Outrunning Karma

by Anjelle

Summary

Kakashi was forty-two and the world ended in a sea of smoke and ash. Kakashi was forty-two and there stood a man in the carnage, untouched and unfazed as the village burned around him.

Kakashi is nineteen and the world ends tomorrow, and he will do everything he can to make it right. Even if it means making friends of his enemies. Even if it means erasing everything.

Even if it means staring into the face of all that he hates and smiling.

Kakashi is nineteen and Naruto is five and there is still time. Instead of counting his losses, he'll make the most of it.

Notes

So this is my first venture into a pretty big, multi-story series I'm starting. It started with a conversation I had with my wife after watching Road to Ninja that got me thinking of Menma, the alternate version of Naruto, and how underutilized he was. This story is not about THAT Menma, but thoughts about that kinda morphed into an unrelated story, and this is the result. If the universe interests you and you want to read more, I'd suggest following the
series The World Ended Yesterday as there will also be a fic called The Story of Menma coming in the future that's pretty much a prequel to this one. (And possibly some other ficlets because this series is my new obsession)

Fair warning that this story NOT canon compliant. There’s plot divergence, yes, and a lot of it. But there’re also a lot of things that don’t fit with canon at all, examples being that Obito’s sharingan degrades with usage like other sharingan, and that the effects of the nine-tails sealed within Naruto are more extensive than what’s seen in canon. Having the nine-tails from birth has a lasting effect on him. Also, the timeline has been mostly rewritten. Kakashi was in ANBU most of his life, people who died are alive and people who are alive are dead etc. There are more, a lot more, but that’s all you really need to know right now. Don’t be surprised if something doesn’t line up with canon, because there will be a looooot of things that don’t.

Also, we have a cover. I started doodling concepts for future Naruto/Menma and got carried away.
The matron was a woman of smiles and compliance. She greeted him as such, her hands clasped
before her, the glasses askew upon the bridge of her nose. He tried not to slouch when her eyes fell to him, but long-standing habits were hard to break.

“Kakashi Hatake,” she surmised, her voice short and sweet. Then there was a hand held out to him in offering, one that he didn’t take, one that he didn’t think to take, and it hung there awkwardly before the matron pulled it back and adjusted. The smile was still there, strained and unimpressed. He knew that he should be trying to make a good impression but doubted that it would matter in the end, that it mattered to anyone whether he made a good caretaker or not. “We were expecting you. Lord Third informed us of your interest in one of our children.”

“Did he, now?” He knew. Of course he knew. Without approval from the Hokage, this visit would have been meaningless.

They wouldn’t give up the jinchuuriki boy to just anyone.

With careful niceties and practiced charm, the woman drew a path through the long halls of the orphanage with Kakashi in tow, a hand shoved into his pocket, his fingers turning and twisting the metal ring of the kunai hidden within. Old age made him paranoid. Perhaps that was another habit better left buried in another time. But, well, habits were hard to break, harder still when they came from a place of desperation.

He wouldn’t use it, he told himself. He would see that boy for himself, would see and wait to judge.

Konoha Orphanage was a short two stories tall, all aged wood and dusty windows. The orphanage received quarterly funding through the Hokage so there was little excuse for the lack of updates on the building, but he didn’t doubt that a huge portion of those funds went to staffing and food. There was a leak in the corner at the far end of the wall, a bucket half-filled resting below it. The matron brought no attention to it and he didn’t ask; he wasn’t there to be critical. He was there for a reason.

As his eyes wandered from corner to corner and wall to wall, Kakashi couldn’t help but think that this was a fitting start for his most hated person, that the stale air and creaking floorboards and implacable smell of age set the stage for the atrocities to come, a cautionary tale of long-standing tragedy. Or maybe he was thinking too hard. He tended to do that in old age.

He couldn’t use age as an excuse. Not anymore.

“I find it the smallest bit… unusual that you’ve taken interest now, of all times,” the Matron hedged, wringing her hands together. Her smile was tight but still present, so he gave her points for trying.

“That so?”

“There is nothing wrong with it, of course,” she assured, and he could see her mental backpedalling. “But the Uzumaki boy is weeks away from his fifth birthday. Lord Third intended to remove him from the program and place him in a home of his own.”

‘On his own,’ Kakashi corrected internally. It was a bitter reminder of a past he lived, alone in that small apartment. Even if it was the Uzumaki boy, it didn’t sit well. He understood; no one wanted to be within ten feet of that damnable fox, not even his caretakers. Rumors spread like a virus in places like that; there was no doubt that the secret of the Uzumaki boy’s identity was common knowledge by the time the kid was two weeks old, gag order be damned. People feared him. They had every right to. And they wanted him gone.

Well, he would be gone. One way or another.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter now,” said the matron, her heels clacking a rhythm against the wood as
she walked. “What matters is that you’re here now. We’ll get Uzumaki in to see you shortly.”

“Good.”

Kakashi’s dull eye strayed from the hall to the long line of windows on his right, framing the grassy play area outside. The older children were out playing in that way children did, with the running and the throwing of both safe and unsafe objects. There were toys, sure, but he saw one boy throwing a rusted, wartime shuriken. He thought better of mentioning it to the matron; he wanted in and out of there as quick as possible, not to make a scene, so much so that weeks prior to this visit he considered donning his ANBU uniform and breaking in to be an acceptable course of action before a long talk with the Hokage about just how horribly, stupidly, terribly wrong that idea was made him change his mind. Plus, he was sure one of the supervising staff would notice soon—the kid was throwing it at other small children—and sure enough a woman with her hair in a bun and an ankle-length skirt came flailing out from behind the wall.

Well, it was bound to happen; this land was a battleground in the last war, and it was inevitable that now and then a few relics of the past would be uncovered by the curiously sticky and unreasonably stupid hands of the little hellions they were raising there.

Point-blank, Kakashi did not like children. This was the last place he wanted to be. It was the last place he would ever be, but there he was, because the world had ended and he was out of options.

His steps faltered when, out of the corner of his eye, a flash of yellow crossed his path. He straightened his back and inclined his head towards the image of blond hair darting about the wildgrass like a hunter on the prowl. The small body squirmed on all fours, pressed close to the ground, wriggling in place.

All Kakashi could see was the fox, its nine tails flicking and twitching and crushing the village beneath a strength that could level mountains.

But there was no fox, just a small boy with gangly arms and unruly hair and a grin on his face.

The boy bounded forth and pounced at the shuriken-wielding menace who had taken to running from their supervisor. The boys rolled, grass and weeds and flowers crushed beneath their path, until the shuriken brat was pinned beneath the fox hell-child with his arms at his sides and horror in his eyes. His grip faltered, the rusted weapon slipping out of his hold and into the dirt.

Uzumaki grinned and snatched the shuriken up. He bounced to his feet with a bubble of excitement, spun on his heel, and presented the weapon to the frantic woman who’d been trying to break the boys up for the past ninety seconds.

She ripped it out of his hands. Kakashi couldn’t hear, but he thought she yelled. If the way the fox brat shrivelled up was any indication, she yelled. He was the one in trouble. He was the one at fault.

Well, Kakashi couldn’t say that he cared.

“Mr. Hatake?”

A lazy eye found the matron waiting at an open door and his steps started up again. He sighed, stepping through the threshold. The room was small and quaint. There were toys scattered about, crude crayon pictures on the wall, and in the centre was a small table with two chairs. The walls were painted with childish colours and he was in hell. This was actually hell. He died as an old man of forty-two and this was actual hell.

None of that showed on his face as he dropped onto one of the chairs and looked up at the woman
with a lazy eye, waiting, expectant.

She hesitated under his stare and looked out into the hall. “I’ll—” She cleared her throat. “Little Uzumaki should be outside playing. I’ll get him ready. He’s been so excited to meet you--this is the first time anyone has considered him for adoption, you see.”

He did see. He saw how fake her sincerity was and how far she had to reach for words of sympathy. It didn’t matter. Soon the boy would be Kakashi’s problem, not theirs. Then he could worry about faking sympathy.

When he didn’t say anything, the matron fidgeted and scuttled away.

Kakashi closed his eye, tipped his head heavenward, and sighed. He lifted a hand to brush across the headband covering his sharingan. “I’m doing this for you,” he muttered softly. “To clean up your mess. Save me a seat in hell, old friend.”

There was a window to his left. He opened his eye and lulled his head to the side. The world was all blue skies and sunshine and fluffy clouds like the objectively atrocious crayon art that the staff thought worthy of showcase on the walls.

He couldn’t get out of there fast enough.

“Um—”

Kakashi stilled. The voice was small and squeaky, unused. He lifted his head to find a small boy barely knee-height looming in the doorway. The moment Kakashi looked, the boy ducked his head, stubby fingers gripped tightly to the hem of an oversized white shirt.

Behind the boy, the matron ushered him into the room, over to the table. She crouched down next to him with a plastic smile. “Naruto, this is Kakashi Hatake. Say ‘hello.’”

Blue eyes flickered up and then back down. There was fidgeting, an old shoe scuffing the floorboards. Twisting.

When Kakashi thought about meeting the child that ruined the future, this was not what he was expecting.

There was still no greeting and Kakashi exchanged looks with the matron. His eye crinkled into an easy, practiced smile.

“Why don’t you leave us to get acquainted? I’m sure Naruto here is just a little shy.”

“But—” She held her tongue on her protests with a glance to the blond runt and stepped back. “Of course. If you need anything, my office is right next door.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

The door shut with a soft click and they were alone.

Legally speaking, there was a lot wrong with this picture. Were it any other child, Kakashi knew that the whole visit would be supervised. Of course, this was the fox brat, the Uzumaki boy, the one that the staff wanted to get the hell out of there by any means necessary. If it meant pleasing the man intent on taking the fox child away, they would go to any lengths.

Naruto looked back at the door, large eyes blinking in confusion, and then he twisted back around to
turn that confusion on Kakashi.

The last time their eyes met, Kakashi was forty-two years old. It was raining, a constant hiss enveloping them like white noise within a grey and broken world. Across the valley stood a masked man encased within a corrosive red chakra, tapering out into nine tails behind him, something innately inhuman about the way he stood and moved. The wind carried with it smoke and pine, the air thick with the overpowering scent of sulphur. The image was burned into the fading vision of his sharingan, his soon-blind eye, a permanent afterimage behind the cover of his headband.

Now their eyes met again and Kakashi was nineteen, and he wasn’t quite five, all small and jumpy like a stray cat.

“Um,” the child said again, twisting the toe of his shoe into the floor, tweaking the fabric of his shirt between his fingers. “Are you gonna be like, my dad or somethin’?”

There was something very wrong with this picture and Kakashi sucked in a steadying breath. “Well,” he started, leaning forward to rest his arms on his knees, “I’m something.”

Naruto’s eyes lit up. The unsteady frown curled upward and he pulled the empty chair out from under the table and scrabbled onto it. He bent his legs beneath his body to give himself more height—though even with that, he looked small—and placed his hands firmly on the table top. He stared openly, first at Kakashi’s headband and mask, then down to the standard uniform he came dressed in—because he wasn’t wasting money on a new outfit just for this.

“Hey hey,” Naruto’s fingers drummed a rhythm into the wood and he scooted closer to the edge of his seat. “Are you a ninja?”

Kakashi’s mouth twitched and he was grateful to his mask for hiding away his hard-set frown. So the kid was already interested in ninjas. He wanted to be a ninja. He entered the academy. From there, he renounced his name and his village and then he was gone. Then his face was in the bingo books. A missing-nin. Konoha’s missing-nin.

Then a grey world and smoke and pine and red chakra.

Kakashi couldn’t fake a smile. “Yes, Naruto. I’m a ninja.” He was still ANBU at that point. Reliving old missions was a complicated feeling. During the first week, there was a part of him that worried that his prior knowledge would change something. By week two, he realized how foolish his concerns were; he was there to change things.

He would keep his promise. He would right Obito’s mistakes.

He would give the fox child one last chance in memory of Minato and if that didn’t work, he would kill the boy where he stood. He owed Minato that much, at least, for believing in him.

Naruto’s hands slammed down on the table and Kakashi’s went for the kunai in his pocket. The boy sprang up with a bolt of newfound energy, wobbling atop the rickety old chair with starlight in his eyes and wonder on his face. “That’s so cool!”

