, and this was what was left of him, and he hadn't come down here with big grand dreams of surviving but this? He could do better than this.

Had to.

They wanted the Fox. *Not gonna get him.* Now that felt true, cheered him up, made his lips curl. He could take at least one more with him.

The one coming now.

Bracing between the walls to go up them hurt so hard he had to stop breathing at all or he'd breathe too hard, too loud. He was up. Shoved-rolled onto the gap between false wall and ceiling—he couldn't fit in the passageway between the wall and the raw rock behind it, like he used to, but he could balance on top of it. He eased the cop's gun from beneath his coat, steadied it on gritty
cement and shaking hands.

Now if his scarf would sop up just a bit more blood—stop it from dripping down, they wouldn't see it unless they shone light on it, but anyone paying half attention could smell it—he had to go first. Shoot first.

The footsteps coming his way were wrong. Trying to be quiet, but heel-toe—who made that mistake? And hurrying and hesitant and familiar.

No.

No.

He let Namikaze Minato walk right past him. Felt too much all at once, everything coiling up in the cracking pain of pressure on broken ribs. He was so angry. And so hurt. And so scared.

Dad was here. Dad was gonna to get himself killed.

He should call out first, but his throat had turned into a fist with words squeezed to death inside it. So he just dropped. Dad whirled, hand pulling something from his pocket, and then his narrowed eyes went wide, wide, wide.

Naruto just...stood. Bled. This cannot be good, he thought, and tried to talk but it didn't work and then he remembered he was holding (pointing) the gun and sucked in a swear, then stuffed it fast as he could under his coat.

"Naruto," said Dad, in a way that made his name hurt like his ribs hurt. His hands were up. Like he was surrendering. Then the he was closing the distance between them, looking so fucking relieved and even more afraid, and still calling his name.

"This way," said Naruto, making a decision, proud he got the words out even if they came out mangled. Get him where they can't get him. Two more Gates—twisted away from arms that wanted to hold him. Anger grew out of fear, and cleared his head a little, helped him move faster than he was before. Couldn't breathe deep enough to match it though. Made it two hundred steps before the wall was the only thing holding him up again.


The second Gate was close. He had to keep it together long enough to get through that. Then one more. "Okay," he whispered. Closing his eyes made it easier not to flinch when hands touched him. Touched above his face, feather-light, trying to find the source of the blood. There was a curse, quiet and vehement, and it was the first thing Dad had done that made sense. Then fingers were digging under the straps of Naruto's backpack, easing it off his shoulders, and Naruto started to protest but—it helped. It helped with his ribs, and it should help him move a little faster.

Needed to go faster.

"Thanks," he said. Tried to say. Didn't hear it pass his lips.

"Drink this," Dad said, and Naruto did. The water helped too. Dad started to lift his arm up, maybe to pull it over his shoulders, and the shriek of Naruto's ribs almost came out of his mouth.

He opened his eyes and got out of arm's reach again. Didn't want to see Dad's face.
"I'm good," he said, after enough heartbeats to be sure something else wasn't going to come out instead. "You?"

He didn't wait for an answer. Felt Dad pause. Follow, catch up, stay too close. Dad was a little loud—made it hard to listen. But they'd passed the first Gate, and there—there was the second.

Naruto shook off the way everything bent and tilted, forced focus into his fingers as he worked through the passcodes that would give him a few seconds to disengage the traps. Got through those, too, and then he was in, Dad stepping carefully through behind him, and half-a-heartbeat left to close the door.

_Just one more._

When they reached it, Dad was holding him. Fingers a vice around his elbow, and it took a moment to un-lean, get his head balanced on his neck again, and his heart was beating too fast and making more blood bubble down his face.

*Please, Fox,* he whispered, with all the stupid hope he'd stuff over his dread every time he came through this door, *please, if...please, if you come. Please, don't hurt him.*

He opened the door.

Dark. Quiet. Empty. He choked. It was the relief billowing up that got him, and he kept gasping and gagging until he got the door closed, and then he looked at Dad, a pale floating face with broken eyes in the darkness.

They were—for a little while, they were safe.

"Dad," he said, when he could breathe. Hands were on him again. Helping him. Holding him up. One hand. The other was—fumbling for something, turning it on—a flashlight—

Naruto's corner lit up just as he stumbled into it. Collapsed, vision already gone, pain swallowing him up and if he let it—he'd stop feeling it.

For a little while.

"This is where I was," he said, trying to remember why that was important, and then he went with the dark.
Dawn broke beautiful.

Purple almost-light caught on untouched snow, reflected and radiated, keeping the black of pre-dawn away. Next came deep-deep blue, then orange, and the retreating clouds stained red. Umino Iruka gave up on his toes and cracked open his sixth set of hand warmers and felt, in the chill-beyond-wind prickling at his neck, the attention of his watchers.

He was starting to think he'd see the sun itself. Had stopped praying his final prayers with every other thought. If they were going to shoot him or club him or whatever murder method was currently in vogue, they would have already. Maybe they held back because it would be hard to hide blood on this pristine sheet of snow. Maybe they'd believed him.

The west half of Konoha stretched out before him, bits of sunrise catching in small bursts on dark windows as streetlights winked out.

The unmarked bump of Haku's grave turned pink and gold; the sun cleared the horizon.

And what's special about this place, Naruto? Humoring. He'd been humoring his newly favorite student. Enjoying the beauty of this hidden bit of Memorial park, despite the sweat soaking his collar. It's a grave, Naruto had (maybe) said. Had looked sideways at him. I killed my friend and hid him here. They were going to throw him away but I begged—Something like that. He couldn't remember the exact words, just that they were words that had made all of Iruka's small hairs stand on end, his heart speed up, the fear he'd worked so hard to replace with love crawl back up his throat—Ahaa! Got you sensei! You know I didn't kill anyone! and he'd been so grateful to have an excuse to laugh. To pretend he didn't see the tears Naruto scrubbed from his eyes. The blood he licked from a bitten-through lip.

When Iruka read Uchiha Sasuke's post, this was what caught him, choked him: not the allegations of political blackmail or money laundering or child trafficking, but the link on the satellite map of the hill a boy name Haku lay buried on.

He knew that hill.

He came before the roads were cleared. Posted selfies of himself on his skis with peppy captions about #epicsnowday and #skikonoha and a GPS check-in on all of his social media accounts in case he didn't come back and someone needed to find him. Because he'd fallen asleep, after clicking that link, and dreamed that he watched as shadowy figures with scarred faces dug up a bony body with long black hair and filled the grave with another boy instead, and when Iruka down to see who they'd put there, Naruto's dead eyes stared up at him.

He knew that hill.

All of Iruka's friends were right. He was an idiot. An overly reactive, overly emotional, overly attached idiot, but he would—was a little surprised, actually, to find out how willingly—rather die than let evidence that could help free Naruto be destroyed, the grave of a child desecrated. There was something sacred here, something that helped an heir to terror choose to be better, and he wasn't going to let that crumble to more secrets and empty rubble.

Iruka's friends were right, but Iruka wasn't wrong. The watchers turned up not quite an hour after he did, boots squeaking through fresh snow, swearing and smoking, metal tools for breaking frozen earth clanging. Iruka didn't wait until he could see them. Hopefully, this meant they couldn't see him, either.
He made good use of his take-no-crap teacher voice, asked flat and dry and clear if they had come to join Haku. "Dig your own graves if you like," he said. "You're not touching this one."

More swearing; a startled laugh. A note of uncertainty. Iruka smiled to himself.

"You some kind of ghost?" Mocking. Like an insecure middle-school bully.

"One with nine tails," agreed Iruka. Breathed, disbelieving, as they paused, went still, backed off.

They didn't retreat all the way; he saw the smoke from their cigarettes rising from the bottom of the hill. Had been waiting for the regroup, the reinforcements, the renewed orders that would send three thugs charging up to the hill to kill him. The threat of the Kyuubi was only a threat. And while he wasn't defenseless, he wasn't stupid; his chances of survival went up the faster he ran.

Iruka didn't run. He watched the sun rise, and prayed not to die, and to have a not-terrible afterlife if he did die—and for the soul of the boy for whom he kept vigil—the one in the ground; the one in his heart.

Someone new was coming. He heard the car, then saw it, an SUV worth more than he could make in five years.

Please don't make me a cockroach in my next life, Iruka prayed. Maybe something wild and free, like a stingray, or a dolphin—but most animals are fine by me, better than humans anyway—

He started a live video on his phone. If he was going to die defending the kids screwed over by the rich and corrupt, he was going to make sure there were witnesses to finish what he couldn't.

"So I'm here at one of the spots Uchiha Sasuke posted coordinates to," he said. Two people were watching already; he was surprised, it was so early—"beautiful sunrise, yeah? But I'm here because he said a dead kid is buried here. I think he's probably right. The guys who showed up with a jackhammer also seem think he was right." Iruka took his eyes off the the figures getting out of the SUV—too far away, too muffled in heavy winter clothes, way down there at the base of the hill, to make out—he didn't see any guns, though. Not yet. "So I've been standing here, and they've been skulking over behind the trees down there—yeah, we can't see them from here, hopefully won't see them at all. But those might be reinforcements coming." Ten viewers. Iruka switched cameras.

"I mean, I don't want to jump to any conclusions here, but that's not the press. Where is the press, by the way? You'd think they'd be all over these tips. So I don't know—but how many reasons are there to be here? If there's nothing—no one—hidden here, well, I've seen a great last sunrise. But, uh, if there is something—I can think of a few people who would be very, very, very interested in keeping it—keeping it—hidden, sorry, guys, they're getting close, I'm nervous and I know why I'm here but I'm still—Sarutobi-sama?"

Forty-six viewers. It was beyond his immediate friends list now. And, yes, that did seem to be the Honorable (honorable? Please—please be the hero I believed of you—) Sarutobi Hiruzen climbing the hill. With his son, whom Iruka had met once, at one of Naruto's hockey games. And four other young men, each looking as dangerously fisticuffs-ready as the hulking Asuma.

Iruka stuffed his phone in his pocket, camera peaking out. Didn't stop recording.

"Iruka-kun," said the elder Sarutobi, not looking nearly as surprised to see Iruka as Iruka was to see him. "Still stretching beyond your reach on behalf of your students, I see."

Iruka didn't have anything to say to that. He'd been a bit...forward, in badgering his way up the chain of command until he got to someone everyone else had to listen to. He had made that man—
celebrated judge, former PM, current Mayor, revered elder of the Sarutobi clan—listen to why Naruto needed WoF, and WoF needed Naruto.

That didn't explain why Sarutobi was here.

The revered elder turned watering eyes from the untouched snow near Iruka's feet, passed with cold wind over Iruka, lingered on the waking streets of Konoha spread below.

"One of the bodies was said to be on my property," he said, low and distant, and Iruka wondered if his phone was picking up the words or not. Wondered if he wanted it to.

He should have kept his mouth shut. Should have listened with his eyes cast respectfully aside. Instead, he stared his best unimpressed waiting-for-you-to-be-done-with-your-lies teacher stare into the side of Sarutobi's head. Ignored the way the younger Sarutobi shifted protectively closer. "And is it? Is he. Or she. Buried there. Under your fountain—that's what Sasuke said."

The sky was fading white-blue now, the last bits of sunrise glowing from a thousand windows.

"Yes," said Iruka's maybe-ex hero. "Yes, there is a body there. Obviously we have not identified it yet. Nor have we disturbed the site more than was necessary to confirm. The police have been notified, of course, and the rest of the investigation is up to them."

"The police—the KPD," said Iruka, disgust so bitter on his tongue that his words came out twisted in it.

Sarutobi sighed. "It does seem…that Konoha is broken. More broken than we—that I—wished to believe. Here is a schoolteacher, standing guard over a child's secret grave.

"Here is a schoolteacher, standing guard over a secret grave," he repeated—without the self-condemnation, the second time. "Preventing further dishonor. Thank you, Iruka-sensei, for letting light through the cracks of all we have broken. Sunlight is, after all, the best disinfectant."

"His name was Haku," said Iruka, after enough silence for the last blush of sunrise to wash white. The snow was blinding."I don't—I don't know anything else about him. I just—I just—I know someone who loved him. He was loved. He was loved. He—"

"We'll watch over him," said Sarutobi-sama, smiling a little, knowing and sad, the same benevolent patriarch who had first held Iruka's shattered world steady.

If only Iruka could ever trust again.

Sarutobi studied him. On the other side of the hill, the sounds of Sarutobi's men confronting Iruka's grave-digging stalkers drifted into bluer-and-bluer sky. And—engines, more cars coming, press symbols emblazoned big enough to recognize even from the top of the hill.

Suddenly, Iruka wasn't brave enough to be there. He had courage for thugs and guns and powerful old men. Was brazen enough to impersonate a Nine-tails. But cameras and microphones and blatant agendas—he couldn't. The cold had him numb from the knee down, his nose was red and running from long hours in the cold, he couldn't feel his chin—and they'd see his broken heart all over his face. And then it would be: how do we use this?

Like they would use Haku. Like they had always used Naruto. Like they had used his parents, found dead in their KPD uniforms, three cuts on each cheek.

Iruka pulled his phone out his pocket. Didn't pause to read the number of views, but registered that
it was in the thousands. "Real press is here," he said. "Guys, I'm out. No one's hiding this secret again. I hope. You'll help, yeah?"

Comments were flooding in. He cut the feed, clicked save before reason could tell him not too. Flushed red as the younger Sarutobi watched him collect his skis, eyebrows high, but all Asuma said was: "Roads've been plowed by now. Not great for skiing. Want a ride?"

He was so tired. Too tired to be as proud as he wanted to be. He took the ride. Gratefully locked every lock on every door and window he owned the moment he got home, filled the tub and soaked his feet and then filled it again and soaked the rest of him until all of his limbs were feeling again. Turned on the news, watched Sarutobi-sama intoning about regaining honor and the never-extinguished flame of the Will of Fire as behind him KPD officers cordoned off Haku's grave for all of forty seconds before shutting it off and throwing the remote.

So everything Iruka thought he stood for was a lie. So he hadn't slept last night, or much the night before, or the night before that. So school had been canceled three times in the past two months—because of bombings, because of publicly displayed Nine-tails victims, because a known and captured Nine-tails (Naruto! His Naruto) had broken free—

So. So. Iruka was still here, and there was really only one thing he knew how to do. Cared enough to do. Cared about more than anything. The kids—the kids needed someone. They weren't too picky about who it was. They'd settle for him, if he was the only one reaching. The kids in his class, the ones long since grown and graduated. The boy who'd come to him and sobbed on his couch the day his father found him. The forgotten child sleeping forever under snow.

He would show up for his kids.

VxYxV

After allowing Sasuke enough dignity to walk without being held, Itachi's hand kept reaching for him.

*If you're reading this I'm dead* was burned in bright negative to the backs of his eyelids, and the subtle flutter of heartbeat beneath the fingers he'd locked around his brother's wrist had been helping.

Sasuke's form shuddered a bit around the edges, and Itachi watched him take steps that didn't always manage to pass as even and knew that his brother was breaking.

"Well," said Kisame, looking up from an incoming text, "it's been fun being ignored by you, but I've been ordered to retreat." He looked disgusted by that last word.

Itachi took a moment to watch him, drafting leading questions that might tempt the man into revealing more of what was coming next.

In the end, he said: "Do avoid being eaten by any foxes along your way," and Kisame laughed, took careful stock of where they were walking, swore at his compass, and sauntered back the way they'd come, waving.

"Speaking of eating," Itachi said, turning back to Sasuke, who was not running but was definitely calculating his chances of getting enough of a head start to make it count, "do you prefer dark-
chocolate-sea-salt or honey-hazelnut?"

Sasuke scowled at the protein nut bars Itachi offered, grumbled about both being too sweet, took both.

Ate as they walked, contention coiling behind bloodshot eyes. Itachi spared less attention for monitoring their unsafe surroundings than he would like, because he couldn't look away. Both because he needed to see his brother breathing and, if his speculation based on Sasuke's ever-developing athleticism held true, there was a very good chance the boy could outrun him.

Sasuke crumpled the protein bar wrappers. Pocketed them, eyes never leaving Itachi's.

"Everyone will have cleared out by now," he said. "You can't pretend your apartment is safer."

It was a valid point. Itachi hated it. "The Gates are never safe."

"Nowhere is safe for me, for now," Sasuke said, not so much challenging as—watchful. Weighing. "Even Father—"

He didn't finish. The word *Father,* it seemed, had closed up his throat.

"Father sent Akatsuki after you. Father's judgment is—"

"So he *is* the one paying them," said Sasuke softly.

Itachi read the tug of small muscles writing pain with Sasuke's face: every day for far, far too many days, Sasuke's stubborn love of father and mother and brother and best friend wracked him. Pulled until the edges of his psyche ripped and split. And Itachi...could neither prevent, nor halt, nor heal those wounds.

"...He does not work alone, if that helps." Itachi did not think it would help. "Everything he does is done on behalf of the clan."

Sasuke was quiet. Rolled his shoulders back and stood tall, and when he met Itachi's eyes again, he looked as unyielding as if his metal-capped boots had sunk steel roots through the concrete floor. Dread seeped through the locking muscles of Itachi's jaw, squeezed his throat, pooled in the coiled muscles of legs-ready-to-lunge.

"You can't be here," Itachi said. Begged. "You can't be here when the Fox comes. I won't let you—" but he'd never had to face Sasuke like this before, never had to prove what he would need to prove now, if he was going to save his brother—

"Then come with me," said Sasuke, almost pleading—but he wasn't. He wasn't asking. He was reaching out: one last chance. One last chance to choose between what Sasuke could accept for love and what Itachi needed to do *because* he loved.

Itachi had loved Sasuke by being everything Sasuke wanted. Had loved Sasuke by being everything he thought Sasuke needed. Had loved Sasuke by letting Sasuke hate him. Had tried to make things easier by creating an obvious choice: made himself the villain to allow Sasuke to hold on to his heroes. And: stupid, stubborn, saving Sasuke didn't choose. He did hate him—aggressively, venomously—almost as much as he loved him.

Almost.

"Look," said Sasuke. "Nii-san. Look: everyone else who might die today, down here or wherever,
they—they fucking deserve it. Akatsuki, Father, Namikaze, fucking Danzo, the Fox. All of them had a part in making this. And me—I chose this. I chose the fights and the Gates and—Naruto tried—he tried—he didn't even know me. I—deserve it too. Even..." He swallowed, hard. Again. Again. "You. Even you. Naruto didn't choose this. I'm not leaving him alone, nii-san. I'm not leaving him down here alone."

"Brother—" said Itachi, swallowing down be reasonable and no one is going to die. "I don't give a fuck for what anyone deserves," he said, and if only because he had never heard him swear before, Sasuke listened—"it can't be you. It can't be—it can't be you, Sasuke. Sasuke. I—need you. I need you to be okay. I need you."

His brother's eyes went wide, so so wide, and his lip trembled when he breathed in, and for a moment, a breathe-in-breathe-out-breathe-in, Itachi thought it would be okay.

"I love you, too," Sasuke said, slowly. "But...but, if you need me, if you need me, nii-san, you need Naruto."

"The Fox will kill you." Itachi's hands clawed in the hem of his coat. If he let go, let go of fingernails pricking through wool to bruise skin, he would reach out—and Sasuke would run. "The Fox will kill me. The Fox will not kill Naruto."

"Let him," said Sasuke. If he'd put his knife between Itachi's ribs it wouldn't have hurt more, and the tilt of his mouth said that he knew it. "And you don't know what he will do to Naruto. I know what he's done—enough of what he's done. I told you: I'm not leaving Naruto alone."

"Naruto's parents will look after Naruto," said Itachi, knowing it wouldn't help. It wouldn't help, because he'd already used it. Sasuke did not forget. "Both Namikaze and Uzumaki have mobilized. Neither is to be underestimated. Trust them. Sasuke—if you think you care for Naruto, imagine how his parents—"

"No," said Sasuke. Took a step back. Whatever he'd been offering Itachi, whatever hope had bridged between them—it was gone. Another step back. Go on the offensive. Leap now, before he can gain speed, control his hands and—but he didn't move, couldn't move, because if he would have to hurt—if he hurt Sasuke—

"They had their chances," said Sasuke. He was so angry. Cold, focused anger, and Itachi missed the reckless rage he'd always been able to manipulate—"they weren't there. They weren't there when he needed him, so many times, so fucking many times."

"Not their fault," whispered Itachi.

"Yeah, maybe," said Sasuke, and there were two meters between them now, and every move Itachi made, Sasuke shifted to compensate. "Maybe 'cause it's our fault. 'Cause our clan. And the Fox's fault, and does it fucking matter? He was alone."

"I'll come with you," said Itachi, because he felt like he couldn't breathe, and he needed to speak with the air left in his lungs before it was gone and all of his words and choices and chances with it. "Wherever you go, whatever you choose, Otouto. I'll come with you."

Sasuke's mouth shut, and then his eyes shut, and breath shuddered in. His eyes opened, and his hand, and he tossed something small and shining to Itachi.

A 100 yen coin. No. It wasn't quite right-

"Payphone," said Sasuke. Which meant nothing—nothing applicable—to Itachi, but the sound of it
let him breathe again. He walked forward, telegraphing each step as non-threateningly as possible. When he reached his brother, Sasuke walked too.

Fifty steps in, Sasuke started to cry. Itachi looked away carefully every time a hand darted up to blot out a tear. Wondered if crying was something his body could do.

Wondered if today was the day he found out.

VvIvV

It was impossible to do evil on a belly full of Ichiraku ramen, right? These kids may have set fire to a secret base in the tunnels under KPD central and they'd probably trained half their short lives to kill like she'd just seen Sai kill—but he and his four companions were all giving her the lost-puppy-dog look again, and they'd downed their noodles damn-near reverently, and Kushina couldn't exactly take them home, or take them with her, or leave them.

She took them to Naruto's old apartment. She had several half-good reasons for doing this: she wanted to check for evidence that Naruto had been there; it was a place they were unlikely to be found, questioned, or otherwise interfered with; Sai seemed to have some sort of connection to Naruto, and it seemed to be a positive one, so hopefully he wouldn't destroy Naruto's home—and as Minato had bought and paid to maintain the place as one of his dozen contingency plans, she might as well make use of it.

And she'd come up entirely blank when trying to produce a better plan.

"Pretty sure there's an extra futon under—yep. Looks like only one futon, but there's probably, like, twenty blankets in that closet—open it—hah. Good. And the heat seems to be working, and the water from the taps is potable, there's some long-shelf-life food in the cupboards if you get hungry...what else..."

No answers. Big eyes. Blank faces.

"So. Sai." She should not be as out of depth as she felt. She'd listened to so many haunted street kids. "You're responsible. I'll be back in touch within forty-eight hours—will send someone with my pass phrase if I'm unable to be here personally. Might send someone sooner. You can watch TV, sleep, eat, anyone got a phone? No phones. Okay, well, stay here until we figure out what comes next. Questions? Requests?"

One of the girls was looking at her with something close to emotion. Kushina met her eyes, cocked an eyebrow. The girl's lip trembled, just a little, before she spoke. "May we...may we use the shower?"

"For hours and hours, if you want to," said Kushina. "Yes. Yes—use the shower. Use anything you can find in here, so long as you do so safely and non-destructively. This was Naruto's home—we kept it in case he needed to return to it—you are his guests. He'd want his friends to be safe and comfortable."

Sai's eyes filled in. Not with tears, or an emotion Kushina could read, but with something focused and intense and desperately, giddily human.

"Yes," he said. "I am Naruto's friend."
The ramen she'd managed to swallow started to settle, finally, and Kushina breathed deep enough to take another stab at taking on the world.

"Thank you, Sai," she said. "Thank you, all of you, for following me here. You will be okay."

She left.

At the big house, Genma was waiting for her.

"Nothing from Obito, sorry," he said. "We're all set up to start hacking, though. Have you eaten?"

"I ate. Here—I had literally seconds to decide what to take and what to leave, and I don't think anyone's going to get a peak at what was left—so go through these for everything you can find, no matter how innocuous, yeah? Have you heard from Minato?"

Genma's face was instant confirmation that he hadn't. "I thought he was staying in contact with you?"

She needed to find him. He must be too deep behind the Gates to have a way to call her. He could be trapped. If he'd followed Naruto to the Fox—

"Leaving?"

Genma's voice and mouth were casual, his stare anything but. She opened her mouth to tell him that she was going to track down Minato. And Naruto. She also needed to follow up on Sasuke's leads—she knew the press was following up, that interest was high, but there had doubtless been some level of sabotage—she needed to check up on Sasuke, and set up a back-up to deal with the kids she'd hidden in Naruto's apartment. She needed more time. She needed to be a dozen places at once. She needed Obito to be where she expected him to be, filling in the spots she forgot, making inappropriate jokes at inappropriate times so she could hiss in oxygen between a laugh or a shout or a shut up, Obito . She needed to know that he was okay. That everyone was okay.

"Hold the baby before you go."

A mind whirling with the dozen faces she fought for went sudden stark blank.

"Wha—the—what?"

"Baby," said Genma, very clearly. "Hinata's baby. Hinata had her baby."

Hinata. Hinata! She hadn't even thought—let herself forget— "Oh—oh," was all she managed, graceless and guilty, the panic she'd turned into the sort of fierce frenzied energy she'd been fighting on twisting, sucking and sour.

"They're okay," Genma added, looking a little guilty. "Really good, in fact. Just—go sit, and see them, and hold her a bit, before you go."

Kushina wondered if he knew her well enough to know what he was asking. If he had any idea how high, on the very short list of Kushina's True Fears, small helpless babies ranked.

"You said they're okay."

"They are."
"Good, that's—that's good. Keep them that way, understand? Like, if you have to choose between breaking into Danzo's most awful secret files or answering a possible security threat to this house, you'll do the latter. Of course you will. But I—I gotta go. After...maybe after."

Kushina fled.

Naruto's friends were at the front gate. Rin looked torn. "They came to see Hinata," she said. "Do I let them in?"

Kushina squinted at them. Two of them were on the hockey team—one of them was Shikaku's kid, she was sure—the girl she didn't know.

She did know: not one of these kids breathed a word a reporter could use against Naruto. Not one of these very young, very vulnerable people let the pressures of press or parents or fear or envy overcome loyalty.

"Let them in," she said. Yes, that kid was definitely a Nara. And the blonde girl—she looked so much like Inoichi—and the boy—he had a good face. A kind, warm, anxious face.

There was too much to do. They needed all the help they could get.

"Genma!" she yelled into the house. Turned back to the kids. "So, uh, um, Hinata and—the—baby—"

"Are they okay? We saw pictures, and she said she was up to visitors," said the boy with the good face.

"Uh, yes, yes, they are," she said. Genma said they were. "You can see them. Also. Who wants to help take down a web of corruption and evil?"

Shikaku's kid sighed, deep and heartfelt, but she saw the spark ignite behind those sleepy eyes. And the girl—she looked very much like a shark. A lovely, bloodthirsty shark.

Kushina approved.

"Genma," she said, as the man had finally appeared, looking even more stressed. "I found some minions for you."

"We do want to see the baby—"

"We can do both, Chouji," said the girl, grinning her shark grin.

"...Great," said Genma. But he was warming up to the idea, Kushina could tell. "Okay. Well. Iwashi's already overridden the security locks to two of the hard disks. We'll set up another couple of laptops. Once you're done with the baby, I'll put you to work."