Kakashi stilled, slowly releasing the kunai.

Naruto leaned in further and almost fell forward, righting himself at the very last second with a poorly repressed giggle. “You gotta know lots an’ lots of awesome jutsu. Hey hey hey—when you adopt me, are you gonna teach me? You gotta.”

Kakashi leaned back in the chair and considered the child with a lazy, upfront glare. The last thing he
ever wanted was to be responsible for the fox child figuring out how to ninja. “I—”

“You gotta promise,” said Naruto, matter-of-factly with his hands on his hips. He nodded, agreeing with himself. “Okay. You’re good. You can adopt me.”

He blinked slowly, trying to unravel what just happened.

“Can we go now?”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Kakashi said bluntly. His shoulders slouched and he decided to roll with the flow and not think too much about the inner workings of a not-quite-five-year-old’s mind.

Naruto pouted and plopped back down onto his butt. “Well okay. But soon?”

Was it really that easy to win over a child?

“Sure,” he said noncommittally. “When I can.”

Naruto lit up and scooted off the chair. He rounded the table and held out his hand. “My name’s Naruto Uzumaki, an’ I’m gonna be the Hokage!”

Kakashi’s eye widened.

This boy. This hellspawn. This jinchuuriki of the nine-tailed fox, this embodiment of everything that would go wrong.

Hokage.

What a cruel joke.

Kakashi breathed. It took a lot for him to reach out, it took his everything to accept the hand, to take it in his own with its stubby fingers and unmarred skin, but he did it. He did it for the future, for everyone that he left behind and everything that he would erase. That hand was so small, dwarfed by his own, and he couldn’t help but stare. One day that hand would destroy the village. One day, if Kakashi failed, he would relive the worst day of his life.

Today was not that day. Today, Kakashi was nineteen years old and making a change. To fight for that change he would bite back his bias, bury away his contempt, and smile.

“I’d like to see that.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I decided to get the first (actual) chapter up in celebration of the new year! I've also posted the start of The Story of Menma, the prequel, if anyone's interested in watching Naruto grow up to be the enemy Kakashi alludes to. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Kakashi hefted a breath and looked over the apartment. Everything looked in order—surface level, at least. It was meticulously clean. Kakashi was a meticulous person, once upon a time, and he was trying to live up to his nineteen-year-old self’s standards. It was the least he could do to retain some sort of normalcy and keep people from asking questions. Lord Hokage already noticed a change in him, not that that could be helped; the Kakashi of that time never would have went to the Hokage to discuss the adoption of the jinchuuriki in the first place. It never crossed his mind. The Uzumaki boy was never much a part of his life, not until everything took a southern turn and suddenly Uzumaki was there, whether he liked it or not, and the world burned to ash at his fingertips.

Kakashi was coming to find that he was a gloomy old man. Probably not the best default state to be in when raising a hellion brat with four times his chakra.

There was something very seriously wrong with this picture that he refused to acknowledge.

It took time and careful planning to get to where he was now. Kakashi was well trusted by the Hokage, but broaching the topic of adopting the jinchuuriki was not just a matter of trust; it was much bigger than that. The jinchuuriki was a source of power and security for the village, even if, as it stood, the child was five and completely unaware of his burden. There would always be concern that Kakashi’s aim was possession of the nine-tails and the control that came with the jinchuuriki’s favour. Even if Lord Third never believed that, there was no doubt the advisors did. Lord Third must have fought day and night with those two.

More than that, though, the Hokage loved the boy. Uzumaki was the son of Minato, of the Fourth Hokage. He was Minato and Kushina’s lineage, their legacy, their hero. There was a time when Kakashi believed that, too—that Naruto Uzumaki saved the village, containing all of the horrors of that day within his tiny body. The memory was faded and tarnished, but it was there, ever present at the back of his thoughts.

The Hokage loved the fox child. It wasn’t feasible for a man in his position to raise a newborn, or a toddler, or even a young brat. With no one else stepping up to the task, the child found his only remaining support within an orphanage that didn’t want him. Now Kakashi was making the choice that no one ever would, and Lord Third approved. There was a smile when Kakashi made his plea. The Hokage was happy, but there was hesitance, too, knowing that he would be giving care of the boy he watched grow up to someone else.

For whatever reason, everything worked out.

Kakashi gave the living room a cursory glance, then shuffled down the hall, pushing open the door to the kid’s bedroom. Boxes were stacked in the corner—only two, only the fox brat’s things from the orphanage. Apart from that, Lord Hiruzen provided them with an assortment of things because,
quite honestly, Kakashi didn’t know the first thing about children, didn’t know the first thing about raising children, and this entire plan banked on that not being the case. Everything in the room was all mismatched colours, bright and loud and obnoxious. There was a tiny child-sized bed in the corner (Kakashi thought the kid would have done fine with a futon and, when he said as much, the Hokage gave him a look, so bed it was) and a blue bookcase beneath the window. Then, over on the other wall, there was a closet. Tiny clothes were housed within.

Once a day Kakashi would make the realization that he was really doing this. It didn't come with panic or worry, not really. If he could keep himself alive, he could care for a small human. The needs were the same, more or less.

It came with resignation. And, beneath that, determination. Because he would get through this. He would, and everything he came from would be erased.

This was his last mission. He would see it through no matter what.

There was a knock at the door, just two even taps, and he sighed. He set the small box in his hands down on the bed—a housewarming gift for the fox brat from Lord Third—and dragged himself back out into the hall.

Before he could get to the door, there came another knock. Louder, persistent, the continuous bang of a weak fist against the wood. If he was a betting man, he would have bet everything he had on who that was.

The door creaked open. Kakashi poked his head out and glared dully at the runt he found there, Naruto's neck craned up and face all sunshine bright with grins and giggles. He looked up, finding the matron standing there behind her charge with a genuine smile. Of course she was happy; she was passing on her burden.

“I fully intended on picking him up.” Obligatory greetings weren’t Kakashi’s thing, so he skipped them altogether.

Her smile widened and she placed an ushering hand on Naruto's back. “Oh, it was no trouble at all.” Not for her, anyway. “Naruto was just so excited to see you again. He's been talking about you nonstop since your last visit.”

“I'm sure he has.”

Kakashi believed that, at least. But he knew better than to trust her sympathies. She brought Naruto to him to drop her burden on someone else, impatient. That was fine. That just meant that Kakashi had less time to ruminate his choices in life.

He glanced back at the bouncing child, who was watching him as though his hair was made of starlight, and sighed. The door pushed open, enough for his new baggage to slip through. “Inside.”

Naruto let out a high-pitched squeal and ran in. His footsteps faded quick and he was already down the hall with his shoes thrown off.

The matron folded her hands together, her back straight with unwarranted pride. “I hope he settles well. If you have any concerns, send word and I’ll help in any way I can. Otherwise, I'll be back after two weeks to check on how your transition is going.”

Kakashi made a noncommittal noise and followed her with his eye as she descended the steps on the outer landing. Then she was gone, and he was alone, and he slipped back inside. The door clicked shut behind him.
It was quiet. Now, Kakashi did not know anything about children, but he did know that ‘quiet’ was not a thing that they did well. He waited, feeling the corrosive chakra bounding around through the walls like jarred lightning. *Let’s see.* It settled in the bathroom. Kakashi ducked his head around the corner to see the door ajar. Then the chakra halted like a stopped train, flickering and wavering in place, and he waited. And waited.

Waiting with Naruto was not something he felt comfortable doing.

Against his better judgement, Kakashi nudged the bathroom door open with his toes. Naruto was there half-hanging out the window, his legs kicking wildly in the air with noises of delight muffled by the window pane. Kakashi took two quick strides and hooked his finger around the collar of Naruto’s shirt, pulling him back inside. Naruto landed with a plop in the bathtub, all laughter and flailing, sitting on his haunches.

Kakashi stared. He was not equipped to deal with this. “Naruto,” he started flatly, bringing the boy out of his own little world, “what were you doing?”

“Lookin’ outside,” said Naruto. Pushing the point, he hopped to his feet and climbed the wall again. His arms hooked over the sill, feet braced against the tiled wall. This time he didn’t look like he was about to fall out, at least. There was something abnormal about those reflexes in a boy that small. “We’re so high!”

“This is the third floor,” Kakashi pointed.

“I can see *everything*,” Naruto continued, completely ignoring Kakashi’s interjection. “The *whole village*.”

“You cannot see the whole village.”

“Most o’ it!”

“No.”

Naruto craned his neck to look over his shoulder, fixing his new caretaker with a pout. Apparently that took the fun out of everything because Naruto hopped back down and landed deftly on his feet.

Kakashi shut the bathroom door—locked it, though he expected the little hellion to figure that out pretty quickly—and shoved a hand into his pocket as he headed back into the hall. Naruto followed without needing to be asked, looking up at Kakashi with big, wondering eyes.

Kakashi pointed to the door directly across from the bathroom, “Your room,” then to the one beside it, “mine. Off-limits.”

“*Kay*!”

He then pointed to the opening at the end of the wall, past the front entrance. “Living room. Kitchen’s connected.”

“*Kaaaay.*”

Kakashi eyed the boy. Naruto was fidgeting. He was always fidgeting, apparently. Always needing to move, to do something, to keep his body from keeping still. Like he had energy to burn for days. It was a sign of bad things to come.

“Can I go now?” Naruto whined, tapping his feet in a mock run.
“One more thing.” Kakashi leaned over the boy, casting shadows across his tanned face and blue eyes and pale hair. Kakashi smiled. It was not a pleasant smile. “Break anything and I break you. Understand?”

Naruto looked very, very small as he shrank back and swallowed, his hands finding the hem of his shirt. He nodded.

“Good.” The smile fell away to nothing and he leaned out of the fox-child’s personal bubble. “You’re dismissed.”

Naruto hedged away, scooting step by step across the hall before flinging his bedroom door open and running inside. There were noises of wonder and excitement soon to follow, as though the threat was never issued. Well, the kid was quick to bounce back, if nothing else. Kakashi wasn’t sure what he expected.

It felt… odd, to leave the nine-tails jinchūriki unsupervised in his house. There was a niggling voice at the back of his head that pulled at him to check, to peek through the door and just make sure, but he smothered it beneath the knowledge that for better or worse this would be his norm and he needed to accept that. If he suffocated the Uzumaki boy, he only risked a repeat of what happened in the world that he came from.

He admittedly didn’t know much about the boy’s life, or how Uzumaki went from Konoha’s only jinchūriki to the missing-nin that brought its downfall. Kakashi had been on the jinchūriki retrieval team for a time, serving as leader to the team of ANBU specially chosen to deal with the runaway, but that was a mission and he kept personal qualities to himself. It wasn’t as though, in the middle of combat, he could ask for a full rundown of all of the hell spawn’s choices in life. Kakashi knew going into this that he was going in blind. There were no hints at what stressors took Uzumaki down the path of ruination at twenty-eight; Kakashi could only observe and think for himself. That was fine. No matter how much guesswork was involved, that was fine.

It was fine because it had to be. It was fine because they were out of options.

Kakashi realized that he was still standing in the hallway like a lost deer and sighed, dragging his feet into the living room. His book rested forgotten on the coffee table, and beside it was a small bundle of papers with cursive black ink drawing lines across them. He sunk down into the couch, picked up his pen, and resumed his work.

Kakashi knew that if he wanted this to work, he needed to take the initiative to make it work. Creating a timeline of events was his first aim at that. He had already finished mapping out the important events of his initial timeline on the first page and was now on the second. Initially, the plan was to return to the time before the nine-tailed fox’s attack on the village. Any time before that, really. His aim then was to keep Obito from attacking through whatever means necessary. No Obito, no broken seal. No broken seal, no attack. No attack, no bastard hellion fox-child to unleash his fury upon the world.

He always knew that using Kamui wouldn’t be exact. He was prepared for that.

Kakashi was not prepared to wake up in a hospital bed, nineteen years old, with Tenzo sitting in the bedside chair making wooden sculptures to pass the time that he was asleep. According to his teammate, he blacked out during a mission. Went completely catatonic, just like that. No warning, no build-up.

Then, to find out he was four and a half years too late, Kakashi had a lot of thinking to do.
This was all he came up with.