The girl was already on her phone. "We'll get you even more help," she promised. "Sakura's grounded, but Shino's available, and I bet Kiba can get here—"

"We're letting them all in, then?" asked Rin.

"If the other kids vouch for them, yep," said Kushina. Something she should have thought of hours ago lit up in her mind. She pulled out Minato's phone, put in his password, was rewarded with the name she'd hoped to find in his contacts.

"You have a granddaughter," she said to Hyuuga Hiashi, before he could think about hanging up.
"Congratulations. I have the headlines of the century for every newsrag you own. Double congratulations. You don't deserve any of this. We have to hack through Shimura Danzo's encryptions first. You'll come for tea."

That settled, she called the teacher who'd built Naruto's bridge from the Gates to freedom.

"I'm Naruto's mom," she told Umino Iruka. "Do you remember where he lived? Oh good. Do you remember what he was like before he got pretty good at pretending to be normal? Even better. I'm sorry to impose on your time, I'm sure you have many important things to do, but if you go to where Naruto used to live, you'll find five kids who haven't started learning how to pretend to be normal..."

She couldn't face Hinata or Hinata's baby. Wasn't ready for her heart to open up like she knew it would (and shrivel up in guilt, because she forgot Hinata). But she could face Madara. Eliminate Madara. One more threat out of this game, and then she'd take on the last.

Father and Fox. She would face him. She would win. She would.

And then: then she'd find Minato. And Minato would be with Naruto, and they'd be safe because they'd keep each other safe. She knew her boys. She could be brave enough to trust and believe and—and wait, a little while longer.

Hushed, happy noises drifted down from Hinata's open bedroom. Kushina listened, keeping her own bedroom door ajar as she changed clothes, re-armed herself, put together a mental grocery list for Obito to pick up so they'd have everything for the biggest Big Breakfast ever. After.

After everything, she would gather her loves and her loves' loves into her home. She would feed them, tease them, hug them. Feel solid warmth under her hand on a head or a shoulder and listen and listen and listen until hearing them swallow and breathe and speak through smiles wrapped all the way around her, bound up all the wounds she earned fighting for every single one of those breaths.

And to get there, she—Uzumaki Kushina, pacifist—would fight.

Would win.

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mUIUm

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Sometimes, when everything went to shit, shifting-shattering-scattering into unfixable ends, Minato's brain did a frightening, helpful thing: it stopped feeling. Whatever firing of synapses and flooding of hormones made emotions, Minato's brain had a secret subconscious executive kill button that overrode them all. No pain, no fear, no sympathy.

Problems and solutions and a ticking clock.

Naruto, wavering, bleeding, locked the door. It was not a simple procedure, but Naruto didn't hesitate, and the whir of multiple bolts fixing inches-thick bullet-proof metal to impenetrable wall echoed, reassuring and threatening: no one was getting in. No one was getting out.

Minato reached out for him, flicking on the flashlight he'd finally freed, but Naruto lurched away—again. Moved across the room like he was sleep-walking. Left little splatters of blood behind him.
Minato's light passed over two chairs, two tables, a lamp. One chair was big: tall, winged back, wide armrests, thick shadow. Naruto moved into that shadow, Minato's light followed—and there was a—a nook, or—hiding spot (sniper corner?), cut into the wall, hidden by the chair, and Naruto crumpling into it.

"This is where I was," said Naruto. Sucked in a not-good sounding breath, sighed out.

And—sank. Knees-elbows-head-fingers met bare floor, and didn't move again.

Minato's world went white, pushed-back panic flooding fingertips, freezing lungs, setting his ears ringing. Fear overwhelmed.

And stopped: so he could breathe again. Think again. (Look at his child bleeding out and feel (almost) nothing — .)

Problem: Lacerations to head and hands, increasing blood loss, blunt force trauma, possible internal injuries and bleeding, loss of consciousness.

Problem: No access to medical care. Even if Minato had a safe way to move Naruto—and he didn't—he couldn't open the door Naruto locked them behind.

Problem: Naruto did not want Minato to touch him. If he regained consciousness and acted to keep distance between himself and his father, he could further injure himself—

*tick tick tick tick*

Problem: He had no reception on his phone. There were very few people who might be able to help, and he couldn't contact any of them.

He checked Naruto's breathing and heart rate, opened his mouth to make sure he hadn't swallowed his tongue. Still couldn't tell where the blood was coming from.

This place was fortified like a military bunker. Maybe it was supplied like one.

The beam of his flashlight showed polished floor and bare brick and he catalogued the fabric and frames of both chairs for possible uses and then he swept over a light switch and, feeling an utter fool, turned on the light. Four doors: the one they came through, two less-fortified but very locked, one unlocked. Toilet, sink, showerhead, drain hole. Cabinet he couldn't open. On top of the cabinet: medical kit.

Naruto was still breathing, still not moving. Blood was drying in his eyebrows and clotting his eyelashes. Active bleeding seemed to be slowing: small mercies. Minato couldn't fairly estimate how much Naruto had bled. How much blood he could afford to lose.

Had no way to help, if he'd already lost too much.

*Not now.* He examined the lacerations on the hands and wrists, probed carefully along shoulders and arms, shifted in too-small space to tug off boots. Naruto hadn't been walking well, though Minato found no evidence of foot or leg injury. Warm toes, welted ankles, but mobility was there and swelling was minimal; thankful for every good sign, Minato wrestled off his own coat, propped his son's feet onto it, tucked toes into the fur-lined hood. Pulled off his sweater while he was at it: made a pillow.

He was halfway through the buttons of Naruto's coat before he realized it was *his* coat, and nearly started feeling again.
Instead, he tugged carefully at the layers of sweatshirt, shirt, undershirt that came next; allowed half a breath to weigh options. Used the butterfly knife he'd found in Naruto's right boot to slice open the sweatshirt. Gently, as slowly as he dared, lifted the shirts beneath.

Swelling red-blooming-purple radiated a sluggishly-bleeding half-circle cut. Minato thought: *broken ribs, and: collapsed/pierced lung, pierced liver/spleen/kidney, infection, pneumonia* and then had to stop thinking.

There was nothing he could do for the ribs. Or for the internal damage they may be causing. There was so very, very little he could do.

He could clean his son's head, and so he did; rinsing the sleeve he cut from his shirt and used as a washcloth again and again, smoothing warm water over damp skin and matted hair until Naruto's colors started to show again. Found the place skin had split across the scalp, wide and long as his finger. *What makes a wound like that?* He didn't know. Didn't want to. Flushed it with peroxide, winced as he pinched the edges together and more blood welled. To tape them together, he'd have to find a way to shave Naruto's head, and—and he couldn't. He was being irrational, he was feeling too much again, he was so *bloody useless*. Namikaze Minato was not who Naruto needed.

He was who Naruto had. So he packed the wound with hemostatic gauze, glopped antibacterial ointment all around, bound everything tight with his son's head lolling limp on one hand, juggling bandages with the other.

It wasn't that he had no idea what he was doing; he'd started first aid courses as a pre-teen. Signed up three (scary) days after befriending Kushina. He'd cleaned countless scrapes, picked shattered glass from forearms and knees, bound a badly sprained ankle. Once used a pressure bandage on a bullet wound to keep Kushina from bleeding out while he wore down her (hissing, spitting) resistance enough to call in Tsunade.

He'd learned all he could. Memorized fat sections of medical text. And that taught him what he needed to learn most: how much he couldn't do.

If his political career hadn't become its own beast, had he not needed all his strength just to hold on and not be trampled underneath, he'd have quit everything.

Gone to medical school.

He could help Naruto, as a surgeon.

Never would have lost Naruto, as a surgeon.

This was a game his self-loathing liked to play: *what if what if what if* spooling out, thoughts dancing down a dozen-dozen threads of possibility, wrapping all their *faster smarter stronger wiser* ifs around his throat until he choked.

He was drying Naruto's hair now, piling it damp under his own warm dry winter hat, and he had to stop choking. Had to breathe if he wanted to *do anything at all* to help his son breathe.

Minato's hands fell empty. There was nothing left to do. Nothing *he* could do.

He sat back, arms wrapped around lungs to ward off the cold, to remind himself to breathe so he
could maybe help Naruto breathe. Everything he couldn't afford to feel came up bit by bit, squeezing past the psychosomatic swelling of his throat.

Naruto breathed.

Minato breathed. Without tears: sobbed.

Where was Kushina?

Was Naruto's breathing getting wetter?

How many times, how many times in the weeks months years his child was hidden here had he been within a kilometer—500 meters—maybe even in the building above—hadn't Kushina come here, hadn't she begged her father's help—

*Breathe*. Breathe.

Naruto breathed. Minato breathed.

Something lifted inside, defied the rippling sick of guilt and terror, and he was humming it before he recognized it: a melody from the soundtrack of a favorite childhood anime, sung to Kushina's pregnant belly when she'd told him their baby was getting developed enough to hear his voice. To know him. To recognize him.

Then: Naruto in his arms, tiny and perfect and perfectly miserable, because he was teething and teething is terrible. Bright red cheeks and a bib sopping with drool and a little nose too congested to breathe through, so any time Minato laid him down he'd wake and scream and—and Minato would give up and just hold him, hold him and hum. Naruto would squirm across his chest until he was nestled just where he wanted to be, head tucked into the curve of his father's throat, and Minato would rest his chin on the downy-soft-hiccuping head. And hum.

He hadn't known any lullabyes. No one sang very-young-Minato to sleep. He'd tried learning some, searched to find the ones with lyrics he liked and melodies he could sight-read; Naruto cried through all of them.

But Naruto was pretty okay with melancholy melodies from anime soundtracks if they came with steady movement, so Minato had walked and rocked and hummed the length and breadth of their combined living-dining room in spiraling exhaustion, whimpering baby pressed just left of his heart, and every single second was precious.

Because Naruto needed him. Because he could love Kushina by letting her sleep. Because he could be what she and Naruto needed.

Because Naruto loved him.

Because he didn't know any lullabyes—but his son would grow up with a song to soothe the dark, dark nights.

He would have given up, maybe, sunk to his knees and never walked again if he'd known—if he'd known how dark those nights would be—how many, how dark—

"We'll make it," Minato whispered, laid next to a grown-up boy in a half-hidden hole in a Fox's lair. The cold of the tiled floor seeped up-up-up into him, but Naruto faced him, mouth a little open, cheeks warm.
There'd been darker nights than this one. They'd made it through them.

It was only noon (pitch black noon, all the hours of night still before them) but—they'd make it through this one.

Naruto breathed.

Minato breathed.

And hummed.
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

Huge, huge thanks to the few who review. It means everything to me! This story matters to me. So (so so) much. A thoughtful review is the best gift I can get. I'm begging here. Let me know what you think? Hope? Feel? Fear?

Naruto knew where he was—by sound, by scent, by creeping cold—and that he was safe—from everything except the one he feared most.

He drifted in and out of sharp-clear-pain and floating detachment, and lessons learnt early and well kept him still. Someone was helping him, and they were gentle and didn't make anything hurt more or leave him all alone and he didn't want any of that to change, so he worked very very hard at being silent. Silent, and still, unless they wanted him to move. Then he did his very best to comply. He was going to do everything they asked. He was going to be good. He was going to be so good.

(Dad, he thought, Dad is holding me, Dad is here with me, Dad will save me—and then tried not to dream that dream because he was hurting enough, but he also wanted to hold onto it, to dream it as hard as he could, it even smelled like Dad and he how did he know what Dad smelled like?—)

"Please drink, just a little, you don't have to drink a lot—do your best to swallow, okay? Well done. You're doing so well, Naruto. I'm putting some tablets on your tongue now, they'll help with the pain—there, there you go, you're doing so well, Naruto—"

He dreamed of colors and pain and then Dad was in his dreams again. Wanted him to sit up. It hurt. He didn't know why dream-Dad needed him to sit up.

He sat up (let the arms pull him up). Didn't make a sound.

Be quiet. Pain ends. Be quiet. It will end faster.

He dreamed of Yugito. Or Yugito was there, but he wasn't lying in his spot like he had been. They were training. She hit his shoulder, his side, kept hitting his side. She was so angry. Because she was dead. It was a wooden training staff, not sharp, but the pain—the pain was sharp—

And he was in his corner again, no Yugito no training and dream-Dad was making him move again. Sit up and—and lean on him, so he could feel the dream's chest rising and falling behind him, feel the little crack and pull of agony in his ribs with each breath—his breath, Dad's breath.

"It hurts, I know it hurts," Naruto's dream-Dad said. He sounded so sorry. So soft. "We need you upright in case there's fluid in your lungs. If there's anything in your lungs, we need you sitting up, so it can drain, and you're doing so good, Naruto, just a few more minutes..."

Dream-Dad said other things, too, but Naruto was thinking about how warm he was, how much better he felt with Dad's breaths bumping against his breaths. He didn't hurt less, didn't fear less, but it was so warm. If this was his messed-up head's new way of coping with being alone, he was okay with it.

When dream-Dad moved to ease him down again, Naruto panicked. Almost made sound. One
hand did scrabble up, reach an arm and hold it tight, tight and warm across his chest. Then his brain caught up and he went as still as he could go. Didn't breathe. There was someone—someone being gentle with him, and patient (Yugito? It was usually Yugito—) and he grabbed them and—that wasn't okay, that wasn't appropriate. They would hit him. And then they would leave him.

He pulled his hand away slowly, unwinding numb fingers one by one. Ducked his head in apology. Waited for the cold to swallow up everything warm.

"Hey, I've got you," Dad said. Maybe no one was holding him after all. "We can stay like this. We can stay just like this. It's okay. It's okay, Naruto."

So—so—he was still dreaming. If dream-Dad was here, maybe he hadn't done anything wrong. Maybe he was alone. Maybe he could dream a little longer. Stay warm a little longer.

Daring, dreaming, barely breathing, he reached up again.

Held on.

In the dream, Dad started to hum. He could feel it. Recognized it. He felt—felt the stiffness in toes—thighs—shoulders, neck, head go quiet, aching, tender. Felt the control that made all the little muscles in his face into a careful mask slip away. Felt air suck in deeper, pressing agony into his ribs but the oxygen still felt good and if it shuddered a little on the way out—he was safe. He was dreaming.

"Breathe, breathe," murmured the dream. "I've got you. I've got you, Naruto." There was a pause. And then there was the humming. The same melody, over and over, tired, safe, gentle.

Dad's voice and Dad's warmth in a song his inside-everything knew. He would be extra hollow, when he woke up, and remembered that the cost of filling emptiness with wishing was too much. Always too much.

That would happen. Right now, the humming he dreamed vibrated in the throat above his cheek, and the chest he leaned his head against was warm, and the arms around his shoulders were strong.

He wouldn't dream forever. Pain would wake him.

Pain. He was in a lot of pain. But he could feel Dad, holding him, saving him—it was only a dream, but—he was selfish. He was foolish. He'd dream while he could.

VloIV

Every two hours, Minato made Naruto sit up, take small sips of the electrolyte mix he'd found in the first aid kit, and stay upright for enough minutes that any fluid possibly pooling in his lungs had a chance to drain. He expected—groans and complaints, or half-delirious obstinacy, or outright hostility, or—anything but the tightly controlled silence and compliance he got. Naruto didn't seem to be entirely conscious; he was a selective sort of responsive that doubled the chill itching up Minato's spine. He followed requests and allowed every touch and tried very hard to swallow even when Minato could see his adam's apple jumping with a barely suppressed gag reflex. He didn't make any sounds of pain. Didn't make any sounds at all. Once or twice, Minato felt cracked-open eyes watching him.
"Hey, hey, kiddo," he soothed, even if it was really only comforting himself. "You're doing great, you're being so brave, you must—it must be hurting so much—I got you, it's okay, I got you..." again and again, until it was probably safe to let Naruto lie down again, and he'd ease him centimeter-by-centimeter with shaking hands and whatever hopefully-comforting words made it out of his mouth ended up being apologies instead.

He hated letting go. Hated moving back enough to give Naruto space. He watched the way the boy's face stayed stiff, like every muscle was under tight command to betray nothing at all, and moved back anyway. If he sat where Naruto couldn't see him when his eyes cracked open, couldn't feel the heat of his body or hear him breathe, those lines eased—just a bit, just enough for Naruto's lips to open, his breath become a little more ragged, and sometimes fingers would come up, press cautiously at a wounded side. The inside of Minato's cheeks bled and his fists ached but his brain catalogued times and symptoms and tried very hard to come up with more logic than anxiety.

_Fear is not my friend._

On his third time sitting Naruto up, he dared to slip ibuprofen tablets onto his son's tongue before offering the electrolyte drink. Naruto swallowed. By the time Minato shifted into position to ease Naruto's body upright again, he looked—better. Less like a plaster mold of his own face. Minato shifted them both through the careful choreography of lifting-holding-balancing-bracing, ending with him sitting with Naruto's back against his front. He lifted the arm wrapped around the top of Naruto's chest once the position was stable; lurched still when cold fingers touched his wrist. Naruto was—was holding onto him, keeping his arm around him, and suddenly his heart was beating so fast, hope filling up his throat so thick he couldn't move couldn't think couldn't breathe—

The clutching-tight fingers went lax. Uncurled, one by one. Minato closed his eyes so he wouldn't watch them fall away. Naruto's head curled down; the smudged-pink spot where it had rested chilled, spreading seeping cold. Fear clung so thick he didn't know if it was his or Naruto's. "Hey, I've got you," he whispered. _Please, please, _he prayed. _Please, let me hold onto you_— "We can stay like this. We can stay just like this. It's okay. It's okay..."

_Please._

The hand came back. So slow. So tentative. Fingers found his wrist, crept around, stayed—there, warm, not quite closing—but holding, like anything they gripped might turn to powder. Puff away.

Unable to get more words past the lump in his throat, Minato began to hum. The same song. Their lullaby. And—Naruto—Naruto melted. Eased and sunk and toes uncurled, head lolling back to rub more dried half-washed blood over Minato's shoulder. Minato's tears were running into Naruto's hair, making more stains on his shirt, and Naruto breathed out. Long, shuddering, a release.

"Breathe," said Minato, remembering that was something he needed to do, too. "Breathe, breathe. I've got you." Paused. Swallowed. Dabbed the sleeve of his free arm under his running nose. "I've got you, Naruto."

His hips went numb, his legs cramped, his back throbbed—he didn't move, laughed with relief that his pain of the moment was the warmth and weight of the boy in his arms, the living breathing boy in his arms. His legs could fall right off, his spine could hunch up into a permanent stoop; see if he cared. If he could keep just enough strength to be a place for his son to rest his head. Just enough to keep his arms around this boy. Just enough to stay awake and hear Naruto breathe.

It sounded better. It sounded _better_, the breathing, and he was ninety-percent-sure that wasn't only half-sane wishing fooling his brain.
He didn't know what time it was. He'd put down the burner phone he'd brought with him when he prepared to get Naruto upright; its display was blank, it was out of reach, and Minato wasn't wearing a watch. Naruto was holding on to him; he wasn't about to reach for anything else.

Naruto slept. Really slept. Soft-warm-hushed, no stiffness, no peaking eyes. While the rest of him went limp and loose, his carefully-curled fingers turned tight. Held strong.

So—long, slow minutes; long, slow hours; long, slow days—however long, and painful, and precious, Minato held his child.

Until a phone began to ring.

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Itachi and Sasuke searched in circles. It seemed Sasuke's cryptic statement had been remarkably literal: they were, in fact, searching for a payphone.

Underground. In hidden passageways and highrise basements and underground parking lots. Which is where they found one: hidden behind the garage-style doorway at the end of a long line of identically covered loading docks of Konohagakure's second-largest shopping mall, where large trucks were packed and un-packed. All of the other doors hid nothing but the unloading bays they were supposed to cover. Itachi knew this, because they had started at the wrong end.

"...Better work," Sasuke said to the payphone, which he was attempting to x-ray through the focused spite of his gaze alone.

Itachi tried to sound supportive. "We can move on to alternate plans, if it doesn't."

Sasuke just speared him with his attempted-superpower stare. "Can't. Won't." Turned back to the payphone. "So. Here goes."

He flipped the not-100-yen coin, caught it, lifted the receiver, inserted the coin.

Pressed nine nines.

Itachi watched Sasuke in between watching everything else. Their location should be random enough to be secure—there were plenty of exits—no one seemed to be answering.

"He'll pick up," said Sasuke, to a question Itachi carefully didn't ask. Sasuke's chin jutted.

And if Naruto didn't pick up? Was there anything Itachi could do to hold onto his brother, to hold his brother together? Anything—he would do anything. If Naruto didn't answer—if Naruto couldn't answer—

Something changed. No one answered, as far as Itachi could tell, but Sasuke snapped straight, then stepped back, receiver still clutched to his ear. Stared back toward the hidden door leading back to the Gates. Itachi moved to block as much of Sasuke's body as he could, hand on the hilt of his gun.

"There," said Sasuke, nervous and triumphant. Gestured at blank wall.

No—not blank. A tiny red LED blinked, dull in the garage's half-light.
Itachi breathed, heard the wheeze in his own too-loud exhale, let go of his gun to dig into his pocket for his inhaler. He couldn't do this. He couldn't drown in his own body right now.

Sasuke left the phone. "Move fast," he said. "We're clear. Naruto wouldn't have lit the way if we weren't."

Itachi followed him to the little light, past it, through the door. Behind the gates, three more pinpricks glowed red, spaced meters apart in a straight line down the corridor.

The inhaler had helped. There was enough oxygen getting through Itachi’s lungs. Running came easy, muscles falling smoothly into a sustainable pace. He kept himself between possible attack and Sasuke's back; admired and hated the way his brother slipped through shadows he shouldn't belong to, fought back cold dread clawing up the base of his neck. They reached a door with no lights lit beyond its place in the corridor, and Sasuke immediately moved through. Its traps were disabled; they'd come through it already, and Sasuke set about resetting the trap while Itachi stepped gingerly after him. Then they were running again. Red blinking LEDs laid their path.

"Otouto."

"I'm not slowing down. We were just here, you know this bit's easy—"

"Sasuke, did you hear Naruto?"

They both knew how to move quietly, but the rushing beat of their feet was still too loud, the tunnel too long and too narrow and too possibly not empty. Sasuke didn't answer, which was exactly the answer Itachi had hoped to be wrong about. The next trap was a trip wire, lit helpfully red by LED light. Sasuke skidded, slid under it; Itachi took advantage of his long legs to step over it.

"We're running to a place we won't be able to run away from."

"We're running to Naruto."

"Sasuke. It may not be—" probably isn't— "Naruto."

Sasuke stopped. Didn't turn, and Itachi had to brace a hand against the corridor wall to avoid colliding with his brother's stubborn back. "You don't have to come."

That didn't deserve an answer.

"If it's not Naruto, it's someone who has a good chance at finding Naruto," Sasuke said, the line of his shoulders easing a bit. He was breathing harder than he should be, for the distance they'd run; started walking again, sharp long strides. Itachi fell into step beside him.

He needed to remember that he'd already lost this fight.

This time, the door the lights ended at swung open for them. Electricity sparked along naked wire as the stepped very, very carefully through; three inches of bulletproof metal ticked shut behind them.

No way out. Their footsteps echoed. When Sasuke was distracted by the next door swinging open at the end of the corridor, Itachi made swift use of his inhaler again.

Sasuke caught him. Froze midstep, mouth opening, brow creasing, sudden indecision opening up that familiar, deadly crack through his psyche.
"I'm all right," Itachi said immediately, making the inhaler disappear. He smiled. "Just one way left to us, Otouto." He stepped forward, poked the scowl-crease between his brother's eyebrows. Kept moving, steady now, breath coming clear.

The last corridor wasn't long. It looked almost like it belonged in a residential building, with exposed brick and bright lamps and decorative tile. Sasuke moved in close as they reached the final door, let their shoulders brush.

He looked like he wanted to say something. Itachi waited, as he always did; Sasuke's mouth shut on the words he almost said, as it usually did. Instead, the younger brother reached for the heavy door knocker. Itachi stopped him with a hand on his wrist.

"Since I came with you, indulge me one more time," Itachi murmured, and used the hand on Sasuke's arm to nudge the boy behind him. He reset the gun in his other hand, angled carefully down and to the side where Sasuke wasn't; he'd already clicked the safety off. "I'll go first."

He expected Sasuke to protest. Saw the way his jaw locked, lifted his own chin in challenge. He didn't know what he would do if he couldn't win this small, final battle; went almost dizzy with gratitude when he didn't have to.

Gun in hand, brother as shielded as he could make him, Itachi knocked on Kyuubi's door.

Guilt plus fear plus doubt twisted so tight in Sasuke's gut that it took locked teeth and bitter discipline to keep his body straight enough to see over his brother's shoulder as the last door swung open.

*If you die, I die right after you,* he promised Itachi, to comfort himself. If the Fox was going to murder his brother, Sasuke wasn't letting him stop there.

*Breathe. Be ready.*


Namikaze.

Itachi's shoulders sagged—by a millimeter, but it was enough to crumble the brother-as-barrier thing he had going on, made it simple for Sasuke to muscle past and in.

There was an impression of rug-table-chairs-lamp but all Sasuke saw was what wasn't. He turned on Namikaze.

"Naruto—*where's* Naruto?"

"It's just us here," Namikaze was telling Itachi, at the same time, maybe because Itachi still hadn't put away his gun. But if that was his answer to Sasuke's question, too—

"Here, bastard," called Naruto, voice scraped raw like that time he'd yelled himself hoarse singing along to a concert they'd snuck into without tickets. Sasuke lurched in the direction of the voice—
to the door he'd missed in his first frantic look, half-open, spilling fluorescent light.

Naruto was behind it. On a stool in front of security monitors and switch boards, curled over the counter like he'd collapse if it wasn't there supporting him, one arm pressed tight to his ribs.

Sasuke closed his eyes. Opened them. Naruto was still there, with a big idiot smile and dried blood streaking his chin. Bandaged and ghoulish in the blue light of the monitors and—and he could feel him, feel moving muscle under the bunched-up coat sleeve Sasuke'd grabbed.

"Weren't supposed to waste that coin on me, you crazy bastard. I only had one! I gave it to you for when I couldn't help you—"

He was in pain. Naruto was in so much pain, Sasuke could tell. By the way the tendons in his neck stood out. The way his fingers dug at the desk. The way his eyes darted over the security screens, again and again, too quick to focus.

"Get up. I'm getting you to a bed."

"You know, Sasuke," Naruto told him slowly, finally focusing enough to turn solemn eyes up to his. "This...this is why people think we're gay."

Namikaze was crowding in next to him, and Sasuke's cheeks were getting kind of hot, and without thinking he was laughing. Laughing because Naruto was okay. Naruto was okay.

"He's right about getting you to a bed," Namikaze was saying. "You answered the phone. Opened all the doors. Closed all the doors. They're here. They made it. Anything else you need to do, Son, before I drug you and make you sleep again?"

Namikaze sounded like he'd stressed himself beyond lots of breaking points. He reached for his son, but Sasuke was still holding onto Naruto, and Naruto leaned into Sasuke, both of them shifting automatically to accommodate Naruto's weight as he slid off the stool. He went stiff, all white and not breathing, experimentally balancing on one foot, then the other. Sasuke clung to the arm thrown around his shoulders, tried to support more, take all the weight.