He crossed out one line and circled the next. Observation was key over the next few weeks. He would need to spend time with the kid, to learn what made Naruto tick. What set him off. What inspired him. *Anything*. And once he had all of that, he could work towards correcting it all.

Kakashi’s pen hovered over the third page—a list of his observations thus far. He tapped the pen to the page, the ink pooling and spreading out like water from the tip, and he remembered an ugly room and a crayon sky and a tiny hand with stubby fingers bathed in sin that could never be washed away.

*Goal: Hokage.*

His eye narrowed on the words. That was an old wish, one of an untouched timeline. A dream in its purest form from before Kakashi ever intervened.

*Did you once want to be Hokage, too, Menma?*

“Um…”

Kakashi’s head snapped up and he quickly slipped the pages beneath the cover of his book, only to realize belatedly that Naruto wouldn’t yet be all that adept at reading. Sometimes he forgot that not every child graduated the academy at five years old.

Naruto stood there, his body twisting left to right from where his feet were rooted to the floor, eyes downcast to a fixed point on his shoe. In his hands he held a box—the Hokage’s gift to him. The wrapping paper was torn off, likely making a mess of the bedroom floor, and between two fingers rested a folded up note. Naruto maneuvered the box, tucking it beneath one arm and holding out the note with the other.

Kakashi blinked slowly. “You can’t read it, so you want me to read it for you, is that it?”

“I can so read!” Naruto shouted, huffing his insult, but the bravado faltered and it was obvious that this boy was a liar. “I um. I just wanna make sure you can. An’ stuff.”

“Right. Of course.” Kakashi wriggled his fingers and waited for the paper to be deposited onto his palm. From there, he unfolded it, wincing internally when he saw the hard to make out characters of the Hokage’s writing. It was legible, at least to him. Lord Third could write very neatly in a formal setting, but personal letters tended to take on a more… *abstract* style. Even if the boy could read, he wouldn’t be able to read *that*. Kakashi skimmed the letter lazily. “Lord Third sends his regards.”

When he looked up, he found the fox child fixing him under a pointed glare.

“*Read it!*” Naruto demanded, and then his eyes widened and he backpedalled. “Um um um. Please?”

Kakashi rolled his eye heavenward and begged Obito to give him strength.

He cleared his throat. “Naruto,” he started, taking on a very half-hearted Hokage voice. “It is with joy in my heart that I am able to see you with a family of your own. This world is hard on you, I know. And I am sorry for that. But I hope this will be the start of something more for you. Be better, my boy. Do not hate this world for what it has put you through. Be better and prove yourself to it. Show the world that it has no choice but to acknowledge you. I eagerly await that day. Until then—”

Kakashi narrowed his eyes on the latter section of the letter.
Naruto was bouncing in place, something implacable etched into the lines of his face as he awaited the rest. When it didn’t come, he frowned. “What? What what what? What’s it say?”

“Until then, look after this young fool for me. I fear that he needs you more than he realizes.”

Kakashi’s mouth twitched and he skipped to the line below. “Until then,” he continued, because he didn’t want the boy to notice that something was omitted, “I hope this can help you through the hard parts of this transition. Stay strong, Naruto.”

Kakashi dropped the note onto the coffee table and sunk into the back of the couch, his eye lifting back up to Naruto—

There was a moment before Naruto hid his face behind his sleeve where Kakashi caught the glossy film over his eyes. It was over as soon as he noticed, and then the boy was tearing through the box. The cardboard hit the floor and Naruto held up the plush toad at an arm’s length, blinked at it, and then smiled and ran off with his new companion in tow.

Kakashi watched him go. Silence returned, the world was still, and for a moment he felt the weight on his shoulders ease up, and he could breathe.

The moment was short and over when he heard the very distinguished sound of shattering glass followed by a low, unaffected, “Oops.”

As it turned out, raising a child was not as simple as dropping them into a home and letting them fend for themselves, especially when the child was five and loud and made it his personal mission to seek out each and every sharp object in the apartment like a metal detector. Kakashi did not know many things about this venture, but he was pretty sure that small children were not well equipped to handle professional ninja tools. This, in part, was why he did not allow his young charge to enter his bedroom where all of his weapons were stored away safely in the left half of the closet.

To Naruto, ‘off-limits’ meant ‘enter, but sneakily.’

Kakashi stood in the doorway of his darkened bedroom, backlit by the ebbing light of the lamp in the hall. Naruto sat on all fours in the middle of the floor with two dozen makibishi spikes scattered at his feet and a broken picture frame by his hand. He ducked his head under the dull glare Kakashi sent his way, looking very much like a bristled fox kit.

“I didn’t do it!”

Kakashi’s eye crinkled into a hollow smile. “Of course not,” he said lightly. “They must have jumped out on their own.”

Naruto averted his eyes, wearing his guilt on his sleeve. Then, suddenly, “I’m hungry.”

“Then eat,” said Kakashi. “After you clean your mess.”

Naruto whined, loudly, but didn’t otherwise complain as he reached over to the pouch the spikes were kept in, left discarded on the floor, and started depositing the makibishi inside one by one. Something about his compliance made it very obvious that he was used to getting scolded. Kakashi placed no trust in Naruto, especially after he disregarded instruction five minutes after leaving the room, and leaned against the wall to supervise as Naruto picked up each and every spike.

Naruto winced and pulled his hand back. There was red, a small drop of blood sliding down the line of his finger before he put the tip in his mouth, brows furrowed and face tight.
Kakashi sighed, pushing off the wall to kneel beside him with a waiting hand. “Let me see.”

Naruto hesitated. He looked between Kakashi’s open palm and face, back and forth, before holding out his hand. “It hurts.”

“I guessed that.”

Kakashi turned the boy’s hand in his own, squeezed it slightly to see a pinprick of blood ooze out from the tip of Naruto’s index finger. Before he could do anything, he watched the edges of the cut stitch themselves back together. Suddenly it was gone, and Naruto was fine, like nothing ever happened.

If there was any doubt that this child was the Menma Uzumaki of twenty-three years from now, it was gone.

Kakashi smeared away the blood with a heavy breath and nodded to the door. “Get cleaned up.”

“But I gotta clean my mess.”

He rolled his eye. There were only two spikes left, anyway. “Get going.”

Naruto didn’t need to be told twice—or, well, he did, all things considered—and hopped to his feet, running out of the room. Steps faded, and soon there was the distant hiss of the bathroom tap.

Kakashi snatched up the pouch and put the last of the makibishi inside, then snapped it shut. He considered the pouch as he rose to his full height and padded over to the open closet door, wondering where his younger self picked those up. They weren’t a tool he regularly used, but then again, he had a lot of tools stocked and ready in the off chance that he would need them. Most hadn’t seen the light of day since first acquired. Well, until Naruto got ahold of them, apparently.

He needed a lock, if not for his bedroom then for his closet.

With his luck, the fox would just find a way to blow it up.

The closet door slid shut and he cast a gaze across the mostly-vacant expanse of his bedroom. He picked up the shattered frame, slid the picture free from behind the glass, and disposed of the broken glass. He could replace it when he next went to the market, no harm done.

When reworking his plans, he made sure to move apartments. There were too many nightmares looming over his old home like phantoms of the past, too many nights as a young boy waking up in a fit of sweat and hysteria, scrubbing long-gone blood from his hands at the kitchen tap. When he moved, he only took the necessities—furniture and tools. Useful things. Practical things. That was what his nineteen-year-old self would have done.

There was one picture that he couldn’t part with, though.

Age made him sentimental.

When he dragged himself back out, he found that Naruto was gone from the bathroom. A little further and Kakashi could see the boy kicking his legs back and forth on a chair at the kitchen table, waiting. Patient. Expectant.

Kakashi did not like this.

“Thought you were hungry,” he hedged.
Naruto nodded. “Mhmm!”

Oh.

He shifted his weight to fully face the fox-brat. “You can’t cook?”

Naruto’s face scrunched up. “That’s the grown-up’s job.”

“Ah.”

Somehow, Kakashi knew that he wouldn’t be able to just throw the child into a new environment and say ‘have at it.’ He knew, but still he hoped.

Kakashi rummaged through the cupboards and then placed a bowl before the kid, washing his hands of the whole ordeal. Well, that was one crisis averted, except Naruto was making this face like he was displeased, and Sage, Kakashi wanted it to just be over and done with so that he could go into the other room, work on his notes, and keep a comfortable three feet between them for the rest of the night.

Naruto took one of the objects within the bowl between his fingers and eyed it critically. “...What are these?”

“Food pills.”

“Gross.”

Kakashi closed his eye and pulled back, trying to remember what he was like at that age. He couldn’t. He couldn’t because by that age he was already biting back his complaints and training to be a shinobi like his father.

Naruto shoved the bowl away to show what he thought of that meal, then slammed his hands down on the table with a grin. “Hey hey hey—” He squirmed in place, as though he couldn’t wait to share the groundbreaking idea with the world. “Let’s get ramen!”

“No.”

“But—”

Kakashi slid the bowl back to Naruto and watched the boy with a half-lidded eye. “Eat.”

Naruto sank back in his chair, stared vacantly at the food pills, and sulked.

Kakashi was fine with that. He left for the living room, returned to his notes, and figured that the fox-brat would eat when he was hungry enough. He shuffled the pages, located the third, and tapped the back of his pen against the table as he thought. Observations …

Kakashi looked across the room to the kitchen where Naruto sat all sloped shoulders and pouting. The kid looked like he’d just been kneed in the kidney. All because of food? Then his stomach growled, and he wrapped his hands around himself.

He caught Kakashi staring.

Kakashi turned back to his papers. But now he could feel eyes on him, watching. Waiting. He put his pen to paper and scrawled out another line.

Surprisingly manipulative.
He slipped his papers between the pages of his book again and slammed it shut, rising from the couch, looking all kinds of put out.

“Shoes on. Now.”

Like a lightswitch, the sulking vanished behind a grin. Naruto pumped his fist with muttered triumph, slid off the chair, and scampered over to the front door. There was a chant of “Ramen, ramen, ramen!” as he fought with his shoes. The moment they were on, he was bounding down the landing steps, and Kakashi was fairly certain that he only waited for his caretaker at all because he didn’t know the way by himself.

This little hellion would bleed him dry if he let it.

“Pork ramen!” Naruto cheered. The old man heading the stall smiled at him. It was a genuine smile, a simple amusement in the wrinkles of the man’s eyes before he turned his back to them and got to work on their order.

It threw Naruto off. He blinked, the grin fell off his face, and suddenly he was all kinds of shy. He curled inward, staring at the wooden top of the ramen bar, squirming and giggling to himself like a fool.

Kakashi watched him, taking the seat to his right. It was quiet, save the rustlings sounds of the kitchen and Naruto’s audible excitement. He looked genuinely, wholly content. From ramen.

Then the bowl was set before him and he was breaking his chopsticks and saying his thanks. He made to eat, but before his chopsticks touched the bowl he stopped, craning his head to the right, gawking openly at the empty space before Kakashi. Their eyes met. Naruto’s face scrunched up in confusion.

“Where’s yours?”

Kakashi considered this, dropping his chin into his palm. “I’m not having any.”

“But why?” Naruto thought hard while looking down into his bowl. “Is it ‘cause you dun got money?”

“No, Naruto,” he sighed. “You wouldn’t be here if that were the case.”

“Oh.” But he remained unconvinced. Suddenly there was a bowl being shoved Kakashi’s way, tiny hands grabbing his, giving him the unused chopsticks and closing his fingers around them. “You gotta have some, too, ‘kay?”

Whenever he looked at that child he was forty-two again. There was sulphur in the air, masking the scent of pine and ash. Across the valley stood a man bathed in red chakra, pulsing corrosive energy across his skin with Konoha in the backdrop, greyed out by the swell of smoke and embers carried on the high winds. The world was grey, and that man was twenty-eight.

This boy was five, and he was sharing his ramen.

Kakashi sucked in a breath, set the chopsticks down, and hesitantly dropped his hand atop the boy’s head. He smiled, even though the boy could not see his smile, and slid the bowl of ramen back to where it belonged.
“Eat,” he said.