Then Naruto was grinning up at his father. "One more," he said, oblivious to the way Namikaze's face had blanked, hands still reaching. "Got one more door to open."

Sasuke followed where the jut of Naruto's chin told him to go: another door, and Naruto braced against him and punched in a code on the keypad, then did something to a hinge and opened the door from the wrong side. Naruto caught Sasuke's eyeroll, snickered. "You know how long you woulda spent tryna crack that lock without ever trying the other side of the door? Long enough to get caught, Bastard. Now you know the trick, so there's no way to like scientifically test it, but I'm right. I'm totally right..."

He closed his eyes to breathe through what must be some really fucking intense pain, and when they opened again, Sasuke got them moving immediately, because Namikaze had squeezed past them and found a lightswitch and in this room there were beds—bunks, six of them—and the sooner the idiot was tucked in with his feet up so he didn't pass out like he looked like he wanted to, the better.

"Hey, Sasuke," Naruto said, when he was in a bed and had submitted to Namikaze checking all his bandages and had swallowed more painkillers in exchange for a promise that his dad would take a rest on a bunk of his own, "I'm glad you're here. No one's gonna get you here."

Naruto's eyes were already shut, so no one said any of the things that were making the silence kind
of thick and nasty. Namikaze had a great pokerface, but Sasuke had some guesses about some of what was stressing the man out the most—besides Naruto's split scalp and cut hands and beat-in ribs.

It was stupid to come here, he was starting to get. Stupid. Selfish...the unforgivable kind of selfish. His brain got trapped in the echoes of those gunshots and made too many images of Naruto bleeding out and he'd needed to prove it wrong. Needed it so much he didn't stop to think about what Naruto needed.

Which wasn't him. Or Itachi. Not here, not where the Fox would find them, and Naruto would kill himself trying to stop the Fox from killing them.

And Itachi wasn't okay. There wasn't much Sasuke could do about Itachi not being okay, beyond trying a lot harder to keep himself out of harm's way.

They should leave.

They should leave right now.

If Naruto could control the doors from the switchboards in that other room, all Sasuke needed to do was figure out how to open them—

"Hey, where're you—hey Sas—"

Naruto was trying to sit up again.

"Just to the other room. You—sleep."

"...Lie."

Sasuke looked away. Had to.

"Naruto," came Itachi, all gentle and reasonable, "it's really best that we go. Sasuke needed to know that you're all right—you aren't, not exactly, but you're alive, so now we can do something more useful. Perhaps contact someone like B or Gaara-sama. ...Someone more welcome."

Like speaking tactfully was going to get through to Naruto. "You don't want us here when the Fox gets back, dumbass."

"No shit," said Naruto, like Sasuke was the dumbass for suggesting it. "Not letting you anywhere near him. He's gone hunting."

"Hunting?" Namikaze, urgent.

"Sent me some messages when I unlocked the Watch Room. We got about fifty hours."

Sasuke sat back down so Naruto would lie back down, and Naruto did. Bloodshot eyes locked with his.

"Stay here," said Naruto. He sounded like all the pain was wrapped around his throat, and Sasuke's throat went tight in sympathy. "Fox said everyone's looking for you. 'N he's not here, 'n no one else can get in. It's a good place for you. Right now."

Itachi started typing something on his phone, showing it to Namikaze in a stupid secret conversation. Naruto wasn't looking at them. Just kept staring as Sasuke.
Okay. Naruto...was probably right, and that was enough for Sasuke. So he pried off his boots, and, to really drive the point home, peeled off his socks. He folded them and tucked them into the boots and bounced experimentally on the bunk. Sniffed the pillow, the folded blanket. Satisfied that he wasn't cuddling up to dried urine or worse, he tucked himself in.

Tucked himself into bed in the Kyuubi-no-Yoko's underground lair. Looked at Naruto, anxious and watching him; said, slow: "Sweet."

For a moment, all the pain left Naruto's face. All the shadows curved up, and Sasuke's throat suddenly stopped hurting. He turned coolly away from Naruto's chortling, and Naruto laughed harder—laughed with shattered ribs, swore. When Sasuke turned back, Naruto's eyes were closed and his mouth of slack and a-little-bit smiling. Sasuke stayed still until Naruto's breathing sounded like sleeping, reached out—couldn't reach Naruto without getting up, but his fingers snagged the edge of one of the four blankets Namikaze had piled on. Curled around it.

He thought about moving. Thought that Itachi would have questions for him or want something of him or—or something. That Namikaze would ask him to move so he could have the bunk next to his son. But no one talked to him, and his eyes kept drifting shut. His arm stayed stretched over empty space with a fistful of Naruto's blanket—forced eyes open—Itachi talking, Namikaze talking, soft, murmuring; Naruto sleep-smiling—thought fleetingly of how it had felt holding Mirai—eyes closed—let them.
Chapter 39

When the ways she could fight this war tilted back to outside her home rather than inside it—when Hiashi had come, and Neji with him, and several more of Naruto's friends as well; when Iwashi looked like he might flip from bodyguard to murderer if she tried to advise his data-extraction strategies one more time, when still no one had heard from Minato and even Rin couldn't get ahold of Obito and the hours of winter sunlight were growing scarce—Kushina left.

Closed her front door. Closed her eyes. Braced against herself. Braced to make violence.

Opened her eyes.

Violence. Starting with the extra shadow in her car.

She chose her angle, approached slowly, body language hinting that she was trying to remember if she'd left something behind, one thumb poised to emergency-dial Genma on the phone in the pocket of her coat.

Then the light shifted, cloud over sun and with less light reflected she knew—she knew that profile.

Pretense gone, caution doubled, Kushina stood still.

Decided.

When she reached her car, she moved fast. Too efficient to spare a glance for the man in her passenger seat. Was two minutes and over a kilometer from her home before she screeched to the side of the road, whipped around to face him down.

"You drive well, daughter."

Damn right she did. He'd find out how well when she revved up again and threw open his door mid J-turn. He hadn't put on the seatbelt. If she distracted him and was fast enough she could simultaneously reach across—

"You killed Danzo."

In her mind Kushina saw a blank-eyed boy slide a knife through an old man's neck, and swallowed bile. Threats and pleas and condemnation jammed thoughts together in her throat, clogged up the back of her tongue, and she kept her teeth clamped hard until she could make a sentence out of them. And when a sentence did come out, it wasn't any of those things.

"Madara is next."

"Ah," he said, and she understood that he already knew this, and that was why he was here, filling up all the space in her car and sucking in all the oxygen too.

She didn't have any other sentences worth letting out, not right now, and she had battles to get to, so she checked her mirrors, flashed her lights, and swerved back onto the road.

If he wanted in on this fight—she wouldn't say no. Couldn't. Chances were too high she'd need him to cut open a way for her to get out alive.

They did not speak again until she'd slowed dramatically, reluctantly obeying the strident speed
limits of Kuni University's main avenue. Every bit of snow-over quad was torn up, for shortcuts or snowballs or anatomically explicit snowmen or the simple joys of trampling unbroken snow, and the mostly-innocent faces on the students passing by made the darkness of her own intentions—and everything about her passenger—that much colder. Her judgments didn't fall into passionate Rights and Wrongs as they had in her first lived decades, but she believed in good and evil. Which side she marched for now—right now—she couldn't say.

"You chase a lead placed by Shimura Danzo." It seemed the Fox was experiencing his own doubts.

"An independently obvious one," she snapped back, and parked as near the special collections library as overflowing university parking was going to let her get. Marched across the rest of campus side-by-side with a mass murderer. Based on the respectful nods her father and his old-fashioned gentleman's cloak received, most students assumed he was someone high-ranking enough to get away with being eccentric.

The snow before Senju Hashirama Memorial Library lay almost entirely unmarred. This corner of campus might have been a favorite for serious academics seeking truly serene study environments or lovers' trysts both, had it not been for the very strong evidence of malignant haunting. This wasn't a study library, anyway. Everything housed here required specific permission and strict supervision to admire.

The Fox stopped before the larger-than-life figure of Senju Hashirama, eyeing bronze toes rubbed bright by students desperate for a little extra luck. He turned to Kushina, eyebrow quirked in apparent humor.

"Independently obvious," he agreed.

"This is where the obvious ends," groused Kushina, grumpy to hide the grim anxiety of what she was here to do. "I'm confident this is the way to Madara. Not so confident about everything after that."

"Daughter," said the Fox, "I took everything from you. I will take more."

Rage set her jaw, her feet, her shoulders. Fear flipped her gut, but she didn't let it touch anything else. She'd stepped between him and his goal, and with the sun behind him, his shadow swallowed her and her own shadow whole.

"This fight," he said. Patient. "I am taking this fight. Madara will die. All the Uchiha will die."

"No," she said. "No, stop, you have to stop. I took evidence from Danzo. We'll get justice—you'll— you can't—I won't let you!"

"Justice?" he said softly. "How many Uchiha will you preserve, Daughter, just to face your justice? How many will allow you to save them? My Nine-tails are already at work."

Two sure strides and he was beside her. Her brain was firing signals that her body wasn't responding to, too busy with the panic pounding through her heart, the red sunlight blinding her. His arm lifted, deliberately slow.

Hand on her head. Heavy and huge, like she was eleven again. Warm. Warm when it shouldn't be warm.

"Our boy is safe," he said. So soft. His voice too deep to hear—you had to feel it, see lips moving. "Your fool is with him. Both are protected. Both will live. Lay claim to an Uchiha or two, if you wish. This is farewell."
He was gone. Her cheek was warm from a caress that made nothing okay.

She gathered her—thoughts heart plans nerves breath brain—ran.

To her car, lungs burning, legs burning, heart aching, head cold.

Called as she ran, phone jarring painfully against her ear. Called and called. Obito didn't answer. Sasuke didn't answer. Itachi didn't answer. Minato didn't have any other Uchiha listed in his contacts; only Obito's number was in hers.

Found her car, after a wasted minute of blank blind staring at a full parking lot, the memory of parking there overwhelmed.

Minato had Sakura's number. So far, Naruto's hockey team had solved more, saved more, than any of the adults had. Kushina thought about all the reasons she shouldn't—called Sakura anyway.

Sakura answered.

"Uchiha are in danger," Kushina told her, dropped her keys, swore, picked them up again. "All Uchiha. I tried to reach Sasuke, his brother—see if you can. Wait. Listen. Listen. You're just a messenger, got it? You can't fight this fight. Just—warn anyone you can. Promise. They may not listen. That's all we can do. All we can do. Promise. Good girl. Naruto is okay. Yes! Yes, Naruto is okay. You stay okay too, got it?"

Naruto had good friends. Kushina had friends, once—

Mikoto's number wasn't in Minato's phone. Sasuke's address was; Kushina set the GPS, and broke every speed limit between herself and Mikoto's door.

She couldn't tell if the extra shadow in the eaves of Mikoto's roof she saw when she scaled the garden wall was made by Nine-tails or uncontrolled fear, but Kushina wasn't taking chances. "She's mine!" she roared, landing, rolling, bounding up to pound on the door. "This Uchiha is mine! I claim her! I claim all the Uchiha in this house! Go ask the Fox. Ask him. Mikoto? Mikoto, open the door! Miko! I claim her, I claim her, do you hear me?"

Mikoto opened the door. Stared at Kushina with too-big night-sky eyes, all exquisite and fragile. Calligraphy ink on fine paper.

"Mikoto," Kushina said, trying to remember the words she rushed here to say. Needed to say. They didn't come.

Mikoto understood anyway. Because she was Mikoto.

"You came for me," she said. She wasn't moving, and Kushina needed her to move, and something in her chest ached to hear that low-and-lovely voice, and how it hadn't changed. At all.

"You need to come with me," Kushina begged. "Right now. Right now, Mikoto. Get—get anything you absolutely can't leave behind. I can protect you, I swear I will protect you, but your house—"

"I can't leave this house."

"Can. Will. Because you have to. It's hard for you, I know, I know, but you have to. Get your—"

"I can't reach my sons," Mikoto said. And—Kushina counted the signs. Anxiety had done so much damage already. Hair and makeup and clothing—everything perfect, gorgeous, but Mikoto's lip
was bleeding. So were her cuticles. "Sasuke. Itachi. I called and called."

And they were grown women now. Mothers— "We'll reach them," Kushina vowed. "We will, Miko. And the rest too—I need you to help me save the rest, will the Uchiha listen to you? Because they won't—you know they won't listen to me—"

"My sons will look for me here," Mikoto said, and before Kushina could think up a way to argue with that, hit her with: "We can't save each other, Kushina. It didn't work before, and it won't work now. Go on to your fights. I'll do what I can with your warning."

"This is my fight," said Kushina. Drew up tall, will ignited and raging and burning up her cheeks. "We're really unlucky friends, you know? I can't reach my son either. Or my husband. And my father is doing what he does best, and no one is safe, and you're right here in front of me, my very first friend, the very first person I ever loved, and you think I'm going to give up? You give up. Give the hell up on whatever clever or noble or practical thing you think should stop me from saving you, Mikoto, get the damn bag of precious things I know you'll be miserable if you leave behind, and either walk to the car or find out if I can still carry you."

The truth was: there was exactly one person in Konoha who could beat Uzumaki Kushina in a misguided battle of wills, and she was standing right there, jaw set.

"Miko. I've got a baby. At my house. A brand new, beautiful baby, and she needs—her mom needs—her really really young mom—"

Mikoto's eyes widened. "My—your—Sasuke said—"

"Yes," Kushina agreed, determinedly latching on to her only chance at victory, "it's Sasuke's baby. Well, he helped deliver it. He and Naruto. I mean technically she's neither of theirs, I mean probably, but who knows—"

"The Hyuuga girl? That's what Sasuke—oh, oh, that poor girl—"

"You can help her. If anyone can help her. I've tried—"

"You're scared of babies," said Mikoto, eyes wide, and her fingers hadn't spasmed in nearly a minute. Risking everything, Kushina stepped forward, pushed the door open enough to let her through and swing shut behind her. And when Mikoto didn't move away, reached for her. Flung arms around her, pressed her face into her shoulder—bonier than she remembered, but it was the same perfume—light and lovely and designed by Mikoto for Mikoto. It had been—years. Twenty years. More than twenty years. They'd drifted apart when Mikoto married, even more once Itachi was born—but this was Mikoto.

"I couldn't even—Miko, I haven't seen her," she confessed with a sob, holding tighter, things she needed to keep controlled shaking loose inside her and it was dangerous but losing Mikoto was so much worse. She knew this. For too many years—"Genma was like 'Go hold the baby Kushina' so I would remember to be a good person before I went out to get shit done, you know? And I couldn't do it. Because I can't be a good person, not today, and I have to find Minato, and—and Naruto—and the Fox said—to save the, you, the Uchiha, if I could, and I'm trying, but—but. You know what I did? I went to save Naruto and left Hina-chan all alone and she went into labor and—Miko—"

Only one person in Konoha knew what, how much, Uzumaki Kushina feared. Trembling, that one person returned a clinging, wild, desperate embrace. Hesitant. Holding tight.
"I tried too," Mikoto whispered. It took time, for the words to climb past years and years of silence, but they came. "I tried too. To...save...Naruto. Save you. When you told me you'd gone to your father, that—what he said to you—I'm so sorry, so sorry, Kushina, I didn't—I tried—I thought—I didn't—"

Words were lost to closing throats and catching breath, but Kushina didn't need to hear them. She knew what Mikoto thought. That she'd sent the Fox to Naruto, and instead of saving his grandson, he'd killed him.

"Save me now," wept Kushina, stepping back to make room to breathe, tugging the cuffs of her sweater sleeves over her hands, mopping at her face.

"I'll get you a tissue," said Mikoto, still breathing too fast, swallowing too hard.

She left Kushina crying in her entryway. Minutes passed; when Kushina could mostly clearly speak again, she went back to calling phones a polite voice reported had been shut off.

Next, she would...she would...

She didn't know what she would do. Could do.

Then Mikoto was there again, with an entire box of tissues. A fresh cardigan, unblemished by Kushina's snot. Steady breath. Keys. A small suitcase. And she smiled, small-tight-true, as Kushina stared.

"Miko," Kushina started to say, but choked up on more tears instead.

"Baby first," said Mikoto. "I'll take care of the new mother and the new baby. On the way there, I'll...see if there is anyone I can convince. I will start with Fugaku; if he believes me, he will lead the rest to do the same. Then—I'll stay—take care—you go. Find our sons. And tell me what else you need to do. I will tell you what I most don't want you to do."

Yes. That was how this worked. Kushina made plans—crazy plans, risky plans, necessary plans—and Mikoto wielded something that—wasn't quite veto power. Pause power? It was enough to make Kushina think, at least a little bit. Try to find a better way. Kushina didn't care much about what she risked, but—but she never wanted to risk Mikoto.

There had always been lines, in their friendship, lines of propriety and fear and I can only wonder if you're dead so many times before it truly kills me, Kushina, that Mikoto would not let Kushina cross.

Maybe because Before Mikoto, no one had cared much about what Kushina risked, those lines mattered. They hadn't protected their friendship when the rest of life got in the way—

—Or, thought Kushina, lifting Mikoto's suitcase into her car, watching a woman for whom stepping beyond the walls of her home required extreme courage lift her chin and hold her breath and do exactly that, maybe it did. Maybe it was enough.

Whatever wasn't lost, whoever wasn't lost, Mikoto and Kushina were going to save.

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MuKuM
This is—" Hyuuga Hiashi reached for accurate synonyms (unfathomable, mercenary, ingenious, abhorrent) and found each so wanting he could not continue, though his nephew stared. "This is a matter for law enforcement. This—requires warrants, arrests, investigations—goes beyond the bounds of journalism."

"This is why journalism is a vital component of free society," Neji said baldly. "There are rumors that the Capital is sending federal 'peacekeepeers'—we publish this, and they certainly will. Before that—we must, we will report. Report everything. Can this level of corruption exist without federal roots? They will try to bury it, Uncle."

Hiashi agreed, "Your intuition serves you well," he said, reaching for calm, for reason. There was so little room left in his psyche for reason. "But build from it logically! Konoha does not exist in a vacuum. This—" he lifted the sheaf of paper in his hand, yellowed pages with curling edges, typewritten records of business exchanges: land and money and human life, dated from the very nascence of their nation—"is evidence of power that has lasted as long as it has because it is real. Wisdom requires respecting limits, Neji. Particularly your own."

"Everything we have evidence for, everything we don't have evidence for—yet—everything wrong here exists because we allow it to exist," Neji said. The boy could hardly stand, and yet he did; perhaps to counterbalance the perceived vulnerability of requiring a neck brace. "It exists because we—the Hyuuga, the clans—we benefit from it. It exists because we have traded our silence, our compliance, for the privilege we enjoy. Privilege, power, opportunity. Immunity. At the cost of all of this. It exists because we want it to exist."

Neji would not let him avoid his eyes, and Hiashi saw in them fury too fierce for fear. How many hours since this child rammed full-speed into an armored KPD vehicle? "The populace is not ready for this. They are not equipped to interpret—"

"I'll make them understand. That's what good journalism is, isn't it, Hiashi-sama? Making needed facts accessible."

And upstairs—his daughter—his granddaughter. If the determination in Neji's eyes burned too hot, too reckless and dangerous—it paled to what he'd beheld in Hinata's, in that moment before she braced her shoulders and let her child leave the safety of her arms for a moment in his.

Only a moment. Mirai.

Uchiha Sasuke wrote of dead children, sent his words to every journalist, reporter, producer, editor, assistant. Demanded: I tell you about these three because I have undeniable evidence. Did you think it was only these three? There are many. Does it matter how many? How many dead kids have to be forced in front of your face before you care? Before you make it stop?

This was the only world Hinata had to offer her (perfect, precious, pure) child. Without even the Hyuuga name to protect (condemn) her. How many dead kids?

"I cannot protect you," Hiashi murmured, and letting this confession fill the space between himself and his nephew required all the air in his lungs, and sapped strength needed to replace what was lost. "I gave my word to stand with you, Neji, as you stood by Namikaze Naruto. My word is, as ever, my bond. But I...I cannot protect you. My reach is not deep enough—if you are blamed for this release, you will become the target of every Uchiha, their allies, even their enemies—Shimura, and all loyal to him—I must take your place. I must take your place."
It was clear. Quite suddenly, with ease and an alien lightness of burdens lifted, all was clear. "Yes. Yes, son, you are correct. We must report. We will report. Everything. But under my name, and only mine. Disavow me. Claim a new family title; I will have the records drawn up. Claim it for yourself, and Hinata, and Hanabi—"

Something settled on Neji face. Some constriction of muscle, held tight in rigid pain since the day his father died—loosened.

The man who smiled at him was one Hiashi barely recognized.

"Uncle," came quiet, warm, and—reverent—"I hear your heart. Know—know that I understand. My name—I will not give up my name. I have never been more proud to bear it."

"Ah, then," said Hiashi, when there was space for a few small words between the press of thundering heart and singing spirit, "we've a great deal of work to do."

"And never enough time to do it," Neji replied, lips quirking up, hand hesitating less than a heartbeat before settling on his uncle's shoulder. "As Naruto would say: Let's give 'em hell."

Fingers squeezed, the hand dropped, and Hyuuga Neji stepped out of hinted vulnerability like shedding an unfashionable cloak. The smile became a smirk. "Hyuuga hell."

HiiiHi

At last. Gaara didn't smile. Wasn't glad. There was part of him that believed everything Naruto said, even if he didn't believe it when anyone else said it, and Naruto said that killing was wrong.

Today, Gaara was willing to be wrong.

Today was the end of the Nine-tails. The Uchiha would die. Complete, the role of the Fox would die with them.

There was a man behind the Fox: Uzumaki Kurama. A man of many masks and many sins. He was easy to follow: strong, cunning, consistent, uncaring. A man of simple truths: freedom is an inherent right; everybody dies. Those who use power to suppress others' freedom lose all rights to life. Death makes all things equal.


A man Naruto loved.

The Fox did not tell them to fight with him. When their brother and sister Nine-tails died, he did not save them.

Everybody dies.

Gaara felt that the Fox had waited too long. Given up too much. Still: when the invitation to join in this final play was offered—pay-off for sacrifice, at-long-last justice—he was willing—eager. Let them kill him, too, if he couldn't save himself; so long as he took enough of them with him.

(Everybody dies.)
In the end, the Uchiha would be dead, the Nine-tails gone forever, and Naruto would be free.

Chomei, Utakata, Son, Saiken, Gyuki, Isobu, B. There were so few Nine-tails left.

First target in range. Second. Third.

Five shots, three dead. Satisfied, Gaara moved through the motions of repacking his rifle. His escape route stayed clear. He was in his car, en route his next coordinates, his next targets, before patrons of the teashop began to react with more than shock and blind panic. He'd waited patiently for the men to finish their meal, waited until they passed through the doors and moved where bullets that missed them would hit brick, not windows. Everybody died—but not today.

Today, judgment came for the Uchiha. If Gaara could help it, only the Uchiha.

Taking out his next marks would not be so easy. This battle would likely stretch on for hours yet, but with this first strike—if all went as planned, and because they were Nine-tails, and no-one did this work better than they, it would have—they'd already won.

A decade of hiding, maintaining only enough presence to defend their territory. A dozen Nine-tails hunted, left undefended, dead. Allowing false blame and steep casualties to give their opponents confidence: to believe, perhaps, that it was already over.

And it was over...for the Uchiha. He wouldn't be glad. But damn if he wasn't satisfied.

Check-in. Nineteen dead, two injured.

The dead were all Uchiha, as was one of the injured. The other was an unfortunate victim of crossfire. Still—only one.

And none were Nine-tails.

As part of his next attack, Gaara would be seen. Spark a chase, lead the way to the beginning. Not the beginning of the Fox, nor the Uchiha, but a beginning all the same. The beginning of the end of the Fox, perhaps.

Perhaps. Perhaps the Fox would have ended the Uchiha regardless, year by year, as had been his goal before battles for underworld ascendancy created more immediate conflict.

Gaara did not think so. When horizons grew so quickly, so powerfully, before one who had known only control and confinement, it intoxicated. Who would Uzumaki Kurama have become? What would Konohagakure be?

Devastated, Gaara thought, and thrilled and shuddered. All the devastation one man—one brilliant, raging, inspiring man—could wreck.

But it didn't matter. It did not happen. This was the beginning: one day, a boy named Naruto disappeared.

With Naruto: the Fox.

Now: the Uchiha, the KPD, would chase him into a trap. Into the place Naruto had disappeared from. The haven they took him from.

And the Fox's work of saving the only being he loved, the one life he valued above truth, above everything, would finally be done.
Naruto woke half-choked on a swallowed scream, and the smell of the bunk room and Sasuke’s hand tightening over his did not help.

_How could I—what am I—what was I thinking? What was I thinking?_ No. No no no. But he was thinking now. Painkillers wearing useless must’ve been the reason for waking, but the sleep had helped. The pain could help him think, now. Help him focus as he checked: breathing, how-much-can-I-move, who's-here-who's-not-here, exits.

Sasuke was there. Extra pissed off ’cause he was that deadly trifecta of tired, scared, and genuinely concerned. Itachi wasn’t there. Neither Namikaze—they must be in one of the other rooms. Good. Lucky.

No wasting this luck.

"What, Naruto?"

...That wasn't the first time Sasuke'd asked.

"Hunting," Naruto said. Croaked. He sounded like shit. "He said he's hunting."

"Yeah, and you said we were safe here," Sasuke said, uncertain.

"We are. We are. It's just...everyone outside. Your...your clan, Sasuke."

He couldn’t see much of Sasuke's face. The replies Sasuke didn't say came awfully loud.

Naruto closed his eyes. "I'll stop him. I'll stop—I swear it, Sasuke. I swear it. You see our coats?"

Must be on the bunk Sasuke's eyes flicked to. Flinched away from. Naruto gathered himself, stringing just enough order and will through muscles and bones and all the connective tissue in between that screamed they could never move again to make them move again, just like he had so many times before.

Stood up.

"No," said Sasuke. Well. Almost-said it. Naruto felt it in the breath that hit his face even if he didn't quite catch it with his ears. "You're not okay, Naruto. Just...just rest. Tell me how to get there in time."

"Get there to do what?" Saying that was a little mean, but it was the kind of truth that needed to be a little mean. "I'm up. I'm good. ...Not good enough to get there on my own, though. Too slow."

There was a scrape of a chair in the other room, low murmurs of protectors they had to get away from.

Sasuke handed over his coat, got on his own, his boots, knelt to shove on Naruto's while Naruto still struggled with zipping up his coat. His ribs were killing him. Making it hard to breathe. Sasuke looked up, eyes all narrow and stressed and suspicious. Jerked his chin at the half-open bunk room door. "Plan?"
"Not that way," said Naruto. Staggered around until he found the stolen cop's gun, right where he'd heard Namikaze hide it. "Pop out the ceiling tile over there—yeah, this bunk—hang on, I need—" Sasuke was already down from the bunk, quick like a cat, boosting him up.

Every foxhole had a back door. Or, like, three back doors. This one was actually the best one for what they needed now—more luck—'cause it led to the garage.

"Holy shit," said Sasuke, once they'd crawled through a bit of ceiling and come out into the hidden core of the nine-level building Kyuubi built his home base in. This part went up four stories: two underground, two above ground. It looked big and extra-creepy in the dark, platforms and climbing structures reaching out from shaft walls like bony hands. Black water flowed below, faster than it looked. Sasuke's whispered shit still echoed, just a tiny bit.