Naruto pouted, a strange mix of emotion etched across his face, and he ate. He ate so much, in fact, that in under ten minutes he was batting his eyelashes with an empty bowl. Kakashi wasn’t sure it was the right move, but he indulged, at least for today. He needed the boy to like him, didn’t he? That was as good a way as any to curry favor with the nine-tails jinchuuriki. Probably.

A part of him thought that bribing a small child with food was not a wholesome way to garner trust. A larger part just did not care.

Three bowls later and Naruto was full and leaning against him, and it felt all sorts of wrong but he allowed it.

“Thanks, um,” Naruto hedged, “Dad?”

Kakashi twitched, suddenly very fixated on the leaning, and nudged Naruto off him. “No,” he corrected flatly. “Not that.”

“Then um,” Naruto shifted, unperturbed by the sudden invisible wall Kakashi placed between them, “what do I call you?”

Kakashi hummed, bringing his hands together to press against his lips, his eyes on the three empty bowls stacked high between them. Where did he put all of that? He must have eaten his body weight in ramen. “Kakashi.”

“But you adopted me.”

“Kakashi,” he repeated, only because Hatake sounded too formal. They were playing the part of a family now, after all.

Naruto was having none of it, though, drumming his fingers along the bartop. And then he stilled. Grinned. His eyes squeezed shut and he hid a laugh behind his hand conspiratorially. “Thanks, big brother Kashi.”

He didn’t know how that was supposed to make him feel. Probably not like this, he surmised, and raised his eye heavenward.

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Naruto slept with a nightlight. This was news to Kakashi because, as far as he knew, there was nothing of note in the documents he had been given. The orphanage supplied him with all of Naruto's medical records, his personal history, his lineage and notes from the caretakers. Or, well, it was supposed to come with notes from the caretakers. That page was conveniently missing from the care package neatly supplied within the manilla folder labeled ‘Naruto Uzumaki’ from the matron.

So when night came and the lights went out, he was none too pleased to find the fox child hanging off his pant leg with grubby fingers and big, pleading eyes and a worrying lip.

“You're scared.”

Naruto bristled and pried himself away. “Am not!”

Sage, let him make it through the night.

Kakashi cocked his head to the side with feigned ignorance. “No? Then good night, Naruto.”
He made to leave but then small hands were there, as predicted, trying with feeble strength to keep him there.

“And here I thought you weren't scared.”

Naruto bit his lip and bowed his head. His grip loosened before releasing Kakashi all together. There was a tremble to his lips. He took a cautious glance across the dark expanse of the room, long shadows cast across his toys, the only relief found in the moonlight that filtered through the window. He said nothing.

Kakashi prayed for Obito to give him strength. He dipped out into the hall and flicked on the lamp, chasing away the darkness with its orange glow.

“Better?”

Naruto blinked up at him, then cast a glance back into the room now lit in a soft gradient of light, and he grinned.

Crisis number five-hundred averted, and it was only night one. “Get some sleep. We have an early morning.”

“’Kay!”

Kakashi left the door ajar and retreated to his room. He left his door open a crack, just so that he could hear if his charge went on a midnight wander, and lowered himself onto the mattress. The photo from before was there, resting on his nightstand where he’d left it, and he snatched it up. Three young faces stared back at him. Rin was the only one among genin that was smiling. Then there Minato was above them, the ever-present mediator. Looking back, Kakashi felt his fair share of guilt for what they put that man through. He never had an easy day between the two of them.

Every time he viewed that picture his eye would ultimately fall to Obito and he would wonder. He wondered how things would have turned out, had they tried to dig him out of the rubble that day. He wondered what would have changed if Kakashi accepted his friendship sooner.

On October 10th, five years ago, Obito Uchiha died in the the nine-tails attack, by the hand of the Fourth Hokage. Kakashi could only imagine how heavy that weighed on Minato’s mind as he sealed the fox into his newborn son, as he took his few last breaths, smiling at his wife. Smiling at his child. The world crumbling at his feet.

Kakashi wondered a lot of things, none of them good.

The picture was set back down on the nightstand, his headband following soon after, and the light flickered out. He closed his eyes, bundled beneath a thick comforter that bit back the autumn chill, and slept.

For all of ten seconds.

The door creaked open and his hand was already on the shuriken by his bed when a wobbly runt of muted colours padded across the floor. Naruto had his plush toad hugged tightly to his chest, a pillow dangling from his fingers, brows knitted together, and he glanced around apprehensively.

“...Kashi?”

Sage, let him make it through the night.
“You asleep, Kashi?”

Obito, give him patience.

Kakashi sat up, the comforter pooling in his lap as he observed the small hell-beast at the foot up of the bed. “You should be sleeping,” he said, and his tone only emphasized ‘go to sleep.’

Naruto padded over and clambered onto the bed without a moment’s hesitance. He deposited the pillow beside him, making himself comfortable, little feet dangling over the side. “I’m gonna sleep here, ‘kay?”

No, that was very much not okay. In no timeline or universe or reality would that ever be okay. He bottled that up behind indifference and leaned forward, his arms on his legs. “Why?”

“Somethin’ keeps scratchin’ on the window, Kashi!” Naruto pleaded, worrying the toad’s little felt arm between his fingers. “I think you have gremlins.”

“The wind, Naruto,” Kakashi said.

“Nu-uh. It was all tap-tap-tap.”

Kakashi pointed to the window of this room, to the way it rattled against the breeze, and watched understanding dawn on Naruto’s face.

“Oh.” Then Naruto laughed, fluffed his pillow, and settled in.

“Naruto.” The boy looked up with innocence. “Out.”

Naruto ducked his head, smoothed out the blankets around him, but didn’t move. Before Kakashi could chastise him, he sucked in a breath and blurted out a hurried, “It’s scary, y’know!”

There was something about the way Naruto said those words that reminded him so much of Kushina.

“‘Cause—” Naruto hiccuped. Oh no. Tears. Kakashi didn’t know what he’d done to deserve that but this day was long enough already without waterworks. “‘Cause what if I wake up an’ can’t find you?”

“I’m right down the hall,” he said softly.

“But what if you’re not?”

“I will be.”

“But what if you’re not?”

It was quiet, broken by the rattle of the window and the howling gusts just beyond. The bedroom was a hue of muted greys and blues casting long shadows in the corners. Naruto’s hair looked grey in the dark, his skin a pale white. He never looked up at Kakashi, never tried to meet him head on. Not like earlier. Not like when he almost fell out the window, or snuck into the room. Not like when he sent manipulative looks Kakashi’s way.

Kakashi did not grow up in an orphanage. Kakashi grew up with a father, and then grew up alone. When he thought of what it must have been like for Naruto to go through life shunned by the world at large, he could understand, to some extent. But when it came to the environment, he had no experience to compare it to. He struggled to find sympathy within himself, too, knowing just what
this boy grew up to do.

But for all that he was bias, he made a promise to try.

This boy was not twenty-eight. This boy was five.

And he was nineteen.

“Only tonight.”

Those blue eyes found him then, lit up like starlight, and he knew that he did something right. Suddenly Naruto lunged at him, flailing arms locked around his chest, and it took all of his self-control not to flinch.

“Thank you thank you thank you, Kashi!”

Kakashi awkwardly patted Naruto’s back, not entirely sure what else to do with his hands. He was grateful when Naruto shimmied away rather than force the contact to linger.

Naruto settled at the end of the bed, curled around his pillow, looking very much like a wild fox, and Kakashi resigned himself to it.

His first night was one without sleep.

Chapter End Notes

As always, I’d love to hear what you guys think. Happy New Year! I hope this year is a good one for all of you. Let's do our best!!
Thank you for all of the support so far!! It's been really amazing to see people getting excited for this stupid little plot bunny I had. On a whim, I'm updating all of my fics. Enjoy!

Naruto stirred with a big yawn that ended in a squeak. He stretched tiny arms heavenward, twisted and coiled around himself as his body woke up with the rest of him, and forced heavy eyes open. Everything was warm and fuzzy and soft, and the bed was super soft, and the blanket was warm and nobody had kneed him in the face while he slept which was nice.

There was soft breathing coming from behind him. To him it was loud, but the kids who shared his room always said he had to be making it up, ‘cause no one else ever thought it was loud. But hearing five other people breathing all around him at night was hard and frustrating because no one listened . He’d taken to slipping out and sleeping in the mop closet, or beneath the big cypress tree in the yard. At least the sound of the wind wasn’t so annoying . More often than not, it lulled him to sleep; the problem with that was that it was dark and scary and cold outside and the ground was hard and all the grown-ups would yell at him when they found him.

This breathing wasn’t like that. This breathing was steady and level, soft even by his standards, and followed a soothing rhythm that had him smiling to himself, ready to settle back into bed. But this wasn’t a sound he was used to, and this bed wasn’t the one he knew, and it was all so confusing and made him think. Thinking hurt in the morning.

Naruto dragged himself up on stubby limbs and twisted around. At the head of the bed, a man poked out from beneath a thick comforter, wearing a mask to cover the bottom half of his face. Huh? Oh, right. He remembered. This was his, er… his something. That’s what the man said, right? That he was… something .

Many things confused Naruto. This was one of them.

He hopped closer, big eyes watching the sleeping form beneath him. This was his first time seeing Kashi without his headband on. A scar ran vertically across his caretaker’s eye. It looked so cool. What happened? Was it a battle scar from a really-cool-super-awesome ninja fight? He bet that it was. Naruto had the coolest… something.

Naruto remembered Kashi’s words from in the night—that they had an early morning—but Kashi wasn’t even up yet. Naruto hovered a finger over Kashi’s cheek but decided against poking the ‘something’ awake, ‘cause he looked really really tired and then he might get mad if he woke up.

But five minutes awake and Naruto was already so bored. If he bugged Kashi too much, though… So he wouldn’t. He’d get up all on his own and show off how awesome he was.

Naruto scooted off the bed and padded quietly across the floor, hobbling his way into the bathroom. This was the best place in the history of ever, because they had a bath all to themselves and no one else could use it ‘cause it was theirs and they could get their own if they wanted a bath so badly.
Then he hit a roadblock; this didn’t look like the baths they had at the orphanage, so he wasn’t
*entirely sure* how to get it to work and, well, do the bath thing. Normally he had baths at night and
not in the morning, anyway, but he was so excited to have one all to himself that he just *had* to figure
it out.

Then he saw two knobs. Huh. He blinked at them, then turned one. It hissed to life and he smiled,
but progress was short-lived and the water just kept going down the hole at the bottom. Plug. He
needed a plug. But where was it? He checked the rim of the tub, but nothing. Also, the water was
super super cold.

He cranked the other knob all the way and set about scouring beneath the counters for the elusive
bath plug. He could do this! He was Naruto Uzumaki, the future Hokage!

Sleep was a luxury that Kakashi grew to appreciate with age. His ANBU days saw many nights of
bloodshot eyes and dark circles, and finally leaving ANBU meant finally leaving that lifestyle
behind. There was nothing as perfectly serene as sleeping until late in the morning, hugging his
pillow and burrowing beneath a sea of blankets until he woke up organically somewhere right before
noon.

Now he was back to those ANBU days. With a kid, no less. Kakashi sighed away his sleep,
deciding that a few minutes more of closed eyes and happy thoughts wouldn’t hurt anyone. Lord
Third gave him his first few days with Naruto off to adjust, so he didn’t *really* need to be anywhere
in a hurry; there were just a lot of things he wanted to get done and out of the way today. If a few
tasks bled into tomorrow to give him ample rest, then so be it.

But then there were noises. They did not sound like *good* noises.

Kakashi opened his eyes and groaned against the morning light.

“Kashiiiii!”

He winced at the pathetic cry of his name, threw the blanket off his legs, and dragged himself out of
the bedroom. Steam billowed out from behind the bathroom door and he steeled himself, kicking the
door open. Beyond it, he found a startled Naruto sitting on all fours atop the tank of the toilet, little
claws digging into the edge of it. The bath was running scalding water over the edge and onto the
floor and he quickly crossed the bathroom and turned off the tap. Everything was quiet and he
sighed. Water occasionally spilled and splashed at his feet as it rippled with motion and he bit back
all of the curses in the world as he reached into the merciless heat to unplug the bath. He did, the
drain gurgled and groaned as it sucked the flood deep below, and he pulled back his hand, staring at
the painfully red skin. It would fade, but in the moment he was *not* happy.