"So yeah, here you see my totally awesome parkour playground," Naruto said, right in Sasuke'a ear where it wouldn't echo. "Told you I had one. We gotta get up one floor—just to there."

"You okay to—"

Naruto was honestly offended. "Yeeep. Faster than you."

He proved it. Covered the way he shuddered when he breathed by the time he reached the top by fetching car keys from a secret safe. It should've been cool, showing off all this for Sasuke, just like he'd daydreamed a couple times when they were kids. Right now every breath was a balance between pain and panic and he'd been fucking sleeping while the Fox was hunting.

There was a shout—Namikaze—Dad. Screaming his name, the syllables bounding and building off the walls of the empty training room, and there was a moment where Naruto couldn't move. Not his lungs. Not his heart.

Then Sasuke was shoving him, wrestling him into the driver's seat of the car he'd just unlocked, slamming the door, rushing around to fling himself in on the passenger side. Pulling the seatbelt on, turning to stare at Naruto with a face of unmatching angles. Broken. Undecided.

Itachi was yelling now too. Wait, wait, he said. Please wait. Naruto hadn't been able to imagine what Itachi yelling would sound like, before.

"We going?" said Sasuke. Voice cut sharp, like his face.

"Yeah," said Naruto. Turned the key. Flicked on headlights, hit the remote to open the gate. Revved the engine so it was harder to hear the desperate shouting.

Stop it stop it stop it, Naruto thought, at his brain for making images of Sasuke's family, of Sasuke, with dead eyes and cut cheeks. At the Fox, for making it reality.

The gate was open. The proximity radar on the dash wasn't blinking. Clear.

He caught a fleeting image of his dad, a reaching running figure in his rearview mirror.

"I'll stop him. I'll stop him," he said, without moving his jaw, because his teeth were clamped on pain too tight. Floored the gas. Roared down the tunnel, hit the breaks for the sharp right turn, burst out into the last of Konoha's light.

MuUuM
"You've come. I did wonder...if you would come. We had an agreement, after all."

Fading light through stained glass splashed color across floors and walls and little cases protecting priceless artifacts; Kurama snorted, irreverent enough to balance out Uchiha-level melodrama. They were the same age, or close to it, Uchiha Madara and Uzumaki Kurama; Kurama had never known his true age, but he and Madara had been raised as near-brothers, and been fairly matched.

It surprised him, a little, how old Madara looked.

"A broken agreement. I'm a bit late—twelve years late. But I always come."

"Broken? Have I hampered your freedom? That was my end of the oath—opening the way for you. I could not have leashed you in again, even had I wanted to."

They'd been twenty-four. Or Madara had been. Young, burning, and Madara fool enough to stoke that fire beyond control, for love.

Forbidden love. Of course.

How Kurama had mocked him. *Set me free? Set me free, you fool, and your family is mine. To end. To kill. I'll kill them all. You know I can.*

*End them,* Madara had said. No sanity in his eyes, in the hands that gripped Kurama, gripped so tight that the stitching of Kurama's coat ripped. His only coat. *Hashirama must live. Do you hear me? Kill them—kill me, but Hashirama—!*

Too ruled by fear, too conditioned in his obedience to Madara's father, Kurama had set out to kill the Senju hero anyway. Even for his own freedom, he could not go against his training, master his own fear—until Mito.

So Kurama was no less a fool than Madara. They were both...young. Hardened and battle-trained, but not yet broken, enough, to resist promises that felt like love.

Even now, Madara could not leave his Senju behind. He faced Kurama between displays of Hashirama's military uniform and the ceremonial robes he'd worn to celebrate peace, and there was no more sanity behind those over-bright eyes than there had been on the day he let loose his family's murderer. "Don't speak of our oath," said Kurama. Cast the words that would justify a blood-brother's death. "You became your father."

Madara listed over his cane, katana swaying at his hip. An old man in a room of old things. Alive, Kurama assumed, for nothing but spite. "Hashirama died."

"Of illness. Not by my hand."

How the madness showed. Rage and spittle, too-white eyes. "What does it matter, how he died? It only matters that he is dead!"

"Then join him," said Kurama, darkly amused. "I can help with that."

Madara smiled back. "Yes, yes, you could," he said. "But you shall not. I traded my family for Hashirama, and the gods did not honor that trade. No—no! They returned my family. So many young Uchiha, so bitter over prestige lost, power they ought to have been born to. Whelps who have earned nothing, when Izuna paid *everything*—but I don't tell them that. I only whisper what
they want to hear. Namikaze took what is yours, I told them. A boy with no clan, no pedigree—yes, this was what their unearned envy wishes to hear, and so long as I speak it, they listen. They listen! But when I gave them Namikaze, they were bested by the Fox. Their own weapon—! And then they were taunted, for years and years, by a child. Idiots, all of them, and how easily I mold their rage..."

A thunk of metal into wood; Kurama's knife quivered in the shaft of Madara's scabbard, halted twenty centimeters before his heart.

A test. A test, that first knife, and Madara proved he was Madara still.

"Konoha will burn beneath the rage of the Uchiha," Madara said, eyes bright in sunken sockets, teeth bared. Stepped forward, katana unsheathed.

Kurama flipped another knife. This wasn't a fight with honor; neither of them pretended to it. Still—not a fight for guns. There were old equalities to settle.

"You won't kill me here." There was no fear in Madara's eyes, no weakness in the graceful extension of his katana. "I still have use for this empty life, for my foolish kin. I will fan the flames of the Uchiha into a firestorm that leaves cursed Konohagakure the steaming heap of ash and anarchy it truly is. Won't you join us?"

"I've killed more than half your whelps already," Kurama said dryly. "I figure there'll be about a quarter left when you and I are finished. Then I'll go help my Nine-tails mop up the rest. Konoha can hang, but I doubt it will burn."

"Your Nine-tails are dead." Madara tossed his words aside with a flick of his blade, a steady step forward, a whirl forcing momentum into the first hissing strike.

They closed. Clashed. Steel on steel. Slower than they'd once been, but the blows sank deep into Kurama's bones, rippling shock and leaving muscles ringing.

"Many are," Kurama agreed, feinting, falling back. This was an old dance. Madara was stronger, more talented; Kurama calmer, more cerebral, more vicious. "Your Akatsuki fight well. Pity so many of mine were lost."

"I almost believe you haven't changed!" Madara laughed, lunged, breath already catching at his words. Kurama blocked two blows, ached, parried. His next attack drew blood, a sluggish darkening along Madara's forearm, and they let distance fall between them.

"Twelve years." Madara sounded thoughtful, breathing easily again. A feint? "Almost believed. Twelve years—so it is the boy. I suspected. I wondered if in him, you remade yourself. That you hadn't changed, hadn't created this weakness—but you care, don't you, Kyuubi?"

Kurama took the offensive, stalking, words and blades low. He knew how Madara would move, now. What had changed; what had not. "It is you who sank into your father's shadow, not me. Remade myself? Never."

The meeting and sliding and ringing of blades crescendoed, furious, and Madara's words hissed between them: "Never? You stole a child, kept him imprisoned! Trained him up to kill as skillfully as you kill, beat the softness from his heart, hid him from devoted parents and a privileged life, cut his face, took his freedom—"

The sound Kurama made may have been a word, a denial, had its syllable not choked on hate. He was faster than Madara now, matching blow for blow, driving him back, to where his knife would
pin him to the wall. A butterfly for the museum.

He would finish the job slowly.

Madara moved like black eels in dark water, fast and efficient as only a master of the blade could be; knocked the knife aside; it rammed concrete. Kurama's second blade locked with the katana, held. "I have taken no one's freedom," Kurama said quietly, let Madara feel the heat of each word on his face. "That is what Uchiha do. The innocent lives your father used to chain me to him—you have made his methods more vile. Free choice and tortured conscience kept me in his thrall. But you—took away even that much choice. Physical control over a child's heart—only you would go so far, Uchiha Madara."

"Failsafe," said Madara. Smiled a little, a twisted tug of lips. "Brilliance learned from failing even when I succeeded. You must have noticed Itachi? I recognized even when he was a small child—here was the only Uchiha with any value, and yet he would not be persuaded by...ordinary means. Did you think I would repeat my father's mistakes?"

"You are your father's mistake," Kurama said. "The only surprise is in Fugaku finding a way to protect his firstborn, protect him well enough that you turned on Namikaze's child instead—"

Madara laughed. "Namikaze Naruto is how Fugaku protected his son." Twisted, struck, fast as lightning; Kurama's massive shove of strength against slipping blades was all that saved him. The bust and pedestal recoil heaved him into teetered, fell, shattered.

Madara stepped forward as Kurama stepped back; looked down as he stepped over broken bits of Hashirama's head. Looked up, considering. "I wanted to control Itachi, not merely use him," he said. "The true power of the electrical implant is over those who are ruled by fondness for the one to whose heart it is connected."

As he spoke, Kurama drew three small blades, threw. Madara blocked two. It would be a slow death, at this rate. How many small cuts before an old body bled out?

He let Madara close in. *Keep talking*, he thought, almost fondly. He could take advantage of any level of distraction.

Madara struck first; struck so hard that Kurama was forced back, vision graying on one side. He'd blocked, but something in him had given. And Madara was still talking. There was a spasm, a fine tremble in the fingers wrapping the hilt of the katana. Let him talk, and feel the backlash of his own blows, and Kurama would find an opening. He needed only one. "The device itself was, of course, designed for little Sasuke. The greatest design difficulty, obviously, was making it small enough. There are only so many developing body bits that are suitable for implantation—"

The katana smashed a large display case; as Kurama dodged flying glass, another—two large vases rolled towards him, ornate, priceless, heavy. Distracting. It seemed Madara was ready for an end, too.

Or he simply wanted more drama. Kurama palmed glass. Weighed, balanced, repositioned, threw. Three small shards embedded in Madara's shoulder. Kurama's second-to-last blade twirled in his other hand, flipping, spinning, forcing circulation through his fingers. His gun stayed in its holster.

"Perhaps I should have told Fugaku that," Madara said, shoulder staining red, tone unbothered. They paced in time, circling, clockwise—counterclockwise. Shattered ceramic snapped under measured feet. "Fugaku mightn't have cared, if he'd known it was for Sasuke."
How just it would have been, Kurama thought, had Naruto followed orders. Made Uchiha Sasuke his first true kill. Stopped the heart that should have been wired with a detonator in place of his own.

*How just, and how terrible*, he thought as Madara closed again, fending off honed steel with a blade he couldn't feel, fingers numb, arm leaden, eyes catching tells his body couldn't respond to, *if Naruto became what I tried to make of him.*

The hilt of the katana smashed the knife from his hand. A display case was at his back. The katana was at his throat.

"I have bled enough for today," Madara said, soft and sober. "Before I kill you, Brother, tell me—who is the boy? This boy who changed you. Perhaps I will spare him. In honor of broken oaths."

"He is mine," said the Fox.

"Yes," said Madara. "Why? Namikaze would have been mine—why? What is Namikaze Minato to you? Who is Namikaze Naruto to you?"

Kurama smiled. He had one blade left, long and thin and favored, made to slip quick and clean through the small gaps between ribs. He may not get it through Madara's heart without flaying his neck open on Madara's katana, but he would get it there.

"Wrong name," he said. Opened his mouth to say more, but his spine thrilled and his body moved: leaned away instead of leaning in; Madara's eyes open wide; gunshot echoed and echoed and echoed.

The katana slipped. Sliced through Kurama's coat.

Madara swayed. Blood soaked his side—both sides. Kurama stepped out of the way as one Uchiha fell, met the eyes of the Uchiha behind.

Uchiha Obito stared back, mouth set grim but eyes open a little too wide. Kept the gun up, leveled unwaveringly at Kurama's face.

On the floor, Madara twisted his head back, choked, spat blood.

Obito spoke. "I've alerted the authorities. Federal security forces will be here shortly. I—asked for an ambulance, too." He stepped forward, two steps, three, and he really should have kept his eyes on Kurama, rather than stealing glances down at his kinsman, each growing longer and heavier with guilt and concern.

Kurama knocked the gun from the boy's hand far too easily.

"You're Kushina's boy," he said, while Obito stared down the barrel of Kurama's pistol. "Well, Kushina's Boy, you can be witness to your uncle's last-ever answer."

He kept the pistol pointed as he knelt near Madara's head, mindful of puddling blood. Flipped the knife in his other hand from stab-up to stab-down. "I hope your Senju is waiting for you, wherever you go," he said. "Your answer, blood-brother, is a name."

A warning shot at the other Uchiha, to keep him in place. The bullet ricocheted an inch from Obito's feet, and he staggered back.

Good. To Madara: "Three names, 'cause you're bleeding a lot and I want to make sure you
understand." Madara's eyes, pooling with blood, fixed on his. Kurama saw a boy he'd trained and sparred and bled with, the young man he'd made a devil's deal with, the old man who saw beating hearts as tools to toy with. "Uzumaki Mito," he said. He'd taken her name as his own, too, but Madara would never know that. "Uzumaki Kushina."

Brought his hand down, sure and fast, until the fist wrapped around its hilt stilled over the final beat of Uchiha Madara's heart.

"Uzumaki Naruto."

Done. Obito was crying out, swearing and pleading, saying he only wanted to end the killing, the endless killing, old clan leaders buying little bits of power with young people's lives.

Well, he wasn't wrong. Kurama cut three lines on either side of Madara's face with a pointed shard of white pottery. Part of Hashirama's bust, perhaps? That would be fitting.

Sirens. Kurama stood, rolling echoes of Madara's blows from his arms and neck and shoulders, and considered the still-breathing Uchiha in the room. Obito shut up, stared back. Fists tight, chin up, red-eyed.

Uchiha. Every unflinching inch Uchiha. Kurama flicked the safety off, settled a finger on the trigger.

In the inhale before the bullet flew, Obito didn't look like an Uchiha.

He looked like Kushina.

Kurama missed.

"Well," he said, after a beat. "She saved one of them, anyway." He tapped the safety back on, pocketed the pistol, kicked Obito's gun further from reach as he made his way out. A SWAT team was assembling outside—kid might not make it anyway, if they shot first, asked second. They'd find no more of the Fox than the signature on Madara's face.

He went through the door Madara had come through to meet him, and barred and trapped it behind him. It was hidden, of course. Well-crafted. Looked just like the rest of the wall. If he turned back, killed Obito, there was very little chance they'd find it.

He wandered through Madara's home instead, noting with interest certain small ornaments he recognized from Uchiha Tajima's manor; relics of a shared and brutal childhood. Found the Gate—as expected. Mad old Madara was exactly the predictable copy-cat earnest young Madara had been.

Beyond false walls, automated gunfire exploded. Updates from Nine-tails lit the small screen of his phone.

The day was theirs.

How bitter the road he walked. How sweet, thought the Fox, Naruto's face bright in his brain, easy and free with no enemy to cast fear or shadow—how sweet to meet this end.
"So here's the plan," said Naruto, driving too fast the wrong way down a one-way road, and Sasuke grabbed the oh-shit handle as they swerved around a car blaring its horn with inches to spare. "Watch the Xs. We find the cop cars, we follow the cop cars, we don't get caught by the cop cars."

Sounded like a shit plan. "Follow police without getting caught by police. Okay. This stops the Fox? I'm calling my mom." He'd already tried his father. No answer. First time he'd called him in two and a half years, and he didn't fucking answer.

Naruto spared half a second to look at Sasuke and Sasuke's phone like he wanted to say something, but then he hit the brakes and careened around a corner so fast the phone jumped out of Sasuke's hand and he had to swear and catch it and hope his mom hadn't answered in time to hear the swear. "I'm here, I'm here," he said, because he could hear his mom's voice and the panic behind it before he even got the phone back up to his ear. "Yeah, totally safe. With Naruto. Itachi is here too. And Naruto's dad. We're all good." Covered the mic end of the phone quickly as a delivery truck hit the horn and held it. Flipped Naruto off with his free hand. "What about you, what about you, Mom? Oh—you're with—that's good. Yeah. You're gonna stay there? Yeah, she's beautiful." They were merging onto one of the main downtown arteries now. Streetlights were clicking on, one after another, all down the thoroughfare. Glimpses of sky between buildings glowed with red-orange-purple sunset. "Listen I'm—I'm going to hang up. I'll—yes, I promise, I will. I'll call you soon. Stay where you are, okay? Stay safe. I—" he looked at Naruto, almost didn't say the words, but Naruto was staring straight ahead with intensity that was terrifying and did it really matter if he heard? "Love you, Mom."

"Your mom took her to Hinata," Sasuke told Naruto. Who was pushing 100kph in the middle of the city. There weren't nearly as many cars on the road as there should be, but—"to Mirai. They're safe, right? They're all safe?"

"Yeah," said Naruto, and something about his face and his shoulders and the way he gripped the wheel lightened up a bit, like things weren't quite as awful as he'd thought they were. "My mom knows what's up. They're with her. So they're safe."

Sasuke debated letting on that their moms weren't together anymore. That his mom said Kushina left. But the proximity radar started off—one, no, two Xs on the little screen—and Naruto leaned forward, the same super-focused eyes and lopsided tilt to his mouth he got just before scoring a trick shot in hockey, and careened right off the main road, whipped left a block later, sped along a side road that ran parallel. Seemed to be keeping pace with the little Xs on the screen. There were three now.

"Why we chasing cops, dobe?"

"They're chasing the Fox," said Naruto, after a jarring almost-pause at a stop sign. At least they were going the right direction down a one-way road this time. "Gotta get to the Fox. He'll have set some kind of trap. Draw 'em all in. Don't know where, though. Thought it'd be city center but we're heading past that. Turn on the radio. News."

Sasuke did. It was already set to a news station, so he looked down at his phone. Regional emergency text alerts. "Naruto, they're putting the city on lockdown—active shooter alert—" so
many missed calls. From his mom, Naruto's mom, Sakura—the radio was repeating what the text alerts were saying, so Sasuke skipped past them and called Sakura.

"You're okay," he said and she said, too fast, at the same time. Sakura didn't really sound okay though. There was a fourth X on the proximity radar.

"I'm at KPD Central," she said. "Naruto's mom called me—she said you were in danger, and you wouldn't answer your phone, and she said all the Uchiha were in danger—so—I came here—I didn't know where else to look for, for any Uchiha, to try to tell them—they didn't take me seriously on the phone—but you're, oh, oh Sasuke, please say something, I thought—I thought—"

"Sakura's at KPD Central," he said to Naruto. To Sakura, he said: "Get out of there—"

—and Naruto was already turning, away from his trail of Xs, back to the main road, back towards KPD Central, yelling at Sasuke that Sakura couldn't be there. "TELL HER TO GET OUT! Or, or, find a hiding place—we'll come for her—The Fox, Sasuke, I don't think that's his main target because—but it is a target, it's always a target—"

Sakura must have heard him. There was something in her voice that cracked his chest. She was crying. She said, "He was already here. The Fox was already here. There're…I watched people die today, Sasuke."

"He was already there," Sasuke echoed, numb. "Sakura…Sakura, we're—we're coming—"

"No," she said. "No, no, do you hear me? Do you hear me, Sasuke? They'll kill Naruto. They've been talking about him. Go away, go away. His mom—Kushina was here. She stopped the—stopped the shooting, stopped the Ninetails. She saved KPD officers, Sasuke, and some of them wanted to kill her anyway. Tell Naruto he can't come here. He can't—"

Sasuke risked a glance at Naruto—told him the part of what Sakura said that wasn't about his mother, that the Nine-tails had come and gone, that it was too late, that it wasn't safe—Naruto ground his jaw, but careened back to the road they'd raced along a minute before. Sasuke tried to whisper so only Sakura would hear his panic: "His mom—is she—is she okay?"

"She was when she left."

"You should leave too."

"I will. Not yet."

"Sakura—"

"No, I—I saw people die—and I stopped one from dying. At least one. Maybe—maybe two. Some medics have arrived, but everything's in chaos, the whole city's in chaos, and there are people here still waiting for help. I'm going to help them. I'm going to help."

"Ask about your dad, Sasuke."

"Did you—my father, did you see—"

"He left," she said. "I was in the main lobby, trying to make someone listen to me. Anyone. And—some kind of alarm sounded, and all these officers came running through, to their cars. Your dad was with them. The first four cars headed out, he must have gone in one of them, I guess, I think, and then—and then—it just—I guess they started shooting, it was like the whole front of the building exploded—"
She sobbed and he breathed, reaching for words where there were none, and then she said: "Kushina will stop the Fox. I know she can. I know she will. Make Naruto stay safe, okay? Okay?"

And Naruto was saying: "Tell her I'm going to stop him. Tell her it'll be okay, Sasuke. I swear I'll make it okay."

Sasuke said, sick and trying not to show it: "Okay."

"I'm going to go," she said, suddenly sober, suddenly confident, and she must be faking but—he believed her. He believed that she was helping. That she was saving people.

His people.

He said: "Stay—stay safe. Please. Please, Sakura."

"Same," she said. Right into the phone, so he heard her breath shuddering around each word. "Love you, Sasuke. Love you both. Come back. Promise to come back."

She hung up first. Maybe because she knew he wouldn't promise.

"She's okay," he told Naruto. Several times, because Naruto wasn't showing any sign of hearing. They hadn't picked up any Xs on the proximity radar.


"Where—" said Naruto, staring ahead like he might see what the radar wasn't, spinning onto another road now, driving faster than his reflexes could save them—"where, come on, where—"

The proximity radar beeped.

One X. Two Xs.

Five Xs.

Naruto slowed down. Leaned back a little, breathing hard. Kept pace.

Then—behind them. Maybe four blocks back when Sasuke noticed, now three: a car that looked just like theirs.

"Naruto—"

"It's Itachi," said Naruto. There were seven Xs now, though they must be a street away, because there were no cars in front of them. Only behind. They were in the suburbs already, and soon they'd have to veer back to the main road. The city grid would end, and if they were going to keep following, they couldn't do it by hiding on a parallel road. "And my dad."

"How—?" started Sasuke, then realized, gut swooping—"my phone. Itachi's tracking my phone."

Naruto didn't say anything.

"I—fuck, Naruto, I—"

"Hold on," said Naruto, and turned hard, and yes, there were lots of siren lights racing, blazing up ahead. Naruto eased up on the gas until they couldn't see the flashing lights anymore, until only two Xs registered on the proximity radar, but they kept going.
They were leaving Konoha now. There wasn't much on this side of town—a few upscale gated communities, a golf course, the borders of a nature reserve.

He could see Itachi staring at him through the windshield of the car behind them. Namikaze was driving, so Itachi—Itachi was just...staring. Until he lifted a phone to his ear.

Sasuke's phone started buzzing.

"It'll be okay," Naruto said quietly, eyes flicking to the rearview mirror and back again. "It'll be okay, because I'm gonna stop him. I'll stop the Fox and then—and then we'll work the rest out. It'll work out."

_No, it won't be okay,_ Sasuke thought, staring at the number on his screen. Sweat stuck his shirt to his skin. Guilt blocked his throat, his chest ached from his heart working too hard and—and Father and the Fox before them, Naruto beside him, Itachi and Naruto's father behind them—no safe places, not for any of them.

"Should we—should we try to lose them? I can disable my phone. Or—throw it. Out the window."

"Can't take the time to lose them." Naruto looked so...stuck. Grim. "Nah, don't worry about it. They're not stupid. Figured out how to get into one of the Old Fox's cars...heh. I don't think my dad's gonna try to run me off the road, hasn't even tried passing us, so. So. It'll be okay. We just gotta get there—what are they—gotta get there first. What are the coppers doing?"

Their speed hadn't changed, but the Xs on the screen were bunching, blinking. Two, then five, then six. Naruto slowed, flashed his emergency lights once—switched off all the lights. They were going to run off the road. It was too dark. Sasuke wiped his palms on his jeans, looked back. Two breaths, three—Namikaze switched off his lights.

"Thank you," Naruto breathed. And then they could see the KPD. Two set up on either side of a side road that veered left, into the beginnings of woods and up the foothills; the others turning up that road, one-by-one, lights blazing.

"We can't follow them up there," Sasuke said, numb. "Any second now a KPD officer was going to look back and see them, and—"

Naruto drove off the road.

Sasuke swallowed _what are you doing_ and a whole lot of swears and thought about how maybe it was better, to die driving into a tree in the dark, than to be shot by his father's men. Or his father. Twisted around, trying to catch a glimpse of Itachi, but already all he could see was trees and all he could hear was their tires crunching underbrush and spinning in patches of snow and soft forest loam and the hot rush of his pulse in his ears.

They zigzagged up and up and their engine whined and roared as Naruto changed gears, tacked left, tacked right, until they crested—something. The first of the foothills. Trees cut off ahead of them, and the sky was brighter up here, moon rising bright. Naruto cut the engine.

"Think this is as far as I dare take the car," he said. "But let's—check it out. If it looks like they're going a lot further—" he cut off, got out of his seatbelt, so Sasuke did the same. Hurried around the car when he saw Naruto holding onto it, face twisted up like he couldn't breathe, got where Naruto could hold on to him instead. Got Naruto's arm over his shoulders, shrugged off the winced thanks that came with it, and like that they crossed the last few meters to the edge of the hill, where a
fence began and a valley spread out below them. They could see the road and the KPD racing down it with their lights flashing and the Naka river shining. They could see a little group of walled summer houses on the river, and ringed around: nine bonfires blazing.

"Found him," said Naruto.

Naruto kicked a rotting fence post as they turned back to the car. "...Think we can drive through this?"

Sasuke looked at KPD sirens and Nine-tails bonfires, the shrinking distance between, thought of Father and the Fox, said: "Shall we find out?"

There was a moment of Naruto's wild grin, ridiculous and glowing; then they were three-legged hop-running back to the car, scrambling in, snapping seatbelts on. The engine came on and Naruto brought it to a roar. Opened his face wide for his own battle roar: they smashed the fence. Hurtled down the hill, bumping, dangerously close to spinning, fires and sirens growing brighter brighter brighter.

Something exploded. Then—pops, lots and lots of sharp pops, and another explosion, and Naruto was beating out a rhythm with the car horn, something Sasuke prayed was some sort of signal for the Nine-tails to hold their fire because—because those pops were bullets. Nothing was hitting them, maybe not even aimed for them—yet—

They blasted between bonfires, and something white filled in everything Sasuke saw, and there was an awful jerking recoil and Naruto hissing pain and tires screaming and: they stopped.

Sasuke opened eyes he hadn't meant to close, saw: a wall. A white wall.

"Freaking ribs," Naruto was saying, grinding out between clenched teeth. "Freaking hurt. Come on. We're okay. Let's go."

Opening his door felt strange, like doing it might mash him into the smear-on-a-wall he'd almost become, but there he was: breathing and standing, weird burning smells around him but the car intact beside him, and Naruto was staggering out on the other side and needed someone to hold him up so: Sasuke went. Helped Naruto climb onto the too-hot hood of the car. Launched himself up, onto-the-car onto-the-wall, and then he was hauling Naruto up the wall—Naruto braced on top, dropped, rolled—Sasuke touched town beside him.