He turned hard eyes on the fox child who flinched.

Naruto fell back onto his butt and ducked his head. “U-um…”

The bathroom was a mess. There was water all over the floor. The window and mirror were fogged,
everything felt humid and mucky, and Kakashi just woke up five minutes ago.

Kakashi left the room momentarily and returned with a mop and bucket. The mop was dropped into
Naruto’s hands, the boy very nearly overbalancing under its weight, and there were glares to be had.

“Fix your mess,” he commanded with thinly veiled threats. “Get cleaned up, then kitchen for
breakfast.”

Naruto nodded mutely, holding the mop with shaky hands, and then Kakashi was gone.

Sage, but he wanted to kill that child.

Kakashi’s first step in not killing the child was retrieving the long-forgotten hitai-ate from his nightstand and getting dressed in something that wasn’t wet and sticking to his skin. That helped him cool down some, and he put the whole incident behind him. A rude awakening, sure, but for the weight of the future, he could handle a few nuisances. Even if that nuisance was very Naruto-shaped.

He pressed a hand to his mask and frowned. It was rare for him to feel the hiss of anger like that beneath his skin. Apparently, it was harder to overcome personal bias than he anticipated. It wasn’t as easy as deciding that he wasn’t going to consider the future when interacting with Naruto and starting from a blank slate was likely impossible. There was no erasing memories like that, so profound and real that they overshadowed everything that came before them. This was something so small, so insignificant. It shouldn’t have gotten him worked up in the least. But it had. And it was making him think.

Kakashi’s aim had been years earlier than this. Preferably, he wanted to stop Obito’s accident. That never came to pass. He would have settled for the night of the fox’s attack on the village. That, too, never came to pass. When he woke up to find that the Uzumaki boy was already alive and an acting jinchuuriki, he immediately thought about finding and killing the boy. He was an ANBU; there were many unsavoury jobs to be had and this would not have been the worst atrocity he committed. But the problem with that was the same problem Minato feared—that the death of the jinchuuriki would mean the release of the tailed beast. He didn’t know how long it would take for the fox to be reborn and didn’t want to risk coming face to face with the horrors of five years ago for a few years of comfort knowing that Menma wouldn’t bring about a repeat of his future.

Besides that, this was the son of his sensei. The son who had yet to commit the sins of the future. Naruto would die for something he had yet to do and there was something very wrong with that.

Kakashi was better than that.

He passed by the bathroom and caught a glance inside. Naruto was very clearly sulking, but was doing his best to mopping up all of the water on the floor. He looked sad and droopy and all sorts of heartbroken and that was okay. It was okay because Naruto needed to understand that there were consequences for his actions, no matter how small.

Kakashi felt the pinch of guilt, though, for his harsh tone.

In the kitchen, he drummed his fingers along the marble countertop and hummed. His initial thought was, as per the usual, food pills. They were what he survived on during his missions and were a primary source of food at the age of forty-two, when everything spiralled into chaos. But, well. Naruto didn’t seem all that fond of food pills, and he didn’t feel like going head-to-head on that again today, not after how dejected the fox was already looking. You need him to like you, he reminded himself.

Kakashi was by no means a food connoisseur, but growing up all on his own meant that he picked up a few things here and there. He figured that he could manage something, even if there was little left in the fridge. Grocery shopping was one of the things on the list.

After rummaging through the fridge and cupboards, Kakashi determined that rice and miso were
viable. The downside was that there was nothing to top the rice with, but. Well. He supposed the boy could at least appreciate that it wasn’t food pills.

When Naruto finally dragged himself into the kitchen and clambered onto a chair, head hung low, he didn’t seem to notice the food at first. Kakashi resolved himself to food pills—there wasn’t enough left for two servings, and he was fine with that—and was done with his breakfast, taking the chance to read away his sleep-addled brain in the connected living room.

Naruto just sat there, fisting the hem of his shirt and sniffing. No tears, though. Just… guilt, and a smidge of fear, and that, well. That was probably worse. At least tears were over quickly. “Kashi… ‘m sorry.”

Kakashi flipped the page of his book, hiding his face behind it as he stole a glance at the child. So even you can feel regret. “Eat and get dressed. We have a long day.”

Naruto swallowed, squeezed his eyes shut tight, and suddenly words were spilling out all at once. “A-are you gonna send me back? It won’t happen again, promise, so—”

“Naruto,” Kakashi sighed. The book snapped shut. He set it down on the coffee table and twisted around, giving the fox-child his undivided attention. “You’re not going anywhere.”

The boy looked at him and cracked a smile. He could see Naruto visibly deflate in relief.

Naruto turned back to the table and his face lit up as he stared at the two bowls set before him, all steaming and warm and not food pills. He gasped dramatically and looked between the food and his caretaker with excitement.

“Kashi,” he exclaimed, “you learned !”

Kakashi closed his eye, sucked in a breath, and covered his face with his hands. This was ultimately Obito’s fault, and he could not wait to see that man in hell.

As it turned out, children did not like clothes shopping. It was boring and long and Naruto kept scuffing the ground with his shoe, kept making those annoyed groaning whines that children did when they were miserable, and kept casting forlorn looks at the different food stalls as they walked by. Kakashi also did not like clothes shopping, and envied Naruto for being able to pass those looks. Kakashi wasn’t allowed to show his misery because he was the adult and was therefore supposed to be the voice of reason.

The clothes provided by the orphanage were about what he expected: old, torn, stretched and about two sizes too big. That wouldn’t do. He knew almost nothing about parenting, but he at the very least understood that clothing a child was important. Maybe Naruto didn’t appreciate it now, but one day he would. That was the hope, anyway.

Two hours of that was two hours too many for the both of them. Naruto saw a park, and then the begging started. Now Kakashi sat on a wooden bench with their bags resting beside him, slouching blandly back as his eyes followed the little blond fox kit running around, trying to befriend all of the children. It wasn't looking good. This wasn't something Kakashi could teach him, either; he would have to figure it out on his own.

Kakashi was not good at the ‘friend’ thing. Most of his did not last long, and the ones that did were promptly ignored because he just did not know how to face them. He understood his shortcomings
very intimately. It was something he worked on. Or, well. Tried to. He thought that trying to be more
like Obito would help bury those shortcomings, but he wondered just how many people saw through
the aloof mask that he wore.

In Naruto’s case, a big problem was likely behaviour. It wasn’t that he was loud or high energy or
came on too strong—though all of that was true—it was the unnatural body language he
communicated. This was something that Kakashi had observed from the very first moment he set
eyes on the boy back in the orphanage playground, something he had mentally prepared himself to
see in day to day life.

Naruto often displayed unhuman mannerisms. It came out most when he was shocked or scared, or
running around to play. He would sit on all fours like it was the most natural thing ever. He would
crouch and watch and wait and pounce like a fox hunting prey and his head would snap to the
slightest of movements, to inaudible sound. Nothing about that boy was natural, down to the way he
smiled. People picked up on it. They may never have known what it was but something felt off about
the kid, like he needed to be avoided.

Well, the adults probably knew. Most people knew what the jinchuuriki looked like, even with the
gag order in place. Their children did not, though. But what they didn’t know, they could see.

Kakashi sighed and smoothed circles into his temple as a little girl went running from the fox-child
and took to the safety of her friend group.

How was he supposed to fix that?

The longer he watched, the more painful it got. It didn't seem fair. That was instinct—something that
came packaged with the fox he carried within his tiny body, a creature that had been with him since
birth, not something that Naruto had control over. And there he was, trying his best to make a friend,
but no one would give him a chance.

From what Kakashi remembered of Menma’s earlier years—and it wasn’t much, because he never
played an active role in the hellspawn’s life before the academy incident—the boy was often alone.
There was one little girl who stuck by him in the shadows, a Hyuga child carrying the Byakugan
who he would often see watching Menma from a distance, but there was no one actively by
Menma’s side. Kakashi remembered a time like that from his own life, when his every action was
guided by a code of rules.

Menma internalized his isolation until one day everything exploded. The Scroll of Sealing was stolen
in the night, a traitor led to a confrontation with the jinchuuriki, and an academy instructor by the
name of Iruka Umino lost his life that day. Something within Menma snapped. A wave of warning
rippled across Konoha like a prelude to their tragedy and when the jounin sent to retrieve the scroll
finally caught up with the child, the enemy was dead and Menma was shrouded within a veil of red
chakra, the first of the fox’s nine tails manifesting itself, and the seal loosened.

Kakashi was not there that night. Kakashi was on an ANBU mission far off from Konoha. He was
briefed upon his return. The recovery team was disarmed, their jinchuuriki was gone, and the body
of Iruka Umino was laid to rest.

Naruto hung his head and kicked the dirt as he scared away the last child on the playground.

Kakashi closed his eye and sighed. There was a book in his hands, but he wasn’t reading. No, there
was far too much thinking going on for that. Ruminating, because Kakashi was a sad old man with a
lot of time on his hands and no good to come of it. He was there to change things, but there were
some things that were just beyond his control.
At times, he wished his Sharingan was one of mind control. Maybe he could have used it on Menma years ago to save himself the trip.

“Naruto,” he called to the sulking child, beckoning him over with a lazy wave. “Time to go.”

Naruto’s head snapped up. He blinked at his caretaker and smiled, toddling over eagerly, as though that whole horrible, terrible, miserable exchange with the playground children never happened at all. If nothing else, the kid was tenacious. He landed against Kakashi’s legs with a short ‘oof’ and leaned heavily on Kakashi’s knees.


Of course he was. That kid was a bottomless pit; his appetite could rival any adult’s. “Not quite,” Kakashi breathed. He deposited his book into one of the bags and rose up, gathering their things. “Next stop is the market. We’re stocking our fridge so that I don’t need to listen to you complain about food pills. Understood?”

Naruto laughed, loud and full, still falling off Kakashi’s pant leg with one hand as he offered a salute. “‘Kay!”

They left the park and he twitched when stubby fingers found his hand, held it fast with feeble strength. This was the hand of Menma Uzumaki, the scourge of the Leaf, the Fourth’s mistake.

The last face ever seen in the ruins that once stood as the strongest hidden village.

Kakashi squeezed Naruto’s hand and braced himself, for this was his future, and he wouldn’t run away from it.

There was starlight in Naruto’s eyes. Bright and blue and so full of wonder as he pressed his face up against the display, much to the displeasure of the lady in apron standing on the other side. His breath fogged the glass as he stared long and hard at the dozen tubs of ice cream on the other side like this was the most monumental decision of his life, as though this would lay the foundation for his future.

Kakashi certainly hoped not; if choosing the wrong flavour of ice cream was enough to create Menma Uzumaki, he was going to retire.

“Come on,” he urged, nudging the brat with his foot because his arms were full.

Naruto whined his frustrations and pried his face off of the display, turning an exaggerated pout on his caretaker. “But Kashi,” he pleaded, “there’re so many!”

Kakashi knew he should have expected this. He was dealing with a kid too small for the academy. He should have, but he didn’t, and he was now regretting the fact that he offered to buy the fox kit ice cream in the first place. It was his way of trying to lift Naruto’s spirits after that disheartening playground encounter, but now it just felt like a hassle.

“Pick one now,” he sighed, “and you can try a different one next time.”

Naruto’s jaw went slack. He gave Kakashi this look that screamed ‘there’s gonna be a next time??’

Oh no. What had he done?
Ten minutes later and they were sitting on the steps that led to the landing of their apartment, bags surrounding them, and Kakashi’s eye to the heavens. Naruto was there next to him, ice cream cone in hand, licking up the sides as they dripped onto his skin.

Copy-nin Kakashi. Kakashi of the Sharingan. Cold-blooded Kakashi. The ANBU that acted as the Third and Fourth’s right hand man. He had the highest success rate in ANBU, graduated the academy at five years old. He was a chunin and jounin before any of his peers, lived through war and death and all of the horrors that came with it. That Kakashi was now wrapped around the tiny, stubby, mysteriously sticky thumb a five-year-old who thought that ramen was the food of the gods and that ninja should wear orange so that they stood out better.

What would Obito say if he saw this? Rin? Minato?