Naruto was looking at him. Looking at him with a hand pressed to his ribs, and his eyes and mouth stretched thin in pain, but Sasuke thought it wasn't from fractured bone. "Listen," Naruto said. "Listen, Sasuke, he knows—knows it's me, 'cause of the signal I sent with the horn, but he—the Fox—he might attack anyway. Attack me. And you—you gotta stay out of it. No—you have to—okay, okay? I know what I'm doing. There are rules. You stay out of it, he leaves you alone. But if you try—if you try—"

He was trying to come up with the words and they weren't coming, but Naruto must see it all in his face, because he grabbed him, fingers digging in and the way he looked made Sasuke's adrenaline-mad heart stutter. Naruto said: "I've got one chance to save your dad, Sasuke. One. If we're not too late."

Sasuke closed his eyes. Tried to breathe. Opened them. "Okay," he said. "Okay, Naruto."

The pulled-tight edges of Naruto's face fell in again, let the we're-doing-something-stupid-together
smile lift up again. Fingers eased. One hand patted his shoulder. Then both hands pushed off him, pushed up, and they were standing.

A man was watching them. A huge man, wide and tall with skin that matched the sky and what looked like a grenade launcher slung over one shoulder.

Naruto stepped in front of Sasuke.

The man said, "You sure, Naruto? You true?"

Naruto said, "Yeah, B," and Sasuke couldn't see his face, but he knew from his voice what it would look like. Determination and fear-nothing grin.

'B' shrugged. Let them by. With a fistbump for Naruto on the way.

They followed the wall, half-pressed into it, gunfire popping on the other side of the house. Found a door, slightly open.

"Behind me," ordered Naruto. Sasuke obeyed. Again.

They went in.

"I know where we are," said Minato, staring, gasping air in, spine so straight it hurt. "I know why we're here."

Itachi watched him with careful eyes, still listening intently to the KPD channel he'd hacked.

They'd lost Naruto's car. He'd given in, turned his lights off as he thought Naruto wanted him to. Had to slow to a crawl while his eyes adjusted, make sure he didn't run them into the black SUV Naruto was driving.

Naruto's car was gone. There were two KPD cars stationed on either side of a side road as though guarding it, the lights of several other cars disappearing up that road, but where Naruto had gone—how he'd gotten past the police barricade—Minato had no idea.

Then the side-road signpost registered, and recognition swooped stole his air.

"Our old summer cabin is up there," he said, when he had control of his lungs again. "Where we went to get away from—the city, politics, you know, everything."

"The Naruto was abducted from," Itachi said, eyes wide in instant understanding. "It is a trap, then."

"Of course it's a trap. ...I need those KPD cars to move."

"And once they move?"

"There's a turn-off part way—we can come in from the back, But the only connection to the main road is here."
Itachi looked at him, and at the lights of the KPD vehicles, and Minato was sure the younger man could feel the ticking time in every frantic beat of his heart. "This will only work once," he warned. Lifted the radio. Closed his eyes. Screamed: "—backup! Get me backup! west road, kilometer marker—aaAAGGGHHH—marker 43—" and a string of frantic 10-codes, sounding desperate, like he was dying, like Minato could never have imagined him sounding.

"Copy, copy, we're sending—"

"Don't send! Come! Come—" and, radio off, to Minato: "Pull over."

Minato did. All the way off the road. Seconds later, two KPD cars streamed by him, sirens warming up, hitting shrill.

No time. No time. Minato shot onto the road, made the turn onto the little country side road, chose speed over stealth and switched on his lights—then his brights. The turn-off wasn't a road, really, more of a walking path—leading to favorite fishing spots along the river—there—

They could see bonfires, winking in and out of view between trees and hillocks, and then they could hear gunfire.

Itachi was down on the floor of the car. Had a gun in his hand. Minato crouched as low as he dared. There was the river—about half a kilometer from here—and there, the path leading from the docks to the house—

A figure stood in the path. Shotgun in each hand. Nothing but black for eyes—

"Gaara!" Minato shouted, hitting the brakes, rolling down the window, lifted bare hands— "Gaara—I have to—have to—"

Black-painted eyes opened, pierced Minato.

*What do I say? What do I need to say to—*

"Save him."

Minato put his hands down. Slowly.

"Naruto went in. Bring him out."

"Yes," said Minato. "Yes, I have to save him."

Gaara stepped aside. Melted into the reeds.

Fingers shaking, everything shaking, Minato drove the last few yards. Ducked low as gunfire burst. Heard Itachi moving beside him, almost crawling through the weeds and the reeds between the river trail and the wall, until they met the little back gate, where Minato paused, breathed.

"We get the boys. We run," he said, a simple plan, a terrible plan, and Itachi nodded, and they went in.
They were in a kitchen. Small, old fashioned, empty.

Familiar.

"I know this place," Sasuke said, so soft it was mostly his lips moving, but Naruto caught it, frowned, moved forward. There were two doors, and Naruto looked between them. He was standing very, very still.

Listening, Sasuke knew. Tried to quiet everything, especially his frenzied heart, so Naruto could hear what needed to be heard.

"Uchiha Fugaku," someone said—a woman, maybe, though it was hard to tell—and there was a sound like—like something big falling, hitting more than one surface as it fell, something like—a body.

He couldn't breathe. He couldn't breathe.

The next voice he knew. Knew, and felt bile rise. "Welcome to the end," said the Fox.

Naruto stepped silently up to one door.

Heavy footsteps. Another door closed. The firefight was—dying out. There were little clusters of gunshot, muffled by old walls, a cut-off cry.

Sasuke's fists shook. Pain spiked in his jaw; he unclenched his teeth. He'd promised Naruto. He had good reasons for following Naruto. He made air go out slow, soft. Made air come in: slow, soft.

Silent.

One step, two, three, four. Slow. Silent. Right behind Naruto. Naruto's hand was on the doorknob.

"Your wife used to bring your children here to play," said the Fox. "What was their favorite game? Hide and seek?"

He couldn't hear Naruto breathing, though he felt him trembling.

"Focus, Uchiha. No one's coming to save you. Your men are dead. The end of the Uchiha—bit late, too-well earned, but fiery. Your forefathers would appreciate that. Now—hide and seek. Children, happy, innocent, playing. In the house, in the garden. Not allowed near the river. Naruto told me all about it, in the early days. Where you can hide—"

The door slammed open. "—where you can't," said the Fox.

A hand shot out. Caught Naruto. Lifted him, shook him, threw him. Naruto—let it. Only brought his hands up to brace against the wall as he hit it, and then he was pushing off of it, breathing sharp short gasps, and Sasuke could taste blood in his mouth but Naruto—Naruto was calm.

"You shouldn't be here," growled the Fox. He sounded so angry. So deadly. And so angry.

"I want to be here," said Naruto. Chin up. Eyes too bright.

And then Sasuke saw Father. In full uniform, minus the belt, minus the cap, and moving, and—not bleeding. He looked-okay. Love surged in Sasuke. His stomach turned, his throat gulped air.
Relief. Fear. Father's face was cold, with an expression that looked too much like Itachi's.

The Fox saw Sasuke, and Sasuke went cold and hot and stupidly stared, and Father was getting into a crouch from where he'd been thrown on the floor, and the Fox snapped eyes-like-ice back to Father, lifted a pistol from his belt, said: "kneel."

"You're not killing him," said Naruto. "I claim him."

"I reject your claim," said the Fox.

"You can't. You have to stop." Naruto sounded—so raw. True. "You have to stop," and they moved.

Crashed, knives fists and the gun still in the Fox's left hand, so he fought Naruto only with his right. And Sasuke didn't know—who had moved first—he needed to get to Father—

Naruto grunted. A small sound. A horrible sound. His knife was gone, and he was curled in on himself, and Sasuke knew—knew that block wasn't enough. That arm again, reaching, shaking Naruto like a broken doll, the Fox bellowing: "Know when you're done, know when you're done, brat! You were safe. You were safe. But you come here—this is for you. For you." And he threw him. Again.

No hands made it up in time to catch the fall, this time. Naruto's face hit the wall, and then the rest of him, and then he was on the floor.

Sasuke lunged. He would kill the Fox. Kill.

Stopped. Someone—someone was holding him. Shouting his name. Shouting to stop. Pulling him away, getting between Sasuke and the Fox, someone too smart, too strong, Sasuke should've fought free already, someone—"Itachi."

"Itachi. Here. Now. No!"

Another man was pushing past them, past the Fox and Father like they weren't even there, throwing himself over where Naruto lay, silent and still—

Namikaze.

"Itachi," snarled Father, and while the name curled harsh, unforgiving, felt like a whip, panic bled through too. "Itachi, your brother—get Sasuke out—I will resolve matters here—GET OUT—"

Sasuke had never, ever, heard his father raise his voice. His vision blurred with what must be tears and he fought half-blind, half-mad—Itachi was struggling to hold him, he could feel it in the building pressure of his brother's hold—the Fox smiled, wide and cruel.

"Let them out," said Namikaze, eyes dangerous from where he crouched over Naruto. "Let the boys go, Kurama. They have no place here."

"Go," said the Fox, jerking his chin at the Uchiha brothers, Naruto, and even Minato. "I do not want Naruto here. He wants to save the Uchiha spawn—I allow him that much. Though if we are to think of justice—what of the justice, Uchiha-san? To have your sons witness the death you plotted for the only other child here—that is justice. Perhaps I should have your children stay."

"I'M NOT GOING!" roared Sasuke. "We can't, aniki, we can't—Father—"
"Last chances. Leave now, or not at all," said the Fox, and Itachi managed two steps towards the
door against all of Sasuke's will and fight and muscle before he ripped free, lunged for Father.
Itachi was on him again in a second, not holding back this time, grappling hard enough to hurt.

"Stop this, Kurama, we need time—" cried Namikaze, Naruto half-slung over his shoulder, and in
that half-breath moment his attention split, darting desperately between three boys and all he failed,
always, to protect.

Naruto's head lifted. Sasuke saw it, a flare of wild hope.

"Time's up," said the Fox. "Cover your brother's eyes if you wish, Itachi-kun."

Father knelt straight and still, unshaking hands on folded knees, shoulders broad, head unbowed.
"May my death absolve my children," he said quietly, and the words rippled through the room,
cold and clear. "I beg their protection, Minato." His eyes closed: the final ritual.

The sound that left Sasuke was monstrous, inhuman. It tore his throat, leaving blood on his tongue
and nothing left in his lungs, and echoed into the silence that fell as Itachi's protecting fingers
bruised through Sasuke's muscles, dented bone; as they watched wide-eyed and their father knelt;
as the silence shattered into a contained thunderclap of displaced air after a bullet exploded
forward.

Sasuke opened his eyes. When had he closed them? Hadn't he stared, because Itachi didn't dare let
go long enough to cover them?

"Naruto," Namikaze was saying, and his voice was wrong, hoarse and shaking with something
Sasuke had never heard in it before. "No—Naruto—no, please—"

"Stop," said Naruto.

He was standing. Pushed up, pushed his father away. Blood on his face, gun in the air, aimed and
steady.

The Fox stared down its barrel. "Stand down," he said softly. "Stand down, you little fool. You're
badly hurt. You think you can stop me with that? You think you can stop me at all? You can't hit
me. You won't kill me. Nothing else will stop me. Down."

Sasuke's skittering eyes met Father's: wide and blinking and—and—

"That was Naruto's gun," rasped Itachi. "Father—Father is—"

Is alive.

Air rushed in, dizzying, giddying, but Naruto's hand was moving, turning his gun the wrong way
around, tilting up and in until the trigger leveled with too-bright eyes and the nozzle nestled into
too-bright hair and—

"No. Son, no..." breathed Namikaze, the horror in his words mixing into the writhing, gasping
mess that was everything on the inside of Sasuke, something that would boil through and destroy
everything on the outside, and maybe everyone touching him, too.

"Still think I can't hit my mark, Old Fox?" teased Naruto, and there was this smile lifting half his
mouth, a smile that made Sasuke hurt, made his teeth-feet-gut ache hollow and burn. Naruto wasn't
looking at any of them, though his eyes did flicker towards Namikaze, once, and his shoulders jerked, braced. The hand holding the gun stayed steady.

It was so quiet, suddenly. No sirens. No bullets. Bonfire hell-light bright on the window.

"My little fool." The Fox's voice rumbled low, so low it wouldn't have been heard, had any of them been breathing.

Naruto's answer rang rough, raw, ready. "You drop your gun, I drop mine."

The story on Naruto's face—Sasuke knew that story. It was a story without an end, the story where Naruto never stopped.

Never stayed down.

Never gave up.

Something on The Fox's face shifted, and he chuckled, cold and callous. "Stole that of a cop, didn't you. And you used it coming in. You've used up the magazine already. Throw it away, Naruto. I've called your bluff."

"Nah, I've got a half-clip," promised Naruto. Like he was arguing about having enough pocket change to buy a soda from a vending machine. Like there wasn't a bullet centimeters from piercing his skull. Like it wasn't his own finger poised to put it there. "Got six—probably seven—shots, and one's enough. One's plenty."

"Naruto—don't—" Itachi cut in, begging, words swallowed in sudden coughing; and the Fox was barking, "Take that from him, Minato—" and Sasuke had long since stopped fighting the arms that held him to stare at his best friend and hear his own voice speaking words he didn't choose: "dobe—you—you can't—Naruto—I love—I—"

Every one of them shifted, surrendering to the gravity pulling them into Naruto. Naruto's trigger finger twitched tight.

All the woven threads that were Sasuke stretched taut, shredded the skin and bone he was meant to be made of, burst. He could feel those loose ends, bloodied and useless, thrashing without wind.

"Stop," Naruto said, and they stilled, spelled, helpless.

"Drop your gun," snarled the Fox, "This man is the reason—"

"I don't care. Stop."

Sasuke couldn't feel his feet, his heart, his hands. His vision skewed, like he was floating above and to the right of his body, and there were no anchors, only drifting thread and Father kneeling, and Naruto holding a gun to his own stupid, stupid head.

"They would have found you!"

Naruto opened his mouth, another denial stuttered there; his eyes locked with the Fox's, and no words made it out.

"It was just a party, just a game of hide and seek. A house full of friends. This man used that. Used his own child. Had his kid give you drugged candy. Suggested the best hiding spot. Isn't that how it happened, Fugaku? Drugged you—gave you to Madara—protected Madara. Removed evidence."
Blocked roads. Set distractions. Your parents knew something was wrong right away; they looked for you, they were chasing after you, and they would have found you."

"You found me," whispered Naruto.

The Fox's chin dipped just slightly, acknowledging. "I found you, hid you, taught you, and cut down your enemies, one by one. Here is the last. I taught you to live. Listen to me."

There was a wheezing sound, heavy and warning, and some part of Sasuke that was still thinking, still reasoning sparked and fired with a separate urgent panic, but he was already swimming, drowning in panic, and the thought couldn't catch—

"Can't you show me," whispered Naruto, words caught between inhale and exhale, nozzle pressed hard to his temple, "won't you teach me— how— how to— how to put down a gun? Please. Please."

"This is the last," promised the Fox. "One bullet, and my work is done. I swear to you, Naruto. This is the last. Get that thing away from your face. I taught you to fight to live. Live."

Naruto shook his head. The gun shook too. "You shoot, I shoot."

A gulped-in breath, a shuddering half-gasped Naruto please—that was Namikaze, but that wheezing—

"You can't stop me, Naruto."

"Yeah. Okay. Okay," whispered Naruto, and his eyes looked a little too open, like he did understand, like he did feel the fear, like he knew something of the wreckage he'd leave behind—

No! NO—NARUTO—NO—

Naruto said: "Together?"

Father's eyes closed again, face stretched tight over angled bones. Namikaze was shifting silently, carefully-desperately reaching for his son, that horrible, painful wheeze collapsed into choking, and—

Itachi.

Asthma.

Itachi. No—not now—no—

Inhaler.

He twisted and Itachi didn't resist. Propped him up, scrabbled for pockets, fingers frantic for the cold metal cylinder of the inhaler. He kept Naruto in his periphery, and he could still see the Fox, and Father, and no one to stop them, and there was something cool and heavy and not-quite-inhaler-shaped and—

Gun.

He'd never fired a gun. But Itachi had showed him how, once, with his own handgun that was never loaded, its clips never kept in the house or anywhere else Sasuke might find them. There should be a safety catch—there—it was off, and he needed both hands, because it would kick back when the bullet shot forward. The world slowed; Sasuke turned. He felt Itachi's fingers grabbing his shirt, felt his brother's weight slide helpless and heavy down his back—but there was the Fox
looming over Father, Naruto staring back at the Fox, and both their fingers poised—and it was two steps forward because there would be no more chances.

*Pull,* he told his finger.

He saw grey eyes narrow, blurred movement, blue eyes wide, heard the world burst.

.

.

The boy moved fast, fell slow.

He'd always been supernaturally quick. Always acted before thinking. Always gambled when the stakes were too high, when he should have walked away, when he shouldn't be there, defending his grandfather, blooming blood.

Naruto collapsed in stages: first to his knees, then to his father's arms. Red seeped through, stained both shirts where Minato crushed his boy to his chest, as if a father's heart could beat for two.

"You can't make me, you stupid Fox! AAAAGH! Okay okay, but it's just 'cause I'm small! I'll be bigger'n you—I'll get you! JUST WAIT!"

The Uchiha child stared wild-eyed at the space Naruto had filled, raised slow blank horror to meet Kurama's. The elder brother rasped out a wet, wretched breath, fell silent. His lips were blue.

"Naruto," breathed the child, the child Naruto followed like an ill-behaved shadow, and looked at the gun in his hand. Looked at Kurama, spasmed wide the fingers holding cold metal, flinched reflexively as it fell.

Gun hit tile. A second bullet exploded, ricocheted, chipped walls and hit the floor, pinging brightly. Three stuttering heartbeats of Minato gasping, tearing at his son's shirt to get to the damage, while the youngest Uchiha stared, while Naruto bled out below him, while the other Uchiha child scrabbled sluggishly at his own pockets.

"I win."

He hadn't acknowledged it in word or gesture, but Kurama was proud. At once humbled and proud.

"So you have. What prize will you claim?"

*The brat looked down at him, blade still poised just over Kurama's pulse, one eye swollen shut, the other defiant, desperate, determined. The child's fear was still there—may it always be there—but Naruto had it in hand, beat down by absolute grit.*

"School. Help me go to school."

"Itachi?" rasped Fugaku, eyes moving blankly from Minato and Naruto to his own sons, to find his eldest—strong, calm, too-smart Itachi—curled helpless on the floor, not breathing.

"Sasuke!" Fugaku cried. The kid jumped. He was still gaping, face bloodless and hands seizing. "Sasuke! What is—why is—what's happening to Itachi?"

"Itachi," echoed Sasuke, toneless, and pulled his eyes from Naruto slowly, as if in a dream, to lock onto his brother's glazed eyes, spasming chest, purple lips.
For a second he wavered, teetering between the twin horrors of bleeding friend and breathless brother, and Kurama thought that this child, too, would collapse. But he shuddered, turned, reached for his brother. Knocked their father's useless hands aside and ripped from his brother's pockets what was needed: a mobile phone, which he dialed emergency codes into and pushed into Fugaku's aimless hands, and a small medical device that he uncapped, prepped, and propped between Itachi's unresponsive lips.

"I'm not gonna fight anymore. There's a girl—my—my girl—she's... she's pregnant. I have to be around, can't be in the ring all night and useless the next day. I got my own job. You put me on the roster—I forfeit. I'm not taking escort or delivery either. I'm not doing that stuff anymore."

"It's an acute asthma attack," whispered Sasuke. His words were shaped clumsily, like he couldn't hear them falling from his mouth, like he wasn't sure if he was talking at all. "Tell them, right now, it's an acute asthma attack, I've given him a dose from the inhaler but it's not enough—and—and—Naruto—Naruto—"

Kurama's eyes drifted, saw what he didn't want to see. Minato had Naruto laid out, had his own coat rolled and pressed under the exit wound ripped through his son's back, had Naruto's shredded jacket balled and fisted tight over the hole in Naruto's chest, was applying pressure and checking airways and begging for a pulse and telling Naruto he couldn't go, couldn't go, couldn't go.

Fugaku repeated Sasuke's words into the phone, hissed directions, warned of blockades and bonfires and hostile fire, demanded federal support. Kurama listened, lifted blood-slicked fingers to retrieve his own phone. He had to holster his gun, switch hands, wipe his fingers, and dial twice before the call went through.

"Police are coming," he said. "Ambulances. Special Ops. Maybe more. Clear out—let them through. Let them all through."

"Help—somebody—help!" screamed Minato, trying to hold his son's suddenly seizing body, trying to dam up the crimson welling endless from the boy's chest, back, mouth, nose; trying to force oxygen into collapsing lungs, trying to hold in life in a seeping puddle of blood and urine. "Naruto—hold on—Naruto—"

Kurama started forward. The first step jarred, sparked vertigo, gushed heat down his front. When his vision cleared, Uchiha Fugaku was there. Kneeling in Naruto's piss, assessing wounds, doubling up pressure, intoning procedure.

"Yeah, I got this, Old Fox. I got something to fight for. I got so many precious people. 'Cause of you, I can fight. I'm gonna fight. I'm gonna win."

Itachi was breathing again, though each breath was slick and slow and labored. His brother crouched over him, tremors running through crumpled limbs, staring eyes stark in a blank face, watching Naruto. Kurama could feel the kid's bullet, grating at broken ribs.

Kid shot well. Hit his mark.

"So just you watch, you stupid Fox. Watch me win."

It just went through Naruto first.

"I got places to be. Eh? Where? Where I need to be."

Uzumaki Kurama turned. Found the door. Opened to sirens, fire, glaring spotlight.
Stepped forward, blind in the light, hands up, gun gone, done.

Done.
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

I spent 8 years writing this story. During that time I moved several times, including across the ocean; held a few different jobs, sometimes 2-3 at once; had two kids; grew up a lot.

This was my safe place for all the feelings too big or too dangerous to hold space for in real life. It’s also the first time in my life that I’ve pulled an entire story, beginning-middle-end + all the plot and character development and *everything*--from the inside to the outside of my head. Which feels crazy amazing. And terrifying.

I would really, really appreciate any feedback you can give. What worked for you, what felt like too much, what kept you reading. And--thank you for reading. There’ll be an epilogue eventually, when I know what feels right to write for it, but this chapter is the end.

...everything

I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

- excerpt from "In Blackwater Woods" by Mary Oliver.
He couldn’t even talk. Sent Kushina a text from his burner phone that said: KMH and she sent back, frustrated, frantic, because she hadn’t found the Fox yet and she had to find the Fox: ??? and he wrote hospital and so that’s where she turned her car towards, in a u-turn so foolishly fast she nearly left her doors scraped off on the pavement: Konoha Memorial Hospital.

Reached the lobby, where news channels were blaring that they’d caught the Fox, the leader of the Nine-tails—but they’d said that an hour ago, with pictures of Obito—idiot cops, idiot Obito, she had to fix this—and no one at the in-take desk knew anything. They weren’t lying; she could tell. They were shaken up just like the rest of the city (my city! My poor Konoha!) but surprisingly: they weren’t overloaded. Actually...the waiting room was almost empty. There was just her, and the blaring news stations, and the parents of one of the Uchiha officers who’d survived a bullet from a Nine-tails.

There were other Uchiha family members here, she knew. Some Uchiha were still in hiding. Some were in the hospital, but not here. They were at the morgue.

Claiming bodies.

Most Uchiha were dead.

The staff weren’t lying to her. They were freaked out. They weren’t sure what protocol was best to follow, not now. But they weren’t lying. There was no Namikaze Minato here. No Uchiha Sasuke. No Any-Name-at-All Naruto.

So she called the number that texted her, and Minato answered her—no—accepted the call, he would have to say something to answer—and he was making—sounds, sounds like sobbing, and Kushina knew this feeling.

This was the feeling she got the night they turned searchlights on the Naka river, sent tracking dogs through the forest, called every single person they’d ever known to beg: Find Naruto. Help us find Naruto.

Minato hadn’t cried then. Not that night, not any of the nights after, not the day Naruto’s dental records were matched to singed tooth shards, not the day of the memorial service. I’m not mourning him because he’d not dead, he always said, calm, always so calm.

"I’m sorry," he gasped, the first words she’d been able to understand. The only words he seemed able to say. "I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry."

"Are you dying?” she asked. The inside of her head went white. Everything under her skin collapsed. She was a vacuum. She was starting to suck the lights and sounds of the room (harsh fluorescence and unsteady updating news anchor) into her gut.

He laughed. Maybe. The sound made her gag. Gag so she couldn’t breathe. He said: "I wish. I wish it was me. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry."

Which of them hung up? She didn’t know which of them hung up. She stared at the phone. Her lips were moving, and air was going in, coming out No. No. No. No no no no no no.

One of the nurses was approaching her. Looked like she wanted to help her. Kushina moved away. The woman's mouth was moving, but Kushina couldn't hear her, and she couldn't let her touch her. She would break if she was touched. Shatter, right from the epicenter of the touch of a fingertip, spiderweb fault lines rocketing through every part of her and then—into dust, she would collapse.
into dust.

But the nurse was still following her and they'd circled the waiting room and another nurse was coming from the triage room, and Kushina would have to run. Didn't know how she could run, because the bones in her legs had given up already. Weren't straight anymore. Nothing was straight. But the doors—the doors were right there.

Some kind of announcement sounded. The nurses' attention snapped away. Orders were coming, people were being paged. Slowly, Kushina understood: ambulances were coming in.

Minato told her to come here. Needed her here.

Minato needed her here.

Kushina breathed in. Breathed her back straight, her bones stiff, her soul strong. This was who she was. The warrior. Not the coward, blank-brained, running from nurses in a hospital waiting room.

*I can't fight much longer* whispered in her head. Whispered true.

She couldn't. She couldn't fight much longer. No one can fight forever, and Kushina—Kushina-the-Warrior was more ghost than strength. The ghost of all that died when she buried Naruto.

The first time. Buried Naruto the first time.

*Minato needs me. Minato needs me—*

*One more breath, Kushina. Just one—*

*And one more.*

*One more.*

"Namikaze Naruto has been apprehended," someone was saying on TV. Breathless. "Breaking: Namikaze Naruto has been taken into custody by federal security forces. Along with one of his victims, Minister of Public Health Otsutsuki Hagoromo; and there seem to be several other rescued hostages—no fatalities have been reported, but several victims are in critical condition. This story is live, updates will come—"

Minato was standing in front of her. He did not look like Minato.

"They took him behind the doors," he said. His hands were shaking. He was—red. Red, red. Reeked. *Blood. So much—so much—*

She was glad to see him, but—"What doors?"

"—surgery doors," he said. It took him long awful seconds to pronounce the word. "Stopped—stopped me. Can't go with him. His—in the ambulance, his lung—they st-stabbed—to make in inflate, and then—"

"Mina—maybe—sit down—"

"His heart stopped."

The whole world was black.
He said: "They made it start again. With—with the paddles. Shock. Electric shock."

She tried to see him through funneling dark.

"They said they'll try," he said. "Try. Try. They'll try. Needs—blood, and to stop the bleeding, and there's a giant hole through his chest. Because he jumped—because Sasuke—I wasn't fast enough—because Fugaku—the Fox—the bullet. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry—"

His face was too white, his breaths too short, his pupils swallowing his irises. She could see him, suddenly, see the sweat beading at his temples, pouring down his neck, the tremor in his hands. Minato wasn't Minato. She couldn't be the one crying here, now, not now—because he was crying.

And he was going into shock.