He blinked, watching the clouds twist and spread with the breeze. Minato… would thank him, probably. For being there for his son.

A lifetime too late.

Suddenly an ice cream cone was shoved into his face and he leaned back and away from it, looking between the half-melted dessert and the grinning boy at his side.

“Try some!” Naruto urged. “It’s really really good, Kashi.”

Kakashi scooted away, feeling all kinds of wrong, and raised a hand. “I’m fine, Naruto.”

The fox kit pouted, pulling back. “But you never eat. You’re gonna starve to death, Kashi. And then I’m gonna be alone again.”

He raised an eyebrow, knowing that he should probably not get as much amusement out of Naruto’s concern as he was. The bags were dropped onto the steps, his arm sliding out from the handles, and he awkwardly patted Naruto’s head. “I eat,” he promised. “Just not when you’re looking.”

Naruto pouted. Then grubby hands came up, a finger slipped beneath the edge of his mask, and —

The shadow clone vanished in a puff of smoke.

Kakashi paused as the clone’s memories flooded his head, the fridge open and half stocked before him. He substituted himself with a clone when Naruto wasn’t looking and took the groceries up to put them away, leaving all of the clothes—and the burden of the child—with his clone. Now he was sighing, resigning himself to the fact that he should probably not use the same trick on Naruto twice in one day, that he should probably go supervise the kid like a responsible adult, and that he should probably stop running away from his problems.

He tucked the last of the groceries into the fridge and closed it, hefted himself up, and headed out the front door with a lazy gait and a hand in his pocket.

The moment he reached the end of the landing, a small body slammed into his legs. He kept his footing, just barely, staring openly at Naruto’s pale hair. Awkwardly, he patted Naruto’s back in a lame show of comfort. “Naruto,” he called, feeling the arms around his legs squeeze tight, “what’s wrong?”

Big, wobbly eyes looked up at him, lip quivering. “Kashi!” he whined. “You were just— gone.”

Kakashi looked past the boy. The new clothes had been abandoned at the foot of the stairs, a shirt
falling into the dirt path that led down from the main road, and he sighed. “Well,” he mused, “don’t touch my mask and I won’t disappear. Got it?”


Kakashi managed to pry the little leech off of him long enough to gather the rest of Naruto’s things and carry them back up the stairs. He frowned when he noticed the big, cold mark of ice cream on his knee. Fantastic.

Like a duckling, Naruto followed him into the kid’s bedroom where he started hanging up the clothes in the closet. He allowed it, if only because it meant that there wouldn’t be another incident while he was preoccupied, and found that he was getting more and more practiced at tolerating the constant presence watching from over his shoulder.

Naruto kicked his legs back and forth, sitting on the bed. Apparently, the crisis had been averted and he was content. “Hey Kashi, why d’you wear a mask?”

“I want to.”

“But why?”

“Because,” he thought, twisting around to look at the boy, “I want to.”

Naruto was deeply, wholly unsatisfied with that answer. “But why?”

“We are not doing this tonight.”

“But Kashi…”

“No, Naruto.”

Naruto was silent, then. He thought he might get a bit of quiet, though of course he was very prepared for that to not be the case at all because this was the fox child, the hellspawn that had made the past sixteen years of his life a complete and utter nightmare. Sure enough, he heard a deep inhale from behind and resigned himself to the fact that quiet was no longer a luxury that he could afford.

“How’d you disappear?”

“That was my shadow clone,” he said simply, frowning. He ran out of hangers. They didn’t have a dresser yet, so he improvised; the bookshelf was mostly empty, so it was as good a place as any.

“Oh,” Naruto nodded, as though everything was now right with the world. “That’s why you were actin’ all nice an’ stuff. ‘Cause you weren’t you.”

Kakashi twitched. This child, this demon fox.

Minato, give him patience.

ANBU gear was something that Kakashi did not miss. The mask felt hot against his face, his breath catching on the porcelain. For so many years of his life, that was the norm. He got used to the narrowed vision behind his mask and the weight that it carried with it. He grew accustomed to the loss of identity that came with his job.
Hiruzen sighed, putting down his brush in order to offer his undivided attention. “You have a clone with Naruto, I assume.”

Kakashi nodded. “Yes, Lord Third. The boy was eating dinner when I left.”

Hiruzen closed his eyes, nodded along to his words as he leaned forward on the desk. It was uncommon for the Hokage to ask questions that didn’t pertain to the topic at hand but this was expected; that was his honorary grandson they were discussing. Kakashi knew from the very start that Hiruzen would want to be included in Naruto’s life, and that was fine.

Kakashi could still clearly remember that day, now so many years into the future, the Hokage looking out the windows with far-off eyes, his pipe left forgotten on the desk, relaying to the ANBU with a heavy heart that Menma Uzumaki was now classified as an S-ranked criminal, that his retrieval was no longer necessary and that he was to be killed on sight. That the Leaf needed to do away with its own mistakes.

He lowered his eyes, his mind supplying the unwanted connection between Menma and the small, giggly fox kit eating dinner in his apartment.

“You should leave ANBU.”

Kakashi lifted his head and said nothing.

There was a smile on Hiruzen’s face, soft and open and all sorts of right as the Hokage found his pipe and caught the tobacco inside with a spark of chakra. “That boy needs you now, Kakashi.”

He knew this was coming. He continued to kneel, watching the floor through the slits in his mask. ANBU had no families. Not usually. It was dangerous with the kind of work that they did. More than that, though, he knew that Hiruzen was worried for Naruto’s sake. But Naruto would not grow up alone. Not this time. Kakashi would not die. “With all respect, Lord Third,” he started, “that won’t be necessary. I am more than capable of caring for Naruto while retaining my position. I assure you of that.”

Hiruzen closed his eyes again, resigning himself to that, and the topic was brushed to the wayside. “I called you here to inform you that I will be giving Itachi Uchiha his own team. You’ll have a vacancy for the next while. I hope that it does not cause you trouble.”

Ah, right. It was about time for that.

The Uchiha clan was very much still a thing in this timeline. That was something Kakashi gave little thought to, his own mind focused on the far greater threat of the village destroyer he’d made it his goal to erase. But the Uchihas were alive. Itachi was only just getting his own team. Shisui was still very much an innocent. He wondered if he should try to stop Shisui, for Itachi’s sake. For the village’s sake. He wondered if he could. He wondered, but his main priority was Menma—Naruto. Above all else, he needed to focus on that boy. If there were any chance to change things, however…

He didn’t know if that was the right thing to do.

“Tenzo and I will manage fine,” he assured.

Hiruzen smiled. “You always do.”
Naruto huddled in the corner of the couch, his toad plush seated beside him and a picture book on the table. He stared at the pictures, still unable to read the words that went along with them, and periodically his eyes would flicker over to Kashi in the kitchen, cleaning up after dinner. Naruto had suspicions.

That was another shadow-thingy. Clone. Whatever. Naruto knew it. He didn’t know how he knew, but he knew. And that was enough.

Now he was wondering where the real Kashi was hiding. Was this, like, a super-awesome-super-cool ninja game? Would he win a prize if he could find Kashi? Was the prize ramen? There were so many questions buzzing around in his head and he was vibrating with excitement.

The clone turned, looked at him, and smiled. Naruto could tell that he smiled. No, he couldn’t see Kashi’s face, but he could tell. Why? Because he was Naruto, and he was going to be the greatest Hokage ever.

“Still hungry?” Kashi asked.

Naruto found himself looking down at Gama, his toad, and plucking at the fabric of Gama’s leg with newfound anxiety. Knowing that it was a clone and not the real Kashi made him feel all kinds of weird, like it was a stranger. Well, he hadn’t known Kashi that long, either, but still…

Eventually he shook his head.

Kashi’s eyes lingered a while longer before he went back to putting away the dishes. The soft clack of porcelain broke the quiet. Naruto wasn’t used to quiet like that, so he tried to fill the silence as much as he could with empty words. The orphanage was never quiet, not even when he was asleep, not with all the breathing and snoring and other horrible noises. But Kashi was… quiet. His clone was quiet, too.

But there was something about the clone that felt very, totally, wholly different.

Hugging Gama to his chest, Naruto gathered up the courage to pad over to his caretaker, staring up at the tall man with big eyes.

Kashi found his gaze and met it evenly. “Something wrong?”

He nodded curtly, pointing an accusing finger with his free hand. “You’re a clone!”

“Well,” Kashi started, an amused lilt to his voice, “yes. I am.”

Naruto’s face scrunched up. He retracted his hand to better hold Gama. That was easier than he expected. Now what? His torso twisted left then right, back and forth with his feet rooted in place as he tried to form a coherent thought. Eventually, he hedged, “You an’ Kashi feel… different.”

“That so?” Kashi wiped his hands on the dish towel and knelt down, meeting Naruto’s height. The real Kashi never did that, and it just reaffirmed Naruto’s beliefs.

“You’re nicer,” he said simply. “But you’re a clone. I dun get it.”

Kashi hummed, raising his eye to the ceiling as though trying to think. Naruto was no expert, but he was pretty sure that Kashi didn’t need to think as long as he did for an answer. Like he was stalling. “When the original has conflicting thoughts and emotions, they can often manifest themselves in shadow clones.”
Naruto pouted and repeated, “I dun get it.”

Kashi smiled again, with his eye, and it felt all kinds of weird. “Sometimes clones have a bit more personality to them.”

“Mm…” Naruto stared hard, waiting. Expectant.

“Like naruto and menma.”

“Oh!” And suddenly, everything made sense in the world. He nodded to himself, as though coming to terms with all the truths of the universe, and added a solemn, “But naruto is better.”

A hand came up and ruffled his hair. He grumbled and ducked out from under it, cheeks tinged red with embarrassment.

“I think so, too.”

Chapter End Notes

Shameless self plug, but I figure it pertains a bit to the people who are reading this so that's my excuse—I have a new oneshot up, a time travel story about Sakumo and Kakashi called Paper Moon. It's a jump forward rather than back, and it's weird, but it's mostly fluff and angst and bonding and family feels. It has a lot of similar plot elements to Karma, so I figured I'd mention it *cough*

See you next time!!
Naruto promised that he would not whine or moan or complain when Kashi left for work that night. They had a long, drawn-out talk about it the day before. It was boring and he hated it, but Kashi made him promise so he did. Kashi didn’t like people who broke their promises, so Naruto was extra careful with keeping his mouth shut as the door closed behind his caretaker.

The moment Kashi was gone, he visibly deflated. This was Kashi’s very first day back at work since Naruto started living there; it felt all kinds of weird, and two seconds in Naruto was already lonely.

It wasn’t all bad, though. Clone-shi was there. That was his nickname for Kashi’s main clone. That one deserved a nickname, ’cause he would give Naruto snacks and read him bedtimes stories and make awesome food whenever the real Kashi had to step out. Overall, Clone-shi was a pretty cool guy. For a clone. He wasn’t perfect—he was still Kashi, after all—but he tried. Sometimes the touching thing was too much for him, and sometimes he would shut down for a moment if certain words were brought up. Like menma. Or, or, there was one time when they were reading a picture book together before bed, one of those ones about animals, and then it got to the fox. Clone-shi closed the book and told him to go to bed. That didn’t seem fair.

He wasn’t perfect, but he tried. Sometimes more than the original Kashi did.

Naruto stood in the front hall, staring at the door as he listened to the fading footsteps descend from the landing until they were gone. He felt a hand on his head and looked up to find Clone-shi smiling down at him. Clone-shi smiled a lot more than Kashi. Even after a week, it felt kinda weird.

“It’s you and me tonight,” he said.

“Mm.” Naruto turned back to the door, shifting his weight. “Hey, Kashi? Where d'you work?”

Kashi was quiet a moment, moving back into the the living room where a stack of papers sat neatly on the corner of the coffee table. He grabbed a pen, sifted through the papers until he came to one in particular, and started writing something down. Naruto really wished he could read. But it was probably just boring adult stuff, so he didn’t care. “My work takes me to a lot of places,” he answered vaguely. “I work for the Hokage.”

Naruto pulled himself away from the door and padded over, plopping down beside the clone on the couch. “Ooooh right, you're a ninja! That's so cool. I wanna be a ninja, too, y'know.”

“I know.”