"Doctor!" yelled Kushina. "Help us—he needs—he needs a doctor—" the too-helpful nurse was there, the one who had followed her around. Good, let her focus on someone else. Let her focus on Minato. They could touch him—he was already dust.

"He's going into shock," she said. To Minato: "You're going into shock. You need to lie down. No. Listen to me. What if you need to give blood to Naruto? You can donate to him, I can't. But you can't give blood. You can't give anything. Not if you're in shock. You want to help? Help, damn it, Minato, by existing in a way that helps. Come on, come on, just—rest a little—"

"Yes," he mumbled. "Yes, I want to help. I want to help."

He was broken.

He lay down. He didn't want to, was forcing himself to do it, she could see that. But he did.

Because he was Minato. He always did what he had to do.

The doctor didn't send her away, but she left anyway. She couldn't breathe the air next to him. He smelled too much of blood.

She didn't want to know if it was Naruto's blood.

She went back to the waiting room. Sat down.

There was a house on the TV screen. Pictured from above. Caught in the searchlights of a helicopter. It looked familiar. It was next to a river.

It looked like...looked like... no. That was then. That was before. Now is different, now is—different—

A boy stumbled into the room, a boy with wild black eyes in a face like his heart was cut open, and something in Kushina straightened into place. She stood up, reached for him; he saw her, stilled, flinched-to-flee.

"Sasuke," she said. "Sasuke, you're here." He could walk. He wasn't covered in blood. He wasn't okay, but—"So glad." she whispered, all her heart welling up, pushing up against pain—just enough to gasp in breath beneath it. She was close enough to touch him, now, and he was staring at her with so much fear.

She hugged him. She needed to hold her child—she held this one.
She was too late. Always too late. Always looking in the wrong places. Going out to war and—losing her way to the battlefield. But Uchiha Sasuke was alive.

That was something. For just—a breath, a dozen breaths, let that be everything.

She was going to let him go, because his muscles were flexed and trembling, and he wasn't breathing. Pulled back—and then he was clinging.

Shaking.

Wailing.

Crying Naruto's name. Crying like a lost child, too flayed-open in grief to pretend to be anything else.

He clung, so much taller and broader than she that he bowed over to hold onto her.

She had too much practice in staying standing when desolation tripled gravity. Maybe it was only muscle memory—but they didn't fall.

They cried.

"Do we tell Hinata? How do we tell Hinata?"

"I don't want to tell Hinata," Rin whispered. She'd been holding herself since she made her last call, arms pressed tight into her ribcage. Like she was plugging a hole in a dam.

Or maybe that was just how Kakashi was feeling: like water was leaking through cement seams. The dam was breaking, and here they were, plugging up tiny holes.

It wasn't just Hinata who needed telling. There was an exhausted kid who cared an awful lot draped over every couch and spare bed in the house. Naruto's friends, who worked too hard all day and most of the night, leaking Danzo's—Konoha's—secrets to the world.

They had to do it right. They had to prove that they weren't destroying or tampering with evidence. They could still be charged—and Hiashi did all in his power to ensure that he, no one else would be charged—with a variety of allegations, but it was a court battle Hiashi felt he could win.

And they had a hell of a lot less to lose than what those they were exposing should lose. Except maybe—maybe what they'd already lost.

Naruto. How could he tell them?

"She deserves a chance to say goodbye," Genma said. Tired. Steady. "Guys—trust me on this. It's better when you get a chance to say goodbye."

"What if it's not goodbye, though?" Rin said. Like she wanted to believe what she was saying so badly. "It's—it's Naruto. Konoha's Number One Most Unpredictable Knucklehead. Right, right, Kakashi?"
Kakashi opened his mouth to give her the teeny-tiny comfort she was seeking, and—nothing came out.

Genma saved them. Laughed a little, genuine and fond, told Rin that yep—this was a kid who survived. Again and again. He might pull it off like he always did, who knows? But—"We still need to tell them. Come on, guys, don't try to tell me being kept in the dark when you can feel everything going wrong isn't the worst. We went through this five weeks ago. The absolute worst."

He was right. These kids—these kids didn't deserve that. "Let them sleep a little longer," Kakashi said. "No—I agree with you, Genma. We tell Hinata. We tell everyone. But—one more hour. Let them sleep one more hour. He might—he might be out of surgery by then, maybe we'll have something—" he couldn't say better. Couldn't tease even himself so cruelly. "—more concrete to tell them."

He looked around the kitchen. It was morning, though sunrise was hours away. "Breakfast," he said. "I'll...make pancakes. Hey! How hard can it be? I'm a certified genius, remember, Rin."

She—almost smiled. Almost. "Better you than me," she agreed. "Scale your recipe for twenty—no, teenagers eat extra-extra, make that twenty-four. I'll check how much bread we have. We can do toast, eggs—pancakes. Kakashi—"

She was close, then, hand gentle on his arm, eyes bruised with too much crying. "—good idea," she whispered.

*Feed someone right, and whatever hard thing they gotta do, they do it hella better,* Kushina liked to say. He thought about that while choosing the highest-rated pancake recipe on the highest-rated recipe app. Thought about it while watching the instructive video three times. Thought about it while weighing flour, measuring careful teaspoons of baking powder, looking up the definition of "dash" as in "a dash of vanilla".

So long as he didn't have to think about...anything else.

Everything else.

He burned the first pancake and overcompensated and took forever to cook the second, but the third flipped off the griddle perfect and golden. So he filled the whole griddle.

Just under three minutes later, he had a dozen perfect pancakes waiting. The kitchen smelled amazing.

As expected. This kind of thing, the kind with step-by-step directions and basic chemistry and well-made demonstrations to model after, he always got right.

In direct opposition to everything else in life.

His contribution would be meaningless in the end. But before the kids faced the reality where the friend they'd worked so hard to free and protect was captured, was dying; before the thought of eating made their stomachs knot up like Kakashi's already was—he would do what he could. Get some food in their bodies, warmth and fuel and comfort.

And then tell them the truth, and rip all that comfort away.
The sun was up, and curfew was lifted, and people were arriving.

Among the first was Senju Tsunade. Kushina had not seen her sister since the blasts that hit the hospital weeks ago—blasts that provided cover for the kidnapping and framing of Naruto, injured a half-dozen hospital staff, and left Tsunade in critical condition.

Not for long. Tsunade was part Uzumaki, after all. She let Kushina know she was recovering, then disappeared.

And here she was, leaning on a walker, too thin, barely recognizable without makeup. She sat next to Kushina with movements that favored her crippled left side. "What happened to the dramatic court room entrance we've been plotting? He couldn't wait to get the drama started? Brat. I've got some words for him once he's up."

Kushina said, hollow: "Have you talked to—they're not making it sound like he's—going to get up."

A bony finger poked her shoulder, then lifted, trembling just slightly, to brush back her hair. "Yes, I've heard. I trained the surgeon leading the operation. I trust her. And, well, he's got more than this first surgery to get through, if he's going to get up. He's in bad shape. But he's ours, Kushina. He's Naruto. I'm not making promises. His odds are not great. I just—I believe he can beat them. Can't help but believe."

Kusina felt hope, and dread, and a strange little twist of betrayal. "Aren't you a pessimist?"

"Pshh. Yes. I am. Makes life more bearable, to be surprised when things don't go as poorly as they usually do. Naruto...surprises enough, consistently enough, to make an exception. I'll place my bets on him."

"You make terrible bets," whispered Kushina. Tugged hard on an already-bleeding hangnail. "But Naruto always wins his," said Tsunade. Took the hand Kushina was picking at, protected it between her own.

Naruto came out of surgery. His heart was beating.

Forty-five minutes later, they let his parents see him.

A tag-team of nurses had bullied Minato into showering, given him clean scrubs to wear, and maybe—maybe that was why Kushina let him near. Let him lean.

Leaned back.

So they held onto each other. Needed to hold onto Naruto—couldn't.

They couldn't even see much of Naruto. He was on his side. There was a cannula up his nose and a
tube down his throat and a sort of belt wrapped around the whole bottom half of his face, keeping that tube tightly in place. His eyes were bruised, his scalp was wrapped, his hands and wrists and ankles were bandaged, there were IVs and catheters and pressure sensors hooked to beeping monitors and thick pads of surgical gauze over the hole that went right through him.


Kushina said, "We're so proud of you, Naruto. We love you, baby. Come back to us. Come back to us."

Minato couldn't speak. Couldn't find a place to touch his son that didn't look like it might hurt him.

Then it was time to go.

If this was the Fox's endgame, it sucked.

Gaara could feel things falling apart inside of him. Important things. Why had he trusted this man? Fox said Naruto was safe: Gaara believed him. Fox said he would protect Naruto: Gaara believed him.

Addiction clawed at his cracks. Cravings he'd ignored so well for so long he'd started to believe they were gone reached long thieving arms up from under the darkness inside him, snagged his thoughts, his plans, his rage, his despair.

Anything. If he could feeling anything—nothing—anything but this.

Getting into the room of 'Otsotsuki Hagoromo' was harder than expected. A shit-ton of federal Hi no Kuni law enforcement officers came into the hospital with the EMTs that delivered Naruto, and more were arriving by the hour. Gaara and the other Nine-tails got out when the Fox told them to get out, and probably Gaara should've stayed out—reappeared in his own home, his own country, all in line with his pre-arranged alibi. Being high as fuck could work with that alibi. Breaking into secure hospital rooms, which he was very deliberately choosing instead, would really not.

That was fine. Everything was fine. There was plenty of time to get high (stay high, never come down from the high, die high—) when Naruto stopped being around to care.

Naruto wasn't much able to care now.

(Not yet. Not yet.)

"How many?"

The Fox looked disconcertingly shrunken in his shroud of hospital sheets, but the shuddering menace shadowing his voice hadn't changed.

"Two. Feds. One at this door, one at the east end of the corridor. Three CCTVs."

"I heard their radios scramble."

"That was me. CCTVs're on loop."
Seconds stretched. Gaara was angry enough, suicidal enough, to move where he could stare into the man's face. Eyes-staining-yellow fixed on his. Lips were wet. The sheets near the pillow were spattered with spat blood. "Naruto."

"Survived surgery," said Gaara. "For now. I know only what Neji is able to tell me."


Gaara said nothing. Stared and stared, because he could not accept what he was seeing.

Death. He was seeing death. Konohagakure's Nine-tailed Fox was dying.

"Why are they not treating you?" Anger, again, hot and quick and so much easier to breathe around than grief. "They have not identified you yet—even if they suspect—they don't suspect, because they're idiots—even if they know, they are required by law to treat you. By the International Creed of Human Rights. Why are they not treating you?"

"Law..." repeated the Fox, and gagged, and spat more blood. He looked up, fresh blood thick on his chin, and said, amused: "Law, indeed. I invoked my right to withhold treatment. Until my lawyers arrive, but the schedule seems to be moving somewhat too quickly for that."

"You're dying."

"Bullet in the gut," agreed the Fox, genially. "Nasty way to go."

Gaara glared. "Get treatment. It could be operable."

"I have a better idea," said the Fox. "Hyuuga. Get your Hyuuga. Tell him to bring his cameras. His gear. Whatever he needs. Faster than this, you fucking one-tail."

Gaara could say no.

The Fox was dying.

Gaara looked at him, the human he'd somehow conned himself into seeing as greater-than. Conned himself into believing, when he said he'd save Naruto.

He called Neji. He said, listening to the tone of Neji's phone ringing, "mission accepted."


"Yeah," said Gaara. Next, he'd have to call B.

Fuck all their alibis.

One last go.

For Naruto.
The first time Naruto roused, his swollen eyes opened and rolled like he was screaming and he thrashed and a doctor and a nurse held him while a third sedated him.

Once Naruto was still again, once they had checked and re-taped all of the little tubes going in and out of him, they strapped him down.

Minato wept.

The waiting room was full now. Rin and Raidou and what looked like the entire WoF hockey team. WoF mentors. Other WoF kids.

Kakashi arrived, with Iruka.

"They really—really won't let us see him, see Naruto," Sakura told him, face and eyes red. "It's been hours."

"Do you—want to go somewhere?" Kakashi asked. He'd been running errands all morning—the latest being picking up Iruka-sensei. Hoped to find enough to run all afternoon.

Anything but sit here, trying to make do with air so full of fear-hope-and-horror he had to swallow instead of breathe it, waiting.

"I'll take you to get something to eat," he said. "Where's Sasuke?"

Iruka was already interrogating someone in scrubs, warm and polite and unstoppable. Kakashi felt a gentle pity for his victim.

"Hasn't arrived yet," Sakura said, and her focus had shifted, taking in things on Kakashi's face he didn't want her to see. Which was mostly useless, because Sakura was too smart and cared too much. "He texted me to say he's okay, just not ready to deal with everything. And thank you, but I want to be here. I'll eat from the vending machine if I need to."

Raidou looked over. Eavesdropping. Always. "Sasuke was here when I arrived," he said. "If he left, it wasn't through those doors."

The front doors. The hospital had other doors, and it wasn't unlike Sasuke to go off and hide when he was feeling things he didn't want to be feeling, but between Itachi's request and the way Sakura's face screwed up in distress, Kakashi assigned himself his next mission: Find Sasuke Before Sasuke Does Something Stupid.

Sakura was already up-to-speed, of course. "You take the parking garage, I take the roof? Regroup from there?"

"Yep," said Kakashi. "Call the moment you see him, then engage—I'll do the same."

"Roger that," she said. Took off at a jog.

*Survive,* Kakashi begged in his head. It was all he could ask. Team Seven—his ridiculous
powerhouse of talent, intelligence, potential—his really effing dysfunctional little trio of upstarts, of rising stars—he just needed them to live.

What kind of fucked-up universe made that too much to ask?


He got instant thanks.

Don’t thank me yet, he wanted to say.

Two out of three. Two out of three was horrible.

But it sure beat one out of three.

Kakashi picked up the pace. He still wasn't sure what happened last night. No one was—no one who was in a state to talk about it, anyway. But he'd picked up enough.

He had to find Sasuke.

XwTwX

Kushina looked at the doctor's face and knew: he had come to tell them something she did not want to hear. Was not sure she could bear to hear.

She looked at him with hope draining helpless out the soles of her feet, and the first few words he said she physically did not hear.

Could the brain do that? Shut down perception in desperate self-protection?

Minato was asking a question. Strained. Fist on the wall—to have something to push against, she thought, so he didn't push away the doctor.

They needed the doctors. They needed them.

Hear, she commanded her ears. Pain in the place where ears and throat and nose met spiked, pulsed out. She heard.

"...into emergency surgery to address continued internal bleeding. Additional surgery is added stress on his body, stress we tried very hard to avoid. If he makes it through the surgery, there may still be lasting effects. We won't know until he wakes up. The choice is yours—the outcome may not change, and there are added risks, but it's a chance. Please take a moment, I will do my best to answer your questions, but a moment is really all we can—"

Minato was signing papers. He looked up at her, pen pressing hard at the end of his name—she made her chin go up. Go down. Go up.

There. That was a nod. Chance. They had to give him a chance. That was a nod, right?

(Naruto had been screaming—she was sure of it, but with the tube filling his mouth, jammed down his throat, he couldn't make sound—)
Then they were sitting. Minato was holding her hand, again. Too tight, again.

The doctor was gone.

The room was moving. Walls and floors sliding diagonal, overlapping, making her motion-sick. She let Minato hold her hand. Tilted her head back, pressed hard into the wall. Felt her hair bunch between scalp and cement, a dull point of pain.

Closed her eyes.

That gasping—that was her. So...so she was breathing.


Always.

Wherever you go.

Breathe in.

YIVIY

"Found him," Sakura said. "West roof." Heard Kakashi's affirmative well done, on my way, hung up.

She was shaking. Low blood sugar, probably, and fatigue, and after-effects of trauma and adrenaline—but she couldn't open her hands. Her fingers made fists, and Sasuke was there, on the wall, not safe when she really needed him to be safe, and she was going to hit him.

No, no, she wasn't. She was going to be patient, and understanding, because she didn't know what had happened but Sasuke had been there and he needed help, not his ass handed to him —

"GET YOUR ASS DOWN HERE," she screamed, and her traitor eyes were crying, and not just a few tears either, but lots of tears. Fuck her eyes. Fuck last night and people thinking it's okay to explode bullets through other people and Naruto for not running somewhere safe when he had the chance to run somewhere safe and most of all, most of all, fuck Uchiha Sasuke for sitting on the edge of the roof on the wrong side of the wall and protective railing, twelve stories up and dead-eyed and looking at her like she should understand.

Then he just...turned away. His back was already to her, his legs swinging over a fifty meter drop, and now she couldn't see his face, wouldn't get anything close to a warning if he decided to just—lean forward.

It wouldn't take much.

Seconds, probably, of standing stuck, staring, and Sakura decided: fine. Fine. The edge it was.

Anything but being left behind. She reached the wall, climbed it, and vertigo hit at her first glimpse over the edge. Hit hard. Move. But she couldn't. She couldn't move, not even a little bit.
Her fingers were holding the bars of the guard rail like they were part of it. This was it. This was it, she was dying here, she'd become a gross half-mummy dried out by the wind and they'd have to leave her carcass there forever because her fingers were never uncurling again. If her stomach did one more flip she'd be a carcass with vomit stuck to its face.

Sasuke said her name, and she turned to him on reflex, which: very, very big mistake. Because he was framed by nothing. Lots and lots of cubic meters of nothing, a nothing that would let greedy gravity suck you down down down and then: splat. Sakura's eyes squeezed violently shut, but there behind her eyelids she could see Sakura and Sasuke: two smacks on the pavement.

She heard the swish of fabric on fabric. Eyes opened wide. Sasuke was moving. Standing. MOVE, she told herself. Closed her eyes so she could convince her hand to open—reach, grab, catch, MOVE—DON'T LET HIM—

"Hey," he said. Sakura forced her eyes open again, and there he was, staring at her through the bars. "You hurt?"

There was a beat of rapidly filling silence. He was standing on thirty centimetres of possibly-unstable concrete, literally nothing but that between him and a fall to certain death, and Naruto was somewhere below them already dying, and she accidentally looked down again and her stomach was heaving and his eyebrows were bunching together like he was, you know, mildly concerned.

YES I'M HURT, Sakura screamed in her head. Couldn't say anything out loud, though. If she opened her mouth, horrible, horrible things would come out. Sounds. Bile.

She couldn't even open her eyes, which had closed again. On their own.

She heard him move. Opened her eyes.

He was gone.

Sakura screamed. Screamed and screamed and screamed and there was no air left in her but she was still trying to scream, no time to get in air get in anything just—

—someone was holding her.

She thought hysterically of Sensei, always late, and air leached into the vacuum she'd made of her lungs out of and her jaw was unhinging, hanging wide because there was so much more needing out and Sasuke said, right there, breath on her ear: "hey, hey, Sakura," and slowly, slowly, she put the pieces of herself and her face back together.

Over. Sasuke was over. Over the guardrail. Not over the edge.

There was wind on the roof, and her fingers frozen to the rails, and Sasuke's arms around her, strong, steady, tight. His heart beating behind hers.

He stepped back a little, tugging her with him, but she was stuck. Stuck to those bars.

"Uh...well...let me know when you're ready to let go," he said, uncomfortable. "Of the bars or—or if I should let go."

"No," she said. Words and shoulders heaving, out of control, shuddering. "Don't you, don't you dare."

"Okay."
The wind was so cold. Bright sun and clear horizons and she looked up, up into that dazzling sky, reminding herself that it was Sasuke's breath keeping tiny warmth near her ear, and her fingers let go.

She turned, lips bitten shut because she might start screaming again, closed her arms around him.

He didn't say anything. Didn't let her hold onto him as long as she wanted to, but he did hold her back, it was longer than he'd ever held her before. When they stumbled to sit together against the wall, he offered his hand, palm up.

She looked at it. Grabbed it. Held tight.

Looked up and saw Kakashi staring at them, hair wild with running.

"I heard Sakura screaming," Kakashi said.

"Yeah, uh...my fault," Sasuke said, after the moment where he waited for her to speak first. He tried to take back his hand. Didn't get it. Sakura's hands could not just...let go. Not today. "Guess she thought I'd jumped."

Kakashi's entire body sighed. He looked ten years older than he had yesterday, and he'd looked really old yesterday. When he was in front of them, crouched, eye-to-eye with Sasuke, he asked: "Were you going to?"

"Nope," Sasuke said. Easy.

Kakashi looked at them, one by one. Looked at their hands. "Five minutes," he said. "I'll be waiting right inside. I'm too old to be this cold."

He left. Sakura said, about seven times in her brain before she got it out of her mouth: "You lied."

Sasuke shrugged.

She let go of his hand. Stared ahead, feeling more awful than she'd known she could feel. He was looking at her, but she couldn't make her face turn to his.

Not right now.

"Listen," he said. "Listen, I won't. I have—things. To do. Like—I'm a witness. ...I'm not letting anyone get away with something I can stop by being there to testify. Okay? And...Naruto...made me promise, I promised—Hinata. Promised I'd take care of Hinata. So."

That hurt, too, but it—helped, a little. Convinced her, a little. She didn't need to be his reason not to jump. She just needed him to have a reason.

Why, then why, why— she couldn't think how to make that into the question she wanted to ask. Why stand on the edge when you'd promised not to fall?

She didn't ask. Maybe she knew the answer. It wasn't one he would explain, or one she could readily accept. Just something Naruto said once, offhand—sometimes when you almost die it feels so good, you know? Like your brain remembers how much it wants to survive. You're drowning and then you can breathe. Air tastes so good. Everything in the world looks beautiful.

"Did you want to?" she asked. "Did you—even part of you—"

He looked away. Because he'd tried to make his face his mask, and it cracked.
"Sasuke," she said. His name cracked, too. She felt fault lines spreading, speeding, felt like the whole roof should be crumbling.


And then he was looking at her, bare, broken, brave. Brave in the way that made him love so intensely, beyond sanity, when he knew better, when it was so much safer not to love. He said: "It was me. I shot him. I killed Naruto."

"No," she said. "No, you didn't. He's not dead. He's not dead. He's not dead!

His hands made fists and then his fists were in his hair and he ripped his own face up, into the brilliant sun, and there was no mask, no mask. Sasuke in agony.

"I had to stop the Fox," he said. Cracked, crying. "I had to stop to the Fox, and I had a gun, and Naruto had a gun and he was going to—he—" two fingers pointed at his temple, and his ring finger curled like it pulled a trigger.


Wind, and hard breath, and it was fucking cold.

"Take care of Hinata," Sasuke mumbled, half laughing again. "That idiot. Me, taking care of—me—dead-last, idiot, fucking dead-last..."

Sakura peeled her fingers from over her mouth, reached—didn't touch.

"You didn't kill him," she whispered. "You didn't."

"Should've—been faster, should've—should've seen—I can see and catch a puck but I—why didn't I see him? Why didn't I see him? Why didn't—"

"He's not dead," she whispered.

"Itachi said," Sasuke said, words all pinched, fingers gouging jeans, "Itachi said—Shisui did the same thing. Remember Shisui? He was—yeah, he was my, my cousin—and Itachi's partner and—he jumped in the way. Like. Like Naruto. That's why he's dead. I still can't—I saw his body. I stood by his body at his funeral. I stood there. But I always forget he's dead. But it's not the same. It's not the same, cause Shisui got killed saving Itachi, and I tried to save Naruto, and I killed him. I killed him."

No wonder, she thought, back to the wall and the bars and the free blue sky, no wonder.

He's still on this side of the wall. She tried to make her arms move again. Reaching, reaching. He is. He didn't fall. He's here. He's here. Have to keep him here.

He was strong but so was she, and she could stop him if she needed to. She could hold on—there, she was, she had her arms around him, and he wasn't pushing them off, and she'd make her hold body his anchor if she needed to.

I can hold on. I can. I can.
There was a sound, a purposeful throat clearing, and Sakura looked up, saw Kakashi looming over them. She could see in the strain around his eyes that he'd heard enough. There was no way Sasuke could get past the wall now; he could take on one of them, maybe, but not both. Not both.

Kakashi said: "Naruto's back in surgery. Let's go in. Come on, get up, let's go in."

In her arms, Sasuke was shaking. Shaking like he had a fever. Shaking like the earth was grating apart beneath him. One hand came up, curled around Sakura-holding-on.

"You didn't kill him," she said. She'd say it as many times as she needed to. She'd say it even if Naruto couldn't—couldn't say it with her. She'd beat it into the bastard's head, she thought, Naruto's voice an echo and an ache in her heart.

Kakashi had moved to Sasuke's other side, found firm handholds. Together they hauled Sasuke up. He shook them off, ducking to hide tears, and his shoulders were coming up, fists forming, defensive anger building.

"Look," she said. "He's going to get better. Nothing keeps Naruto down. We know this. We know this." And her gut coiled cold, because she didn't believe it, now now, not really, but she said it like she really, really meant it. "He's going to wake up and—" she was crying too, suddenly, and the words hurt on their way out—"first thing he's going to do is ask for you. You better be there. You better fucking be there, Uchiha Sasuke."

He couldn't deny it. He couldn't deny it, and he didn't want to fight—not really.

"You two," she sobbed, "you stupid boys. You stupid, stupid boys."

Finally—Sasuke stepped forward, with both of them still holding on, and the three of them made it through the door. To where it was warm. Where there were fewer edges. Where it was a little harder to be alone, run away, fall.

Sound checks; cameras rolling; live feeds streaming: Neji gave the cue, and a dying man spoke.

Broadcast, live, to every media feed Hyuuga Syndicate gave Neji access to. He was taking a terrible, terrible risk. One with very little promised payoff.

"My known alias is Otsutsuki Hagoromo," the man said. His eyes were difficult to look into, and difficult to look away from. "Minister of Public Health. I feel no need to reveal my true name. Another alias of mine is the Nine-tailed Demon Fox. I have killed many."

Neji checked viewer stats. Right now, their highest feeds were in the hundreds. A few comments were coming in, but most seemed trollish.

Nothing he could do about that, not in the moment.

"I used my role as Minister of Public Health to build the labyrinth known as the Gates. The Gates, the tunnels, they are not myth. I made them. I rule them. Your city plans, construction blueprints, subway maps, sewer designs and power grids—I used all of them. As your Minister of Public Health, I had legal right to the plans of this city's entire foundation, and I made it mine. If you
think, if you let yourself think, you will see that the laws and false authority you enslave yourselves to will always turn against you. Always. There can be no liberty where there is government."

He lifted his sheet and hacked blood behind it, wiped his mouth and chin with that same sheet. There was another red stain spreading, leaking through the bandage around his abdomen. "I have devoted my life to ending false authority, the abuses inherent in government. This is my work as the Fox."

"There are some who wish to give the credit for this great work of mine to others. Now I remove my mask. Mine is the face of the Fox. Mine. I was raised as a tool of war by the Uchiha. I turned on them. I murdered my way to freedom. And then—twelve years ago, I went to kill certain Uchiha, and I found they had taken another child. They took him, implanted his body with leads and batteries, connected those batteries to his heart. A device they could control with the touch of a button. Control a child's heart. I found this child, taken by the clan I hate most, every freedom ripped from him—even the freedom of his own unconsciously beating heart." More coughing. More blood.

"That child was Namikaze Naruto."

Viewer counts were doubling. Tripling.

"I marked him mine. Surely I had found one who had even greater cause to hate the Uchiha than I. I made the world believe his death, lest the Uchiha find him, control him, and I kept him alive. Made him strong. Taught him to kill."