Kashi tapped the back of the pen against the wood of the table in an unstable rhythm. It was a bit hard on Naruto's ears and he scrunched up his face. The tapping stopped. Understanding dawned on
Kashi's face… what he could see of it, anyway.

“Too loud?” Kashi asked.

Naruto tilted his head this way and that as he tried to find better words. “Too sharp.”

“Ah.”

Kashi put the pen down. It rolled across the paper before settling somewhere near the edge. Like that, the noise stopped. Naruto grinned up at the clone, grabbing Gama off the table. It was… weird, because Kashi was the first one to believe him when he said that sometimes sounds hurt his ears. Actually… no, he hadn't said anything about it. Not to Kashi. Kashi just knew because he was awesome like that.

“Hey, Kashi,” he greeted, kicking his legs back and forth, “what're we gonna do?”

Kashi looked at him. It was obvious that he just wanted to write stuff down on those papers, but the clone was indulgent. Naruto knew now that he'd asked, Kashi would play with him. Or something. Kashi didn’t really play. He mostly just sat there flailing. But that was fun, too.

Kashi hummed, doing that thing where he looked up and thought longer than necessary, and then smiled. Naruto could always see that smile, even if his face was all covered up like a super secret ninja man. “Well,” he said, “what do you want to do, Naruto?”

He was hoping Kashi would ask him that, practically vibrating in his seat as he blurted out a quick, “I wanna learn to make clones like you!”

Kashi twitched. The smile was gone, and his face was empty as he turned away.

Sometimes Kashi would shut down. It was never for long, and it was never very noticeable, but Kashi would go quiet. His eyes would be searching far off into the distance, looking at nothing. Then it would leave like a smothered flame, like it was never there to start.

Kashi slouched into the back of the couch, eyeing one of the words on the paper. “I think it’s a bit too soon for that,” he admitted.

Naruto let out a long, drawn-out whine. “But I wanna learn.”

“Well,” Kashi mused, “I could, but I don’t think you’re very familiar with the chakra system yet.”

Naruto narrowed his eyes, as though squinting would help him make sense of the words. It didn’t. “The wha?”

Kashi smiled and reached out to poke his forehead. “That is something you should be learning in the academy next year.”

“But I wanna learn now. C’mon, I can do it!”

“Well…”

Naruto was prepared to learn. He was excited to, and he just knew that Kashi knew all the cool, super awesome jutsu out there! So he was bouncing in place, awaiting his totally amazing lesson, and it came. And it was not what he was expecting. Kashi was drawing diagrams on one of the blank sheets of paper, was talking about the flow of chakra through the body and blah blah blah—it was the worst kind of lesson. Instantly his enthusiasm was gone, his eyes diverted to Gama, and he
plucked at the threads of the little toad’s eyes.

Mission failed. Sometimes Clone-shi was the worst.

Kakashi peered into the kid’s bedroom, the soft glow of the nightlight casting across his face. Naruto was asleep, snoring lightly away with Gama hugged securely to his chest. His blankets were half kicked off, one foot dangling over the side of the bed.

He sighed, closed his eyes, and pulled away from the door to stumble into the living room. His clone was sitting over their notes of observation, which had grown quite vast over the span of the week, more due to the clone’s efforts than his own. He wouldn’t have gone so far as to say that he avoided Naruto, but there were times where he felt overwhelmed and needed to take a step back. Now, with his ANBU missions resuming, he would need a more secure method of keeping an eye on the fox kit; it was only a matter of time before he left for a mission spanning more than a few hours, a mission that would require sleep, and his clone would disappear the moment that he did. Worse still was the very real possibility of losing consciousness when under attack, leaving Naruto alone at the drop of a hat.

The Hokage seemed to think that Naruto would be fine alone at five years old, and the Hokage may have, for all intents and purposes, been right; Menma lived like that, alone from the age of five years, and he didn’t manage to kill himself in those years. He was alive and healthy at twenty-eight. He also stole the Scroll of Sealing, ran away, renounced the village, killed Leaf shinobi and later returned to destroy his home with the eager aid of the nine-tailed demon fox, but hey. He was healthy.

Kakashi sighed again. He was doing a lot of that lately, feeling his age now more than he had when his body was forty-two. Parenting couldn’t be that hard, he’d told himself. But he was starting to wonder. How did normal parents avoid raising their children to be S-ranked criminals?

The clone looked up at him and he waved. “Thanks,” he said, and it felt weird, thanking a copy of himself, but it also felt appropriate knowing that the clone had to deal with Naruto the whole day. That kid was draining.

The clone smiled, setting down his pen. “Naruto can be good company, you know.”

“That so?” Kakashi wondered about that. Their one-sided conversation at breakfast devolved into whether the Hokage or Gama would win in a fight. Naruto determined that Gama would, obviously, because Gama was a gift from the Hokage, and the Hokage would therefore never be able to bring himself to harm the plush.

There was something very seriously wrong with the way Naruto’s thoughts connected in his head. Some called it ‘childhood,’ but Kakashi couldn’t recall his thought processes ever being so erratic.

“Maa, you would know,” the clone continued, smile bright, “if you gave him a chance.”

Kakashi twitched. Called out by his own clone, huh? He shook his head and rose his hand into a seal to dispel his shadow clone, deciding that the situation was absurd enough already and that tonight was not the night he was going to confront his own personal demons.

The clone stopped him, a hand held up in pause. “Naruto wants to learn the shadow clone jutsu.”

Oh. No, that wasn’t any good. No good at all.
“Let him.”

The clone dispelled in a puff of smoke and memories of the day flooded Kakashi’s head. In a rush, he remembered the tapping of a pen, the vibrating child seated beside him, and the hours of chakra theory he tried to cram into that boy’s head. And he cursed himself for it all.

Kakashi dropped down on the couch, covered his face with his hands, and groaned.

He held no illusions about what the future would bring; the nine-tails jinchuuriki would be expected to be a ninja for the village and Naruto wanted to be a ninja. Whether he liked it or not, this was something that would come to pass, an inevitability of circumstance. That, he understood.

But the shadow clone jutsu was one Kakashi rather remain a mystery to Naruto. It was a personal favourite of Menma’s in the days before the nine masked beasts and his first tactic in evading capture. Kakashi carried with him a long-standing resentment, aimed more at himself than at Menma, from the days before Menma had renounced the name Naruto.

Being the ANBU sent to retrieve Konoha’s missing jinchuuriki, the failure of that mission and the weight that it carried was Kakashi’s burden alone. It was careless of him. Menma was a child; he never expected Menma to have learned the shadow clone jutsu in the few hours the scroll was missing, or that he could use it to formulate a calculated escape. The boy that day, the one who asked his name and grinned at him, and said—

“Naruto Uzumaki. I’m gonna—I’m gonna be the world’s greatest ninja!”

Kakashi lifted his head and everything stopped. Those words had been carved into his thoughts for so, so many years. He remembered every inflection, the look on Menma’s face as he made his proud declaration. But something was off. Something was always off, settling wrong in his mind.

The pause, right in the middle. The hesitation.

He remembered the small body of a boy years younger, a hand of stubby fingers reaching out, with bright eyes on an impossible future.

“My name’s Naruto Uzumaki, an’ I’m gonna be the Hokage!”

Oh. That was what Menma wanted to say that day.

“Kashi?”

Kakashi’s head snapped left to see a tired fox kit looming around the edge of the hall, rubbing his eyes with Gama dragging at his feet. Every line of Naruto’s body radiated the desperate need to go back to sleep, but he stumbled his way into the room anyway.

Naruto hopped onto the cushion beside Kakashi and leaned against him, blinking zombie eyes at the bookshelf against the wall. This boy was five, not twenty-eight. This boy was five with big dreams still held tightly in his heart. “You should sleep, Kashi,” Naruto yawned.

You’re one to talk, kid.

Kakashi closed his eye and resigned himself to it, settling with the brat in his side. He placed the stack of observations on his knee and grabbed the pen, balancing everything well enough to write.

Age 5—wants to be Hokage.
Age 12—goals differ.

What happened to cause that change, he wondered?

“Naruto?” he called, and his voice seemed to be the one thing keeping his young charge from drifting off.

“What?”

“Do you still want to be the Hokage?”

“Duh.”

Right. He didn’t know why he bothered asking.

With a grunt, Kakashi lifted the boy into his arms and made his way for the bedroom. He set Naruto down on the bed with ignored protests, pulled the blankets up, and sat on the edge. Naruto was fighting sleep, pouting, looking all sorts of cranky. “Do you know what’s most important to the Hokage?”

Naruto blinked, scrubbing at his eyes, groaning away his exhaustion. “Um…”

“The village,” said Kakashi. “The village is the most important thing. The Hokage loves and protects his village like it’s his family.”

There was interest in those eyes, a spark of newly lit curiosity, but Naruto was fading fast. “Like family?”

Kakashi nodded.

“Oh.” Naruto slipped his arms out from beneath the blanket, craned his neck to better face his caretaker, and smiled. “That’s easy. I’ll jus’ protect them like they were you, y’know?”

Huh.

He didn’t know why, but he smiled.

“Good. Remember that.”

He was forty-two and a strangled noise escaped him as he pulled his arm out from under broken stone. It hung limp at his side, a slow stream of blood dripping stains onto the rubble at his feet. There was panic from the streets—screams and pleads and begging please stop and above it all, a level voice hummed a tune.

Through the billows of dust and smoke walked a man, masked and blond and cloaked in black. Nine beasts spread out from the blind spot of his silhouette. With every path they took, the chaos screamed louder. Desperation filled the air.

Kakashi tried to stand but his leg was caught in the collapse and he was losing blood, and his arm did not listen and his body did not move and he sat there and watched as ANBU took to the streets in droves.

The masked man stopped, his tune cut out abruptly, and he laughed.
“You're all here for me? You shouldn't have.”

That voice rang familiarity and Kakashi's body felt cold.

Kunai flung through the air and the masked man stumbled around them, looking all sorts of clumsy and all sorts of effortless and it felt like a disgrace, like he was toying with them. Like this was fun.

“Careful,” the man teased, “you might hit me.”

Kakashi watched the carnage from within, saw the mask clatter to the stone debris. He met the gaze of a man with Minato's eyes and Kushina’s smile as a hand pressed to the earth and rippled with chakra and the fox was there, its tails lashing out, teeth bared and ready and suddenly it was October 10th, twenty-eight years ago, and the world was on fire.

Kakashi opened his eyes to find a swirl of blond and blue standing over him. His heart pounded a heavy rhythm against his chest before reality formed in his head. He released a long, calming breath, and stared up at Naruto’s grinning face.

“Mornin’, Kashi.”

The blond head poked out of view, leaving him to stare up at the cream-coloured ceiling, and he couldn't bring himself to move. The phantom pain of a broken arm still burned its way down through the bone and behind his eyelids was fire and smoke and a discarded mask.

He reminded himself that he was not forty-two. He was nineteen. The fox was not destroying the village; it was scurrying around his tiny apartment. The havoc it wreaked was very Naruto-shaped. He steadied himself on those thoughts and tore the comforter off his legs.

Kakashi staggered to the doorway with a sleep-addled mind still playing images in his head. The faint sizzle of a pan on the stove buzzed in his ears from the kitchen, an indiscernible scent carrying on it that promised trouble. Oh no. If the bath had been as much of a disaster as it was, he did not want Naruto to try a hand at using the stove.

With his mind still a haze, he followed his nose down the hall and paused in the space between kitchen and living room. Naruto stood on one of the kitchen chairs, pulled flush against the counter and stove, reaching out to turn off one of the burners. The damage had been done. Or it should have, at least, but the only evidence of anything troubling was the faint smell of burning carrying across the room and that, in itself, was troubling.

There was food set out on the table. Two plates. Eggs over easy a little brown around the edges. Toast, somewhat burnt. It was a far cry from the meals Kakashi had prepared over the week—consisting mainly of rice, whatever topping he fancied that day, and a side. But it was Naruto, and it was effort. More effort than he ever expected to see from the boy.

“What’s all this?” asked Kakashi, and there was the faintest hint of fondness in his voice as he moved past the nightmare and into the kitchen, following Naruto’s gestures to sit down. Then there was tea, poured fresh from the kettle, steaming a heat that bit back against the slight chill seeping in through the window by the table.