"This is what happened to Namikaze Naruto: he was abducted by the Uchiha, and stolen in turn by the greatest enemy of the Uchiha, and raised to end the Uchiha. I did this. But I did not—"

*Please, begged Neji, barely breathing, please, be able to finish. Please, speak for Naruto.*

"—did not account for freedom, for the freedom of soul," said the Fox. "Naruto's soul. I," he chuckled, and spat blood, and smeared it on soiled sheets, and smiled with bloody teeth, "I have killed close to two hundred. I have never been caught. I am very good at what I do. But I could not make that child kill.

"I could not make him kill. Not for anything. I wanted him to live...I let him go.

"His parents found him. And those who had benefited from the destruction of this family, they—they made their attacks. The bombings of the civic center, the hospital, the corpses with my mark—those were not my doing." Another grin, smeared with blood, and the glint in those hard eyes made Neji's heart stutter in primordial fear. "That was Shimura Danzo. He's dead."

Neji asked, to keep the focus: "Where was Naruto?"

"Naruto was in the hospital the day it was bombed. Recovering from surgery to have those batteries removed. His parents found someone who knew how to do it."

It was some time before the man could speak around the blood.

But he did.

"My agent confirmed Naruto's successfull surgery, spoke with him during recovery. And then: they cornered her, a dozen to one, murdered her, mutilated her body. Naruto was taken as well. So they could frame him. They made sure he was found lying in her blood. This is the way these people think."
"Do you—is there proof?"

"Shimura Danzo was the head of all this. Professional lawkeeper. Very good at obstructing evidence. Perhaps you'll find proof."

"I believe this is enough," Neji said. The man's sclera shone violent yellow. His giant hands trembled. "Thank you—"

"It is not enough," cried the Fox. "I kill. I have killed since I was a child myself. I was created to kill. I confess all my murders. I have written all I can remember. Signed. With your witness. Condemn me for every one of them. I own them. They are mine. But my work is not—my work is not—my work cannot be done—"

There was no hiding the viscous red spreading over the sheets now, the grunts of pain as a dying warrior surged forward. "He is innocent," growled the Fox. "There is no clan in Konoha that can claim innocence. If I was ever innocent, I do not remember it. But anything, everything that child has done—he has done only to defend. To protect. He is dying—dying! Because he tried to save an Uchiha. Fool, fool, that little fool...to save...Uchiha Fugaku...from me. I could not—could not convince him! To protect himself. Not well enough. Not nearly well enough."

The Fox had forced his torso fully upright, blood leaking from the his lips, his nose, his eyes. Veins stood out on massive arms straining against bowing bed rails. The Fox, bleeding, stared into the camera with clarity that washed Neji cold.

"Keep your laws, your oppression, your clans and abuse and corruption—keep them—I cannot fight them any longer, and you—most of you—you love them. You will not stand and fight, not even for your own freedom. But my child, my Naruto, you cannot have him. He is innocent. He is—innocent—"

And he was gagging, hands grasping, trying to breathe, to speak—

"Cut," Neji hissed. "Cut everything but the live feeds to our secure site. We cannot show this."

Because this was death. This was a man dying, live, on camera.

Neji watched, and made sure the audio feed was clear, and did not try to help.

The Fox fought for air, won it, rasped: "Let him—free, free, let him live, let him live—he is innocent. Dare not judge him. Dare not! He is—"

He fell. The Fox fell, the mass of power and muscle of his chest, arms, neck—nothing now, obedient to gravity. He was drowning in the fluid filling his throat.

Still he fought, will against flesh, and contorted onto his side, heaved and choked and spewed blood. Beckoned to Neji.

Neji came.

Kneled to face a confessed villain, met eyes that burned with the fury of the righteous.


"Good," said the Fox. "Good. Naruto—"
He did not finish. He choked on blood and rattling breath, and his eyes bulged, unseeing, and his lips went slack and blue.

Neji refused the instinct to withdraw, avoid, recoil. Lowered his eyes in respect, stayed kneeling, waiting, witnessing—but his team—his team couldn't wait.

On the other side of the door, voices was arguing. Loudly, angrily, threatening federal force. Arguing with Gaara, though Neji could not make out Gaara's answers. He knew Gaara stood shoulder to shoulder with Neji's most trusted bodyguards, and that they would be very difficult to pass—but they'd all risked enough. His mission here was done. It was time to go.

He whispered orders to his crew, and they went out as they'd come in: through the window. Onto the aerial work platform of their commandeered film truck, lowered three at a time to the ground, and from there they scattered in getaway cars.

He was the only one left, now. He and one cameramen, still filming.

Between long awful seconds, the Fox breathed. Loud, slow breaths singing with discords of death, and there was—almost-peace, in the slack of his unconscious face.

Slowly, slowly, Neji stood. Whispered to Gaara, through his headset, that all was done. Then he did what he could to arrange the limbs skewed on the hospital bed more comfortably, into attempted dignity, and found that it took all his strength to lift a single arm.

The door pushed open. He turned, defensive, saw Gaara; Gaara holding the door for Uzumaki Kushina.

Gaara followed her in, shut the door in a federal security officer's face. Neji's focus followed Uzumaki-san as she turned, shoulders braced, to face the man on the bed.

Neji did not understand why she was here—hate, maybe; the Fox stole her son. He tracked ripples of shock and sorrow across her face; watched Gaara stare fixedly at the bed, give a small bow, face Uzumaki-san; bow deeply.

His cameraman was at the window, waiting. Neji ordered him through—knew he should follow.

The quiet of the room held him. The Fox did not breathe again.

Uzumaki Kushina stood near his head, face hard, pale, sore from weeping, but there were no tears now. She touched the body—murmured something, a name, Father—no, Neji had not heard clearly. The room felt—full. Of presence, of a promise that touched him in warmth and weight, and beyond that—he did not try to understand.

The man who had been the Fox, the man whose name Neji did not know, whose eyes and ideals belonged in legends past—that man was not gone—not entirely, not yet. Perhaps he was waiting.

Neji stayed still at the window. Swallowed hard. What he had done—he hoped it was right.

To bow in respect to the body on the bed—remains of a murderer, terrorist, child abductor, anarchist—and the woman attending: that was...unaccountably right.

"May you find rest," he murmured. "May you earn peace."

And then he was through the window, lifted to the ground, running for his car. Speeding through Konoha, all three of his phones frantically buzzing.
Itachi stood behind his father in the family home only Father now lived in, and together they watched the confession of the man who had hunted and culled them. Whom they, in turn, hunted. Watched him die.

"False, false, all of this false," cried Father turning off the TV, words angry and grating and without direction. "It's not him. Not that man. Minister of Health? All these years. All these years!"

Itachi wondered what part of what they'd seen Father most wished to be false.

"People will believe this," Father hissed. "People will believe this, and we will be hated, more than we are already hated."

Unfortunately, many would not believe. There were too many, in Konohagakure and in the world, who believed only what the comfortable walls of their own narrow worldviews allowed them to believe.

Father turned on him, eyes wide with outrage, pupils small with fear. "Is this what you wanted? Is this what you wanted, Son? Hate does not discriminate! You know this. Most of us are dead. Most of us are dead. But they will hate you. They will hate you, my son. And they will hate Sasuke."

Itachi said, quietly, "I did not cause this."

"Yet here you are." Father stepped back, stepped away, hardness and tiredness settling, making him more familiar. "Here you are. Is it to see me back to prison? Is that what you want, Itachi?"

No.

"What do you want? What do you want?"

Shisui, thought Itachi, too fast, too fast to stop. His throat constricted. But he said, "I want us to be who we say we are."

Father stared at him.

"We could be honorable," whispered Itachi.

He did not know if he believed it.

He wanted to.

Father looked at him, looked at him like he was seeing something different than he had mere seconds ago. "Honorable," he said. "Honor is an ideal. An abstraction. It is not real. It cannot be real. Not if you need to win."

"What have we won?"

When Itachi looked up into the pain and the pause, Father was looking at him again, the strange softness around his mouth almost, almost gentle.
"What have we won," Father echoed. Laughed. Like Sasuke, it seemed that when Father was most broken, he laughed.

"Well, Itachi, this time you have won," said Father, when he was done laughing. "This time, you do not need to prepare all the evidence against me. Give it behind my back."

"Father—"

"I will do it myself."

This was not what Itachi wanted. The things Itachi wanted were impossible.

This was not what he wanted, and it was more than he could ask. He locked eyes, lacked words, struggled to breathe, bowed his head.

A hand on his shoulder. Brief. A little cold.

Father left.

Itachi stared blankly into the emptiness left behind, already filled with the lazy swirl of sun-motes. "Go with honor," he said. The words trembled, just slightly, against his lips. "Return—with honor. Return with honor, Father."

On the other side of the still-open door, a shuddering breath drew in; then footsteps, soft and steady, and Father was truly gone.

iTUTi

Minato walked the corridor without feeling his legs, or hearing his footsteps, or thinking beyond the words he needed to say. They had a secluded VIP waiting area allotted to everyone waiting for Naruto, and that was where he needed to go. The hospital got around to providing it around the time the press showed up.

Jiraiya was with him. Had been pestering him about drinking more water, eating something, getting some sleep. He had to find a way to get rid of the man. Jiraiya was strong and steady and solid to lean on, and those were things Minato needed, but much more than that—he needed to focus on Naruto. Even well-meaning distractions were more than he could bear, and made the slow-building rage he so rarely experienced burn bitter at the back of his tongue, sting the roof of his mouth and taint the words he needed to say, and he would not spend the last moments he had as a father being angry at people who loved him, who loved his son.

He wasn't rational. Not anymore. Probably never again. But any good he could hold onto, any light he could squeeze through the closing seams of this nightmare, he would protect. Especially from his own crisis-triggered neurosis.

He was in the room, and he was facing a crowd: Naruto's friends, and mentors, and his own staff and security team, and parents who had come to take their children home, and found those children unwilling to leave.

Night was falling. The parents were right. Their kids needed rest, needed sleep. Needed space to
Some of these parents, he thought, trailing exhausted eyes over anxious faces, had been his own friends, once. Shikaku, with his hand on his son's shoulder. Chouza, holding Chouji to his chest, Ino clinging to his other arm. Umino Iruka was comforting a boy Minato barely recognized, one of the youngest on Naruto's hockey team; Kakashi endured the tears a man Minato vaguely recognized as a grown-up Maito Gai, with one of the WoF kids Minato didn't know weeping into Gai's shoulder. Aburame Shibi stood in silent solidarity with his own son. Inuzuka Tsume paced; a young woman who must be her daughter held a white-faced Kiba. Uchiha Mikoto's arms circled protectively around Hinata and Hinata's baby.

He looked at Sasuke and Sakura, Naruto's oldest, closest friends. Standing apart, tense and silent, eyelids rubbed raw, sclera strained red.

He didn't have to ask for anyone's attention; they were all staring at him, had the cues of the first few to see him. The room was too quiet. Every face read dread.

"Naruto is out of surgery," he began. He'd chosen his words to be simple, to be true, to be over with quickly. "He is no longer—" he had to stop, fight the closing of his throat. Felt Jiraiya's hand close strong on his shoulder. "—No longer breathing consistently on his own. He has been placed on life support. There are no signs of consciousness." A shuffle, a stillness. Too-young teens leaning into parents, leaning into each other. "As of now, with life support, he is stable. His doctors feel it is best to keep things as—least invasive as possible, for the night. Tomorrow—" each word had hurt, and watching those words reflected back in all these young faces hurt. He didn't want to see it, or feel it, or magnify it.

Chin up.

Breathe in.

Say what you have to say.

"We have some very difficult choices to make tomorrow. Please," and it was a little easier to look at them now that the worst was out, to be grateful for them, to draw in a tiny bit of the love radiated in this room, love that was presence and grieving and pleading and hope. Let in love, let in strength. "Please, get some rest. I know Naruto is grateful to you for being here. For being in his life. It means—everything. Tomorrow—come back tomorrow. Kushina and I—we explained to his doctors that he needs you, needs his friends, needs to hear you—they listened, they agreed—tomorrow—come back tomorrow. I'll make sure you see him."

To say goodbye, he didn't say.

There was hope. There had to be hope.

There was life.

Minato knew: life is a story. A beginning, a middle—

—an end.

VlovolV
They came. One or two at a time, bent low under hope, and fear, and love.

There were federal security officers posted on either side of Naruto's room, as there had been since he'd returned from surgery the first time. Someone must have pulled some strings, because anyone okay-ed by Minato, by Kushina, by Rin when she showed up to manage everything Minato couldn't manage—they let anyone on that list through. No challenges, no questions. Must have been someone with a lot of strings to pull. Old Sarutobi himself, maybe.

Two nurses attended. To monitor Naruto, to monitor Naruto's visitors. Minato leaned against the wall outside. Listened. Waited.

The hours of the night, quiet and desperate and holy hours slipping soft into dawn—those had been Kushina's.

A nurse had helped to lift and hold enough tubes and wires for her to crawl onto the bed, to cradle Naruto's body with hers; once she was in place, those lifelines were laid over her, and that was how she held him. Held him through the night, and whispered to him her secrets, of birth-pain and the strange mix of delight and terror over the perfection and fragility of his tiny newborn body. "Like now," she murmured, laughing and crying, "a little like right now, Naruto." How she had feared she would accidentally hurt him. How unfairly difficult it had been for her to bond with him in the horror of postpartum depression. "I was supposed to be happy," she wept. "I only had reasons to be happy. I loved you so much. I wanted you so much. But I felt like I wanted to die."

"You were so happy though," she told him, when she could breathe again, speak again. "From the beginning. From the very beginning. You smiled when you were two days old. The nurse said it was gas. That nurse was full of shit. I know a smile when I see one. And that was the best smile I'd ever seen, you know."

She told him about how he ate all the damn time and smiled all the damn time and made squeaky noises that would make anyone laugh and then he would start laughing, too. How he only cried when he was hungry, so she didn't give him many chances to get hungry and so he hardly ever cried. She told him about starting to feel better, months and months in, and she was so worried she'd damaged him, because she'd been so unhappy—but he was happy.

"Mina used to wear you around the office sometimes," she confided. "In this strap-on baby carrier. Like a mama kangaroo. They all laughed at him, you know. Paparazzi-turds went wild, every time. But he didn't care."

She kissed the side of his head. There was a little patch of hair there, poking through the bandages. Hours melted beneath ventilator huffs and monitor beeps. In a voice worn to a rough hush, she told him about mischief he'd made as a toddler, how she failed at disciplining him because she was always too busy laughing and bragging to act like she was mad. Because he was so silly. So clever. There were picture books he'd memorized because he'd demanded them read to him a billion times, and he would sit and recite them and always turned the pages at the right time, and she would fool people into thinking he was really reading. A genius (still was!). She told him he'd climbed the counters and cupboards and door frames like a devil-monkey, and one morning he'd found and hidden Minato's keys because he didn't want Daddy to go to work, and wouldn't be coaxed or bribed into revealing where he'd hidden them, not even for ice cream. Speaking of ice cream, there was that one time he spent a quarter-hour huddled behind the kitchen door, joyfully eating through
a tub of ice cream half as big as he was while his mama went crazy looking everywhere for him.

That was where she stopped. Grey light seeped through the window. Kushina held her baby, trying not to shudder with the tears that soaked her half of the pillow. Touched his cheek, his head, his wrist, counted and kissed each finger.

Light banished shadows. Nurses came in, as they had through the night; Minato begged five more minutes, nurses went out.

Kushina's hands shook. She held her son's face. "I buried you once," she whispered. "I can't do it again. I can't do it again, Naruto. I won't. You gotta say goodbye first, this time. Your turn, kiddo. I'm gonna live to be a hundred. I'm gonna be at least a hundred, you hear me? And I'm going to feed you and hold you and watch you grow, grow tall and brave and strong—hey, yes, you're already brave and strong, so very brave! Too brave... —And I'm going to watch you get married, and have babies. I mean more babies, and I'm going to spoil Mirai and all your babies rotten. And they're going to grow up strong and safe. Maybe have their own babies. I'm not saying goodbye until then. Not yet, Naruto. My baby. My Naruto."

Nurses were back. They lifted the tubes and wires and she crawled out from under them, aching from hours and hours of holding herself more still than she could bear, wet face shining in morning light and the hope of the story she told.

When she heard the others coming, she stumbled away.

She did not want to hear any goodbyes.

"You'll have just five minutes with him," said the nurse. "Keep your voices low and stay positive, please."

Shikamaru looked at the stillness on the bed they said was Naruto, and his throat started burning. His eyes were already burning. Something that might be his heart—that was burning, too.

Chouji stepped forward first. Stepped so damn carefully, like 'keep your voices low' meant you'll ruin everything if you make a single too-loud footstep. He had a package of crisps—his favorite flavor—set them on the little table in the corner.

Ino slipped up next to him, face all tender and twisted, and said, "Hey, you beautiful boy. You're breaking our hearts, do you know that? We're waiting for you. Everyone's waiting. Get up quick, Naruto, because the angels may want you, but they can't have you. Can't. Get up, get up quick, you beautiful boy."

The silent tears sliding thick down Chouji's face slipped into sobs, and Ino's brave face slipped with it, but she kept her own tears in.

The nurse said: "Time's nearly up, darlings."

Everything in Shikamaru was too hot, and the heat was expanding, pressure building. Now or never, he thought. Chose now. "I'm clearing your name," he said. Quiet. Burning. "You do what you need to do, Naruto. I'm making sure—we're getting it all. All. Everything to shut down anyone
stupid enough to try speaking against you—I'll bury them. Fucking bury them. Be ready. Naruto. Be ready. Ready to be free. Ready to do whatever the hell you want, be whoever you want to be, because I'm clearing your name."

"Yes," said Ino. "Yes." Drew tall, brave all the way in and all the way out. And Chouji was on his other side, weeping, and strong, and there when Shikamaru needed him, like he always was.

"Shall we?" said Ino.

"Back to work," agreed Shikamaru.

_Come on, Naruto,_ Shikamaru pleaded, turning back for one last look at his friend's face, Chouji pulling him gently away. _Please, please..._ 

_I want to see you again..._

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Iruka watched Konohamaru, Meogi, and Udon—the youngest members of Naruto's hockey team—say goodbyes-they-hoped-weren't-goodbyes, and swallowed hard against his own tears.

They came out anyway.

"Naruto can't die," insisted Konohamaru. "Naruto can't die. He's too strong to die. He's stronger than anybody. Right? Right, Sensei?"

"He's the strongest person I know," agreed Iruka.

And that was all he comfort he could say. Being there, weeping or not, would have to make up for the rest.
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"You got this," Kiba said. Shino shushed him, and he shut his teeth on a growl. Okay, maybe that came out louder than he meant it to. He meant it too much.

"Get better soon, yeah?" There, that was pretty much a whisper. "We gotta do that shootout we're always talking about. Or a full-on game. Street style, there's this dead-end near my house where Shino and I practice, we'll bring you next time. We can go one-on-one. I'll let you win a round or two."

He backed away to give Shino room for whatever he wanted to say. Which, being Shino, wasn't much.

Shino touched one of the little blond tufts sticking our between the wrappings around Naruto's scalp. Naruto really was blond, now. It was weird to see him that way. Not half as weird as seeing him strapped to a bed, perfectly silent, perfectly still, separate from the pumps and buzzes and beeps of the machines keeping him breathing. Like he'd already left.

_No. Nope. Not thinking about that._

"Farewell, Naruto," whispered Shino, and Kiba started, nausea twisting, anger rising. Shino didn't
have to talk like that. They were going to see Naruto again.

No way. No way this was it.

"I wish for us to meet again," murmured Shino. "It is better, when you are present."

"'Course we'll see him again," said Kiba, too loud. Again. This time, Shino didn't round on him to quiet him. Just shuffled until he was standing close, close enough for their shoulders to touch.

"We'll see him again," repeated Kiba. Not loud, this time.

Almost too soft to hear, this time.

Sakura stumbled when she saw him. Nearly knocked herself out on the bed railing on her way to the floor—would have, if Kakashi hadn't caught her.

Naruto looked wrong. He look all, all wrong.

She was so tired. How many days without rest? She felt like she hadn't slept in months, like she would never sleep again. Almost wished Kakashi had let her fall—almost wished for unconsciousness.

But these minutes—how could they give them just—minutes? Five minutes. Five minutes, to—do something with the fact that that was her best friend in the world, right there on the bed. Or—his body was there. And that body was breathing because a machine was making it breathe. Was that really Naruto? Where was Naruto? These minutes were precious. These minutes were not enough.

She'd thought and thought about what she could wish from five minutes. Watched the others come and go from the waiting room. Some of them, like Shikamaru, didn't come back. Some of them—Lee—came back crying, still hadn't stopped crying.

Sakura wasn't crying. Or she'd never stopped crying, not since she found Sasuke on the wrong side of the wall. She just...ran out of liquid.

It was too much, too big, this hole. Black hole. Mass and gravity that swallowed everything: sound, light, itself. She looked at Naruto: the thing that didn't even look like Naruto, didn't feel or smell or sound or move like him. Didn't make sound or move at all.

Her mouth moved, and then words came.

"Hey...hey, Naruto. I'm here. You okay?"

Slow words. Stupid words.

Kakashi had been hanging back—giving her a turn, maybe, and he must have seen how useless she was making these moments because then he was next to her. It made her mad, that he was butting in, but then his arm was around her, and she realized she needed it there. Needed it there to keep her from hitting the floor. Just like she had two minutes ago.

Kakashi kept one arm around her, reached out the other to lay a hand on Naruto's head, and it was so simple and gentle that something unbearable started boiling inside, came out as a sound she didn't want to make, didn't even know how to make, but it was guttural and haunted and awful, and
she put both hands over her mouth to shove it back in, eyes shut tight.

Kakashi's arm tightened. He said, "He's glad you're here. I'm certain of it, Sakura. He always wants you near." Confided, "I think you're his favorite."

And the sound that was all that was left of her, wail or moan or insides-turned-outsides—it kept coming out. Even with both hands pressed over her mouth, it was coming out.

Time. She needed time. Please, please, just enough time to know—to say—

"I love you," she mouthed, that same wail, shaped into words, shaped into what it really was. She reached out, put her hands on his face, his bruised and swollen and half-hidden face and she longed for the bold brave blue of open eyes but no matter—no matter. She knew that face, loved that face. "I love you," she said, "I love you."

The nurse was there. Saying she was sorry, saying it was time. Kakashi pulled away, hid his face. Took a moment too long to move, fingers trembling as they fell from Naruto's head.

She couldn't let go. She knew she needed to. This was a problem, again and again, not letting to go. If she lifted her hands—if her fingers stopped touching Naruto, touching Naruto's face—they'd be so cold—too cold—


His arm was back. He was using it to make her move, now. Gentle, but—

"No—"

"Shhh, shhh, Sakura. It's time."

"No!"

"Sakura."

"No! No! NO—"

Don't scream, said her brain. Don't scream, it's not good, you screamed so much already, quiet, be quiet, stay positive, not again, not again, don't—

She was screaming, couldn't stop screaming, and he was tugging and pulling and forcing her out, and she wasn't touching Naruto and she couldn't stop screaming but she could stop herself from fighting.

She wasn't fighting, so it wasn't hard for a man as big and strong as Sensei to get her out and down the hall, and she wasn't screaming anymore. Just...shuddering. Shame. Grief. Horror.

No, Naruto, no, no, Naruto...

She shouldn't act this way. It wasn't okay to act this way.

Her body was hiccuping, and when breath hitched out that wail came with it, little shattered bits of it. Helplessness. Horror. Black-hole sorrow.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. Hiccuped. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Sensei—"

Kakashi's hand was on her head, now.
"Don't be," he said. Soft, like his hand. Sad.

Collapse-the-universe sad.

And they leaned together in a corridor where people walked by but let them be, for a while. And when she was still hiccuping but not making other sounds she didn't want to make, Kakashi used his chin and his shoulder to gesture down the hallway and ask if she was ready to go, and she nodded. Float ed when she tried to walk: weightless, empty.

That was it. All the words between them. No I'm sorry Don't be.

Maybe it was enough.

For Naruto, she'd tried to find other words. More words, not just three but—

(I love you)

maybe three words was everything.

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Time was passing passing passing. Itachi was staring staring. Sasuke was...existing.

"You're sure you don't want to see him? I'll go with you. Or not, if you prefer, but—"

"I'm sure."

Light moved over the stairs. Slow. Slow. Because the earth was spinning. Spinning fast. Felt slow.

Funny how the earth just did that. Eons and empires gone just as quick as ant-like human lives, and the planet just kept doing its thing, flying through space as a statistically unlikely combination of stardust and starlight that accidentally made life.

"I fear your regret if you don't, Otouto."

Sasuke didn't say anything. Big spaces went by between thinking about how empty the universe was, how it kept growing growing growing and making sure everything stayed slammed shut inside, because there were things he would not feel. He'd keep his promises, because Naruto wasn't okay with broken promises. To keep his promises he had to stay, so he was here, on the stairs, letting Itachi stare, doing all he could to stay.

He didn't think he could feel and stay. That was too much.

He had a lot to think about, anyway. Breathing was something he had to think about. Not running was something he had to think about. Work on.

"Do you want to be alone?"

Sasuke shrugged.

"Then I'm staying."

Okay. Stay.
Itachi stayed. Sasuke stayed.

Waiting. Sitting on the emergency exit stairs in a hospital in a city in a country on a continent on this rock infected with accidental life that hurtled through the frozen vacuum of outer space in a loop around a burning ball of gas and plasma, one of billions. Trillions. Endless. Countless. He was here so—he would stay. Life wasn't that long. The end was oblivion anyway.

He could stay.

(Maybe not without Naruto.)

Stay.

"Please, Naruto. Please."

Hinata was weeping. His hand was in hers, held like a bird with a broken wing. She didn't want to bump the IV needle pinned and taped there. She bent her head, kissed his knuckles, the tip of each finger, the back of his wrist, right next to the IV catheter. Shuddered and shook and blotted her tears from his skin.

"Thank you for—for everything, and you must be hurting, and you've hurt so much already and I—how can I ask for more, you don't owe me anything, you don't owe me more but—please—please—"

"—don't go," she gasped. "Don't leave me. I need you. I need you. I need you—you k-kept all of your promises, every single one, I—"

"—I cant do this without you." It was so hard to breathe. Words came, and tears came, but air—there was everything else in the way. "I can't, I—I'm alive because of you, Mirai exists because of you—please—please—"

"—please..."

and then it was just him. His name. *Naruto, Naruto, Naruto. A prayer, a plea. Until the nurse was right there, reaching for her, and the nurse was crying, too. Murmured comfort in words Hinata didn't follow, because they were taking her away, away from Naruto. To friends. Naruto's friends, her friends. Reaching for her, arms open, warm, desperate, believing, weeping.

They made huddles. Circles of fear and love, and fear of the hope they had because of love. Hinata looked for her baby, took her, tiny and fragile and perfect and helpless. Sank to the floor with Mirai curled warm and soft and fragrant on her chest, and on the other side of her skin and muscle and bones the strange animal of grief curled, and clawed, and cried. The circle sank to the floor around them. Closed close, Mirai in the middle.

*Please.* It throbbed through all them. And—Minato, and Kushina, their baby—*please*, prayed Hinata, face buried in her own baby's hair. *Please.* Sobbed up her throat, stung over tear tracks rubbed raw into her cheeks.

She'd pleaded like this for her mother's life. All her heart, all her hope.

Please.

People said it was best. Free from harm, free from sorrow.


Please.

Please.

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"Listen."

Minato had listened. He'd promised Naruto he wouldn't leave his side, would be there to the end, and so he'd stayed. Leaned against the wall just outside the door, to give the kids space to say things that were for Naruto, not for him—but the walls were thin, and he'd heard everything.

Their faith, their fear, their love. And now it was time for his own words. A father's blessing.

"Listen, Naruto, you—you light up all the dark. Lit up all the dark, from the beginning. From the very beginning.

"Thank you for coming," whispered Minato. "For being ours."

It was a long time before he could speak again.

"Listen," he said. "It—you—are enough. Have always been enough. Always. Thank you for being," he said. Tried to say. Tried to swallow, tried to breathe.

"If you need to leave, take—my love, my love—you can leave. Naruto," he said. "Please stay—"

"...or go," he said.

He couldn't say any more.

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VoloV

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They turned off the ventilator. The room was full of light, sunset-fire through windows wide open.

They chose this. For Naruto. For Naruto.

The heart monitor spiked. Kushina cried out. Minato closed his eyes. Tears ran steady. He couldn't swallow. Everything hurt.

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Naruto's chest lifted.

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Please.

People said it was best. Free from harm, free from sorrow.


Please.

Please.
Again.

"He's breathing," said the surgeon. The doctor who'd saved him. Twice. Then told them: I've done everything I can. He's dying. I'm so sorry. He's dying. "He's breathing!"

"I told you," said Tsunade, reverent, triumphant, victory and prayer. "I told you. Bet on this kid. You gotta bet on this kid."

"Heart rate's stabilizing," said one of the nurses. She was crying. Everyone was crying.

Kushina crumpled. Minato caught her—fell with her.

Naruto breathed.

Kushina pulled them both again, all the way up to tiptoe, so that in-between hovering doctors and nurses, checking, re-checking—they could see him. See him breathing.

"We're not out of the woods yet," said Tsunade. "It's the first step. Just the first step. But fuck me if that isn't the best possible first step!"

The heart monitor kept beeping, beeping, beeping. Nurses read out stats: blood pressure, respiratory rate, oxygen saturation levels. It was joyful, discordant, the most beautiful, messed-up symphony Minato had ever, ever, ever heard.

"He's breathing," repeated the head doctor, grinning, sobbing. "Look at him. I saw those lungs. I sewed up those lungs. And he's breathing."

"Thank you," whispered Kushina. "Thank you, thank you."

They held each other, and wondered over their child, listening like they had the very first time—he was real, and he was theirs, wondrously and fearfully made—and he was breathing.

Naruto breathed.

MnNuK

In the morning, Naruto woke. It was hard to see. It was hard to move. He didn't know where he was.

A face—there was a face. Something wet and warm falling on his face.

Eyes. The bluest eyes he'd ever seen.

"Dad?"

Naruto reached.
Epilogue

The best day of Naruto's life (so far) wasn't remarkable.

It wasn't the one with the moment where he started gasping in air again, ears-ringing-crowd-surring-cameras-clicking in a too-hot, too-crowded courthouse, not quite able to believe he'd heard what he thought he heard, though Jiraiya pounding his back in relief and triumph and a glimpse of his dad's face all wet with tears he wasn't even trying to hide sang with the echo: *not guilty*. Plea of self-defense upheld: Not Guilty.

Free.

It wasn't the feeling of the ankle monitor he'd worn for fifteen-and-a-half months unclaspings.

It wasn't the one where Sarutobi Hiruzen personally welcomed him back to WoF, and the entire hockey team was there with a surprise party that went on for a solid seven hours of increasingly silly celebration. Shino sang karaoke. *Shino*. Singing. So that was a pretty dang good contender—but not it. Not even close. Not even top ten.

The day he carried Mirai wrapped to his chest in her favorite baby-sling and together they grinned and waved and cheered like crazy as Hina-hime found her pace on the ice again—that was top ten.

Kakashi asking if he would be best man at his wedding, still so confused at his luck over Rin calmly suggesting he marry her—then panicking and asking who in Team Seven would be willing to help him pick out a ring (Sakura, duh)—that was top ten.

Sakura winning MVP in for their championship hockey season—that was top ten. The championship itself, skating into a decisive win and from there right into the middle of his parents' giant to-tight-to-breathe-sandwich-glomp, Mom's voice all hoarse in his ear because she'd cheered it into oblivion, Iruka-sensei wearing a jersey with Naruto's name and number and screaming *that's my boy* and not even caring about Dad's jealous death glares—that was up there.

The day he ambushed Sasuke after *months* of being avoided and punched him in the mouth because *Don't you even miss me? I miss you so freaking much you freaking bastard, how many times do I have to say I'm sorry*—and Sasuke punched him back twice as hard and then they just went for it—that was close. It happened in the parking garage of Itachi's apartment building and was horrible and beautiful, the way they shattered against each other. Hissed breath and real anger and real hurt and then—then, at the end—*You shouldn't have done it, Naruto, how could you—you knew—if you'd died—if—*

Sasuke cried. Naruto was crying before he threw the first punch, so it's not like the bastard should have been as embarrassed about it as he was. But in the end—in the end, butts and backs just about frozen stiff from the arctic cement they were too exhausted to peel themselves off of—in the end it was everything. Everything Naruto needed to get up and face another day, all the days, to keep fighting the awful gravity of the ankle monitor constantly pulling him down. He always tried not to think about what would happen, when the final verdict dropped. Tried not to turn every soft moment into something he couldn't bear to lose.

He always failed.

Not for those minutes. Not sprawled together against the garage wall, shadowed and shining in the weird yellow light of the security bulbs, sweating and shaking and bleeding. Because Sasuke meant
home. Safe. Strong enough to take the worst Naruto could give, strong enough to give it right back. Broken enough to understand. More than anyone in the world, Sasuke understood.

That was a good day, even after Itachi found them and was too angry to talk and called Naruto’s parents to come get him and then everyone else was upset and pained and that sucked, but Naruto was elated. All the way to when Sakura and Kakashi found out and yelled at them, too, and Naruto snuck a glance at Sasuke, fighting a grin because—because Sasuke was there, Team Seven all united and right and there was this smile tugging the side of Sasuke’s mouth and he caught Naruto’s glance and they both—lost it. Laughed so hard he felt it in every freaking ache on his body, and damn were there a lot of them.

That was a good day.

There was this one Big Breakfast with like half of Konoha. Mom invited Hyuuga Hiashi (“He’s the prickliest prick of all the pricks, but he’s Mirai’s grandfather, which makes him family, and we welcome family, Naruto,”) and Naruto made sure every single one of Hinata’s friends—which included all of his friends, Gaara and Sai included, for extra special intimidation factor—was there so they could, at the very least, outnumber the crazy grownups. Which was a feat, because Dad invited Jiraiya-sensei and Jiraiya-sensei conned Tsunade-baba into being there, which meant Shizune-nee was also there. The entire security team showed up, as they were wont to do. Kakashi-sensei had a scheduled waffle-eating competition with Gai-sensei, with Asuma-sensei and Kurenai-sensei there to serve as co-judges, and Konohamura came and brought his grandpa along so there were three Sarutobis, plus security detail. Rin was late. She dragged Obito in with her. How she convinced him to come, no one knew, but after disappearing into Dad’s office with him and getting cursed out by Kakashi, things went...good. Pretty dang good.

Iruka-sensei was there to supervise Sai, and possibly to flirt with Genma. Gaara presented Hinata and Mirai with his latest crocheted baby blazer. Hyuuga Fucking Hiashi spent most of the time looking like he’d stepped on empty air where he’d expected another step down, and hadn’t had a chance to catch his balance. He did catch his granddaughter, who was just learning to walk.

(Her very first steps were from Hinata’s outstretched arms—right into Naruto’s.)

Good days. Such good, good, good days.

(And the dark ones—there were so many awful hours—court days, the days before and after court days, all the days Sasuke wouldn’t see or talk to him, the day he looked up and read the names of every Uchiha the Nine-tails had murdered. The press of reporters and protestors everywhere he went, the time he caught Raidou painting over a murdered lives here!! graffiti on the garden wall, the eyes of family members of murdered Uchiha who came to court to beg for Naruto’s death. Finding out that some parents had pulled their children out of WoF when they learned that Naruto would be re-admitted. The day he tried to meet and apologize to the policeman he’d stabbed, and the man spat on him, and wheeled his oxygen tank away—there were a lot of dark days.)

The best day of Naruto’s life started before the sun was up. He wasn’t sure what woke him, but he was in his bed, and he was warm, and he couldn’t remember what he’d dreamed but—it was warm too. There were a whole bunch of birds making an unearthly racket just outside his window, because it was spring and they started getting all excited about the sun a good two hours before it was up. He’d started sleeping through that months ago though.

He slept through lots of things he’d never imagined he could sleep through. He’d never slept so much. Let your body grow, Mom said. It has a chance. It has a chance, at last. Grow grow grow, Naruto.
He’d noticed, all of a sudden, that he was taller than her.

The house quiet. He passed rooms full of people he loved, resting and safe, and bit down on his cheek, just enough for the pain to make all the good things feel real.

He didn’t turn on any lights, but the kitchen was already glowing, and there at the bright table were Dad and Mirai and about a hundred books. They must have been up for a while, then.

“A bunny?” asked Mirai, sweet and bold and high, and Naruto could hear his father’s smile as he bent his pale head over her dark one.

“Yes, a bunny! The bunny goes hop hop—”

“Hop hop! An’ baby bunny—”

“And baby bunny. Does baby bunny hop?”

“Baby hop! Baby hop hop!”

The book they were reading was probably pretty high up on the list of Most Boring Books Ever Written, but Naruto leaned into the door jamb, ready to listen forever.

Mirai was getting really into the hopping, and hopped off Dad’s lap right onto the table. She didn’t know how to jump yet, but had definitely mastered the world’s cutest knee-bends. Dad’s hands opened and hovered, ready to catch. Naruto got his first clear view of his face, tired and open and smile spread wide.

“Nao!” Mirai saw him, shrieked joy, rushed across the table, Dad lunging after her—“catch!”

Naruto moved as fast as he ever had in a fight, panic rising, but then she was in his arms, giggling like the crazy risk-taker she was. Dad was sprawled halfway across the table, one hand fisted in the back of her pyjamas. He and Naruto’s eyes met, and Naruto had a very, very rare moment of certainty that—despite everything—they understood each other perfectly.

“Good morning, and good catch,” said Dad, laughing a little as he pushed himself back upright, rubbing a little ruefully at the place his rib cage had jammed into the table.

“When did you two get up?” asked Naruto, between automatic kisses to the top of Mirai’s head. One little arm wrapped around his neck, the hand of the other finding its usual hold on his T-shirt collar.

“Sometime after 2:00, I think,” Dad said, stretching and yawning. “What do you want to eat?”

“I can get it. You going back to bed?”

“No hope for it—had two coffees already. Baby or food prep, choose one,”

Lately, Naruto had these weird urges to—parent his parents. Two coffees before 6:00am? Really, Dad? You’re going to make yourself sick if you don’t sleep more—

“Nao read,” announced Mirai, reaching towards the stacks of books imperiously—Naruto caught his dad’s eye, and they both huffed a laugh.

“Bagel sound good?”

“Sounds great,” said Naruto, throat closing suddenly on the warmth bubbling up inside him. It
happened a lot. More of his sentences got swallowed by gratitude than not, some days. “Which book first, Baby-chan?”

Later—after bagels with Dad, after Big Breakfast with not-everyone (but still fourteen people squished around the giant table, and Naruto loved every single one of them) Naruto met up with Sasuke and Sakura to settle street hockey scores with Shino, Kiba, and Chouji. Shikamaru showed, with a lawn chair—hauled out a plastic recliner from Kiba’s deck all the way to the empty lot they were playing on—and opted for watching the clouds and making occasionally ref calls rather than play. The air and sky were heavy, promising rain, and when the first fat drops fell, they called the game. Tied. Getting goals past Chouji was a near impossible feat, these days.

Kiba grabbed him in a hug before he left. It was something he’d noticed, slowly—everyone touching him more. Like they had to make sure, over and over again, that he was really there.

Naruto was glad. Half the time, he wasn’t sure he was there. That this was real. That he wouldn’t have to wake up again. Wake up cold in too-close walls with no windows, nothing but him, him and that smell—

Sakura’s arms’ tightened around him from her seat on the back of his motorcycle, and he went back to breathing. Breathing and driving and less thinking. Sasuke peeled along behind them, still riding the old scooter he and Naruto used to share, though it was considerably faster than it looked, now. Mom had seen to that (after extracting the promise that Sasuke’s mom would never, ever trace it back to her).

There was the half-second press of Sakura’s face to his, raindrops splashing their cheeks, as she said goodbye with a kiss on the cheek in front of her house. Sasuke didn’t get a kiss because he didn’t take his helmet off for one, the dumbass. He did loop one arm around her waist and pull her close for, like, almost three seconds. There was hope for him yet.

Naruto jammed his helmet back on and they were off through the rain, racing a little on the empty suburban streets, shouting insults that couldn’t quite be heard past wind and helmets. They veered off towards Sasuke’s mom’s house—what was Sasuke’s house these days, Naruto didn’t even know; he was as likely to sleep over at Naruto’s or Itachi’s as he was to go home—found Itachi’s car already in the driveway. Naruto braced on his bike, knocked fists with Sasuke, laughed as his friend looked halfway ready to turn back and take off on his own bike again, because his mom and brother were spilling out of the doorway already mid-fuss over Sasuke riding in a bit of rain.

“You’ll come in too, Naruto, change into dry clothes and have lunch—Itachi will give you a ride when we’re done—” called Sasuke’s mom, and Naruto’s heart quailed a bit at the thought of not immediately obeying her because she really sounded like she should be obeyed, but—

“Thank you, thank you so much, but I have a date! See ya, bastard!” And jammed his visor down and took off before he had to say no twice.

The ice rink parking lot was halfway full—it was Sunday afternoon, and A rink was open to the public. He found Tenten’s car and parked next to it, grabbed his duffel and rain cover from under his seat, covered his bike, ran inside.

The lobby was full of people—couples, families, groups of friends—pulling on rented skates, taking quick rests, grabbing snacks from the vending machines. He ducked his head and hurried through to B rink, shrugging out of his wet jacket as he went.

His breath caught when he saw Hinata. The way she moved on the ice—
“NAO!”

“Hi, Baby Girl!” He ran to the boards, face bursting with a smile that couldn’t have been stopped if the championship depended on it. Mirai had a hand each of Neji and Tenten’s, and they had no choice but to glide her over to the boards on her tiny skates.

She looked up at him, proud and deeply, deeply serious. “I ‘kate!”

“Look at you!” cheered Naruto, while Neji gushed, “You skate very very well, yes you do—”

And there it was again, that glowing, disbelieving, aching goodness, filling him up all the way to the top and spilling over, stealing his breath and his words.

Kurenai-sensei was there, and Kakashi and Rin, because Kakashi liked to crash Naruto’s activities while inviting Rin along and pretending it was a date. Well it probably really was a date—they looked lovey-dovey enough, gliding along, holding hands—and he did already get a whole two-plus hours unsupervised while playing street hockey. He was going to complain anyway, but then Hinata was right there, eyes shining and cheeks bright and her smile and yeah, he had no breath for complaining. Or talking. All he could do was grin and wave, stupidly, and rush to get his skates on as quickly as possible so he could join her.

He wasn’t entirely used to figure skates yet, but he was getting there. It was the kind of thing he could learn quickly. Kurenai-sensei spent most of their lessons swinging between exasperation over how poorly he understood spoken instructions and disbelief when his body figured out what to do and did it perfectly every time after that. Once Neji was manipulated (“Mirai will be there!”) into spending some time demonstrating so Naruto could imitate, things sped up an awful lot. Sometimes Neji hissed at him in disgust, for things like landing a jump it had taken Neji eight months to learn to land, but Naruto watched close and Neji’s eyes were always warm and clear in the end, so—so it was okay.

It was okay.

He hadn’t warmed up off-ice, so he accepted Hinata’s hands and gladly followed her in lazy loops of the rink, stretching and extending as they went. Kakashi asked if Mirai wanted to go to the other rink—“Yeah! Go! Go all people are!” And they went.

“They’re pretending your kid is theirs again,” teased Tenten, sliding up next to Hinata as they returned Mirai’s enthusiastic bye-bye waves. “Then again, I’m totally guilty of doing the same...”

“Perhaps you should get your own,” said Neji, and then his brain seemed to work past the adoring daze he was watching her through, and he dissolved into a sudden coughing fit, pale face flushing pink.

“Perhaps I should,” said Tenten calmly, a wicked glint in her eye as Neji swallowed hard. “…In ten years or so. For now, I’ll continue adoring this one. If that’s okay with you, Hinata—? I could definitely understand it bothering you, all these people wanting Mirai all the time—”

“It doesn’t,” said Hinata, watching her daughter disappear down the tunnel with a face so soft and happy Naruto immediately set about memorizing it. Hinata, Happy, he added to his secret mental photo album. He had lots of Hinata, Happy memories in there. There would never be enough.

“Maybe if she would sleep anywhere but literally on top of my heart I could get jealous, but—it’s nice to get breaks, and, I mean—can there be too much love? If every baby in the world had half so many good people to love her—” Hinata glanced sideways at Naruto, all her wishes for him in her
eyes, and his fingers found hers, folded all my wishes came true! warm around them.

“You know you’re her favorite,” he said, sliding in close, catching her eyes and smiling softer. “Mine, too.” And he had to kiss her. He just had to. Not meeting those lips with the best he could give of his was not an option—not in that moment.

Neji cleared his throat, and Naruto broke the kiss with a grin and stared a dare over the top of Hinata’s head, but Neji just rolled his eyes, Tenten smothering a laugh.

“I think we’re all sufficiently warmed up,” said Kurenai-sensei dryly, and they began.

They didn’t know what they were preparing this routine for. There was no competition, no specific performance they were going for—it was just something Naruto had asked to do, hoping to help ease some of the grief Hinata was working through as she faced the realities of how much pregnancy and childbirth had changed her body, the realization that she could never skate quite the same way. Not that she could never be as good, or get better; Kurenai-sensei assured her that much—but her body was different, and her skating needed to change with it. This was—an helpful step on the way. Naruto hoped it was helpful, anyway. It felt good. It was hard. They had fun.

Kurenai-sensei got this speculative look in her eyes, sometimes, when Naruto managed to pull off a piece of choreography she’d originally categorized as too difficult. She’d spring some performance for them to work towards the moment she thought they were ready, Naruto was sure, but for now—for now, it was just—part of who they were. A way to keep breathing. Hinata and Naruto.

“Let’s run the first 40 seconds,” Kurenai decided, poised to cue the music. “We’ll know out what to focus on from there.”

Hinata breathed in, breathed out, floated to center ice. Naruto didn’t have to think to follow.

They had a lot of stories, Naruto and Hinata. This story—three minutes and sixteen seconds of music and muscle and ice—this one hurt, honestly, though he hadn’t (wouldn’t) admit that to anyone. In real life it started in a hospital. Started with days where he couldn’t stay awake for more than a few minutes at a time, couldn’t remember where he was half the time, didn’t always know who had died and who hadn’t, when he was safe and when he wasn’t. In real life, he’d cried. A lot.

In real life, he had to learn to walk again. Think again, trust again, not give up again and again and again. In real life, it wasn’t just him and Hinata. It was him and his parents and teachers and friends and doctors and guards and lawyers, and it had all been too much. Too hard.

Hinata’s hand reached for his.

In real life, Hinata reached. Reached when her body was still bleeding from childbirth, when she’d had no rest and little comfort, when he didn’t want her there because she deserved something—someone—better, someone who could walk without physical therapy and talk without crying, who didn’t want to give up, someone who didn’t have an ankle monitor and twenty-four hour guard, someone with a future—

They scraped across the ice, breathing to the music and each other, all their angles exactly matched. The first jump—

In real life, Naruto got better.

—perfect landing.

It took a long, long time. He didn’t want to think about it. Didn’t want to remember.
Hinata came into his arms. Naruto lifted. It took every part of him to do this right—the strength and balance and judgment of every muscle, heart-brain-core-limbs—keeping her safe, steady—letting her fly.

He brought her back down, back into his arms, curled around her for a desperate selfish moment, feeling the rise and fall of her lungs and his. The 40 seconds were done, the music cut off, and Kurenai was coming in close, smiling. He let go, a little reluctantly, and Hinata turned just enough to respectfully face Kurenai-sensei, one arm firm around his waist.

“You know what, let’s just go on from there,” she said.

Forward. Forward. Yes.

Later—after joining Mirai on the public rink because she begged them to, after mostly-successfully ignoring the whispers and stares and scattered glares as people started to notice and recognize him—he rode home through the rain. He could have gone in a car with the rest, gotten a ride to pick his bike up later, but he needed...space. When he was on his bike, he could turn. Any time. Any street. Go find Iruka-sensei, visit the cemetery, drive all the way to fucking Suna.

Sometimes, he couldn’t breathe until he felt the rush of those possibilities pushing into him with the rain and the wind—he got cold and wet and breathed really deep, and went all the way home.

Dad was waiting for him with a scowl and a towel, and once he wasn’t in danger of dripping all the way there, ordered him straight to a hot shower. Naruto went meekly. Dad would never really make peace with the motorcycle, he knew, but he tried so damn hard that it wasn’t asking much to keep his own irritation at bay. Most of the time, anyway.

He showered fast and put on socks so that Dad would be happy that his feet were warm and then he went to the kitchen and ate a huge lunch. Leftovers from breakfast, leftovers from the takeout they’d ordered for dinner the night before, a cup of instant noodles for good measure. He cleaned the kitchen, then set about wandering the house until he found someone to not be alone with.

Just like in the morning, everything was quiet. Mirai had fallen asleep in the car; Hinata had carried her to bed to continue the nap, and they were both fast asleep when Naruto peeked in on them, Mirai clamped like a snoring starfish to Hinata’s chest. Dad had come to the kitchen to make sure Naruto was warm and dry and eating and then announced his intention to go nap, too, something he should have done much earlier, and Naruto told him as much. Sasuke was coming over later for an Ultimate Ninja Storm rematch, but for now, it was just Naruto...and his family.

The warm-ache was just starting to turn into irrational-fear-pain when he thought to check the smallest family room—and found mom, wearing toe socks and brandishing a crochet hook like a switchblade as she shouted advice to the contestants of the cooking show blaring from the TV.

“That’s great!” she said, too loud, still in shouting-at-chefs mode. “How did practice go? I saw Hinata-chan for a moment, she looked happy!”

“Yeah,” he said. She had an arm out and open, reaching for him, and he went gladly into it, bowing his head down to fit in the curve of her shoulder for a moment. He got a faceful of her hair and it smelled amazing, like it always did, and the pain in his chest dissolved completely.

“Come on, they’re gonna eliminate Marina this round but that’s ‘cause they’re totally stupid,
everyone knows Brad is the one who needs to go—how he made it past the second round—can you believe he used a braising pan for this dish? What an idiot—"

Her crochet project was tossed aside, the arm she’d reached for him with still firm around his shoulders, and he settled into the couch and her side, breathing carefully so he wouldn’t start crying. His body could do things like figure skating just fine, but it must not be completely healed, because it did things like—like producing tears when he wasn’t even sad, when there was no reason in the world to cry, and all the control he’d bruised in and bled for when he was half the size he was now just...didn’t apply.

Not anymore.

“Naruto, have you ever seen the sea?”

“What, like—the ocean?” The sentence stretched over a yawn. His eyes refocused idly on the screen, where some ad featuring a some dude using his phone to take pictures on a beach made the sudden question make sense. More sense, anyway. “Nah. Unless you guys took me when I was small...”

“We did.” Mom’s voice was small. Naruto straightened up, shifting away a little, familiar regret twisting. Mom yanked him right back. “Let’s go again.”

Oh. They could do that. They could. He could find out if the ocean tasted really salty or if people exaggerated that, hear what waves sounded like—“Yeah,” he managed, barely, around the hope and wonder thick in his throat. “Yeah, that would—that would be cool—someday—”

“Someday? Your Spring Break’s in like, two weeks. We’ll go then. Ask your friends if they can go, if you want. I’m texting Hiashi. Can you imagine him in board shorts? I’ll be needing sunglasses for sure. We can also just make it just us—the three of us. Or five of us. Or seven. The whole damn village. Whatever sounds good, baby. Hang on—they’re announcing the next challenge—”

Barely two minutes in to the return of the cooking competition and his eyelids were failing him, falling shut when even as his brain turned around this new possibility, which flickered into what was starting to feel like and infinite trail of related possibilities—he was free to travel, he had legal ID, he could go anywhere...

“Here,” said Mom, tugging and prodding at him until he gave in and lay down, head on her leg. “My shoulder was falling asleep, you great lug. And I need both hands to crochet.” She didn’t pick up her hook again, though; one hand settled on his arm, a warm gentle forcefield, and the other moved to smooth his forehead, brush through his hair.

Naruto shivered, then settled, melting into the couch, the touch, the ache in his throat.

When he woke up, Dad was there, voice very soft. “—told him to go ahead and get the game set up and I’d get Naruto, but waiting a while longer won’t kill him.”

The words didn’t make much sense at first. He was too warm and too comfortable to figure them out, or move, or even open his eyes. He’d been dreaming about airplanes. But he’d been waiting—waiting for something, or someone—

“...S’suke?” he mumbled, slowly twitching into consciousness. “Sasuke’s here?” Dad’s face blinked slowly into focus. He looked more rested. He was smiling.

“Sakura too. They’re in the game room. You getting up, or should I leave them to Mirai? I think
she kept Sasuke busy playing dragons for at least twenty minutes last time.”

Both excellent options. Naruto considered, limp and lazy, but he was already awake. He stretched and rolled and was barely a step away from the couch before Dad had stolen his spot.

“Have fun,” Dad said happily, one arm already wrapped around Mom, attention turning expectantly to the TV. “Did they wise up and keep Marina? No? Damn. What are we going to watch now?”

Naruto watched them for a moment, leaning into each other in a little pool of lamp- and screen-light. Set off to find Sasuke. Something smelled really good when he passed the kitchen, and he stuck his head around the doorjamb to find Hinata and Raidou, congratulating each other on a perfectly seasoned stew. They were just waiting for the bread to come out.

There’d be time to digitally kick Sasuke’s ass at least twice before that. And ten times that after dinner—even more if Sasuke was sleeping over—and he could tell him about the trip to the ocean, find out if there was a chance he could come, maybe mention some of the other things he wanted to see. Mountains so tall they kept snow on all year round, bridges that spanned the distance between countries, waterfalls taller than skyscrapers and places where you could look and walk and scream and run in every direction and just see—like trees and grass and shit. No buildings, no people, maybe not even roads.

Where do you go, if there aren’t any roads?

Anywhere, he thought, standing still between rooms full of people he loved, Sasuke’s fearsome dragon-growl and Sakura’s “Careful!—she’s so fast, I almost didn’t her—” and Mirai’s delighted screams spilling through the closest door, and his parents easy and laughing in their circle of light, and his own lungs bursting with home, home, home—

I can go anywhere.

He had time.

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