Naruto was grinning with boastful pride, his eyes squeezed shut like a mischievous fox. He ran around the table to take the seat opposite Kakashi. His head barely peeked out over his food. “Isn’t it great?”

“Well.” Great was not a word Kakashi would have ascribed it. The eggs were overcooked, the toast was burnt, and it was a greasier meal than he would have liked for breakfast. But it was effort, and it
was admirable. Kakashi hadn’t even thought about teaching the boy how to cook. Maybe it would prove a valuable life lesson. Would it keep Naruto from becoming another Menma? Doubtful. But it was something, another discrepancy between the fox kit and demon hellspawn that Kakashi aimed to erase.

Naruto wasn’t bothered by the lack of praise, his own satisfaction enough to justify his efforts. “I wanted to do something nice! ‘Cause you’re always makin’ me food. So I made you food.”

Kakashi gripped the utensils resting beside the plate and prodded at the meal. It wasn’t terrible. Not great, but a good early attempt.

“Sometimes I helped in the kitchen,” Naruto supplied, sliding his egg onto a slice of toast. “When I got in trouble they’d make me. We made lots of rice but rice got boring and it was so bland. Sometimes we got to make other stuff, though. An’ you always make rice, so I thought I’d try this!”

Ah. Orphanage life. Kakashi nodded along and cut away a piece of egg white, bringing it up to his mouth on the pronged end of his fork. A finger slipped beneath his mask, and—

He froze there, saw the way that Naruto was leaning forward with interest, drumming greasy fingers against the table top. Eyes bright. Grin wide.

Kakashi lowered the fork and looked to the heavens, humming in feigned thought. So that was his game; Naruto was trying to get him to take off his mask. Well, two could play at that.

“Ah, what to do…” A troubled eye searched the kitchen, then fell down to the meal before him, and he pressed a thumb and forefinger to his chin in thought. “Breakfast should always have rice, you see. To start the day off right.”

A look of despair was sudden and real across Naruto’s face. The fox kit sputtered, looked this way and that, then down at his own meal. He shot up out of his chair and scrabbled back towards the stove. “I-I can make rice! Jus’ wait!”

“Mmmm…” Kakashi’s face scrunched up. “But then the food will get cold. How disappointing.”

Big, panicked eyes targeted him. Naruto moved faster, set water on to boil—Kakashi was too cheap to spend money on a proper rice cooker—and did a lot of flailing and fidgeting as he tried to coax the water to a boil.

Kakashi took that moment to quietly and discreetly do away with the breakfast Naruto prepared for him, and it was marginally better than it looked. Yes, Kakashi decided, Naruto’s venture into the culinary arts had been a moderate success. Maybe if cooking became a habit, Naruto would be less dependant on ramen as a primary source of nutrients. Could eating better lead him to live a better life? Possibly. Kakashi wasn’t going to dismiss even the slightest possibility of keeping Menma Uzumaki from ever becoming a reality again.

Mask back in place, he let out an exaggerated sigh of content. “That was refreshing, Naruto. Thank you.”

Naruto froze. Slowly he turned to stare at Kakashi in abject horror. “Kashi?”

Kakashi smiled with his eye. “In the end, I just couldn’t let my cute little ward’s efforts go to waste.”

Naruto twitched, his eyes narrowing suspiciously, the failure of his ‘mission’ now cast to the wayside as he hobbled off the chair at the counter and came nearer, scrutinizing his caretaker closely. “...Clone-shi?”
He blinked. “What?”

The fox kit nodded agreement with himself, arms crossed and back straight. “You’re Clone-shi. Kashi doesn’t smile like that.”

Kakashi was very, very confused.

“Did he leave again?” asked Naruto, downcasting his eyes to the floor. “Without breakfast?”

It brought Kakashi back to a memory from a long-gone clone, a confession of discrepancies between shadow clones and their original when born under conflicting thoughts. This boy held onto that. Now Naruto was disappointed, thinking that he’d fed a clone while the caretaker he knew made off before dawn—which Kakashi had not done, not once, during the whole of Naruto’s stay with him—and the sulking started, and he realized that maybe the harsh tone his clone took with him was warranted. Naruto was convinced that his caretaker was incapable even good-natured teasing. That… put a lot of things into perspective, really.

Kakashi slipped off his chair and crouched down in front of the boy, placing a firm hand on a tiny shoulder. The smile was gone. He’d been in a strangely nice mood up until then, but smothered it down in favour of addressing his ward’s concerns. “Naruto,” he called, quiet yet firm, “I’m not a clone. I promise.”

Naruto pouted, glancing up warily. “But Kashi doesn’t smile like that.”

He closed his eye and sighed. This boy. This stupid, bizarrely tolerable boy. “Clones are copies of the shinobi who casts the ninjutsu. Sometimes they manifest a little differently, but they are still copies. Understand?”

The kit nodded.

“Good.” Kakashi eased away the stern look he’d dawned and ruffled the boy’s hair, earning a lot of groans and protests. “Maa, I shouldn’t worry you like that. Sorry.”

Naruto kicked the ground, awkward beneath the show of affection. He stole glances when he thought Kakashi wasn’t looking, swayed in place. Squirmed. What was going on in that little head of his, hm?

“You look at me like they do,” muttered Naruto, and Kakashi frowned. “Like everyone does. Like I did something wrong.”

Ah. That was what this was about.

“An’ it’s not fair, ‘cause I didn’t.”

“No,” he agreed, “you didn’t.” He held back the urge to add ‘not yet.’ Naruto was right; it wasn’t fair.

“But Kashi—” Naruto met his eyes then, brow scrunched and eyes wavering and looking so small that Kakashi had to wonder how that boy could ever become the monster that he did. “You’re still my precious person, y’know. ‘Cause you’re nicer to me than anyone else ever. An’ you try.”

Kakashi flicked the brat’s forehead. The mood was gone as a hand went up to cover the red spot between Naruto’s eyebrows and Naruto settled him beneath a betrayed glare.

“That’s all well and good, Naruto,” he smiled, Naruto’s other wrist held gently but firmly in his
grasp, mere inches from his face where Naruto had tried to hook a finger beneath his mask, “but you really ought to learn a little tact before you try your hand at besting me.”

Naruto pouted. The sentimentality was gone from his face, replaced with outrage, and he wrenched his hand free to cross his arms and sulk. “Almost had you.”

“You didn’t.”

“I did.”

There was a bubbling noise from the stove and Naruto yelped, hurrying to turn off the burner. There was flailing and then sighing followed by complaints of cold food and demands for ramen. Suddenly, it was like the whole conversation never happened, like it was all just a ploy at distracting him long enough to peek beneath his mask.

Kakashi knew better to dismiss it. He listened with half-vested interest to Naruto’s story of learning to cook and the prank that led up to it, chin in his palm as his young charge packed away the leftover food in two minutes flat, and thought.

‘You look at me like they do,’ huh?

He wondered if that was the first puzzle piece of the mystery that was Menma Uzumaki.

Tenzō was pretty certain that something was very, seriously, detrimentally wrong with his ANBU captain. He was sure, but what could he do? Tell the Hokage ‘hey, I think Kakashi may need a psychological evaluation and should also be taken off of missions for a while?’ That was laughable; Hound was one of the most proficient ANBU they had, with a mission success rate unrivalled by any of the other captains currently on the roster. Plus, Itachi was already being moved to a team of his own; if Kakashi needed time off, that would leave Tenzō alone, likely assigned to someone else’s team because of it. That wasn’t as important as his comrade’s health, no. But that wasn’t the whole picture, either.

Six months ago, they messed up. The mission was a success. They were able to return stolen information on the Leaf and secure it. But the mission came with a cost. It was Tenzō’s fault, really, and his foolish captain’s nindo at the heart of it all; Tenzō overused his wood release and the drain on his chakra left him oblivious to the one enemy shinobi still lurking in the trees. Kakashi took the fall—to protect Tenzō, like the fool that he was.

There was a lot of guilt back then, sitting in the hospital room next to his captain. He passed the time by making little wooden knick knacks and sculptures. Kakashi liked seeing his jutsu at work, so he thought it might be a nice surprise to wake up to.

It took a long, long time for Kakashi to wake up. Almost a week. He’d been trapped in a genjutsu, which in and of itself was odd. Kakashi was a master at dispelling genjutsu, even without the upper hand of the sharingan, which he also had. It had the medic-nin scratching their heads. Other than that, they were able to treat Kakashi’s physical wounds to the point of them being nothing to worry over. But Kakashi would not wake up.

And then he did.

Tenzō did not know what he was expecting to happen when his captain woke. He did not expect the pure heartbreak on Kakashi’s usually stoic face, all conveyed through one visible eye.

Kakashi laid there, bringing shaking hands up to his face. “Wh—” He clenched his fists. “What?”
Tenzō never heard his captain’s voice shake like that. It was the most unsettling day of his life since leaving Root. He could still feel the chill that ran through his body that day, sitting helplessly at Kakashi’s bedside, unsure of what was going on.

Kakashi was not Kakashi that day. Kakashi was someone else.

In the weeks that followed, Kakashi spoke only when directly addressed. The Hokage paid him a visit and he managed to smooth out the troubled look that seemed a permanent fixture on his face long enough to put Lord Third at ease, but then the Hokage was gone and Kakashi was back to staring vacant-eyed out the window.

Progress was slow. Painful. Kakashi stayed in the hospital longer than his physical wounds demanded; the medics were concerned about his overall mental state and Kakashi didn’t seem to care one way or another whether he stayed or left. So he stayed. And Tenzō visited regularly between missions.

One day, he entered the room, systematically placing a new little sculpture on the end table. They were starting to pile up. Kakashi was watching the clouds through the window, far-off and vacant-eyed as he so often was.

“It’s funny, isn’t it?”

He asked what was funny. Nothing about this situation was funny. Tenzō had never seen Kakashi even remotely act this way before.

“My sharingan sees so clearly today.”

Tenzō never asked what he meant.

Something changed that day. From the time of his next visit, Kakashi was less despondent. There was still something very clearly not right, but for the little progress that it gave, Tenzō welcomed it. The stoic, quiet Kakashi that he knew was forever out of reach; in his place was the dull-eyed, scattered superior he was becoming familiar with. Kakashi moved with a lazy gait and a practiced slouch. When the day finally came for him to leave the hospital, he did so with a questionable book tight in his grasp.

The time came for their next mission. Kakashi was late.

Kakashi was never late.

“Ah, well. The sakura blooms were so lovely. I got lost in their beauty.”

Tenzō couldn’t be mad, though. Whatever his friend was going through, it was hard. But no genjutsu could do something like that. No genjutsu could so completely shatter a man like that. No genjutsu could have such an ironclad grip on Kakashi of the Sharingan.

But time passed. A month, and suddenly he was expecting Kakashi to be late, to share with him those stupid, disappointing excuses. He started taking the initiative to request their meetups run earlier than planned, if only to assure Kakashi would get there within a reasonable time. Somehow, this new easygoing Kakashi was not in the least a liability on missions; he performed his duties more efficiently than ever. On missions, Tenzō could glimpse the Kakashi that he’d always known if he squinted just right.

Then, Kakashi smiled. Tenzō could not remember Kakashi smiling.
“Ahh, well. You’ll foot the bill this time, won’t you, Tenzō? My cute little junior.”

A part of Tenzō was momentarily horrified. For many reasons.

Kakashi was manipulative. He never realized before just how sharp a tongue that man had. Maybe that was because he hadn’t had that sharp of a tongue before. Not in that way, at least.

He confronted his captain eventually, a few weeks into this new development. Kakashi raised placating hands, amusement in the lines of his eye.

“Acting?” Kakashi hummed, his voice slow and lazy, like just about every other aspect of his mannerisms. “Mmm. Well. What if I said that the world ended yesterday, and this is the day after?”

He asked what that meant because he was tired of biting his tongue.

“Nothing, nothing.”

It was not ‘nothing.’ But Kakashi smiled, and Kakashi seemed happy—or, as close as that man could get to happy—and for a moment, Tenzō wondered if the truth really mattered.

“Ahh, right. I’ll be taking a short leave two months from now.”

He didn’t care to ask, not at first. Kakashi had become a man of many whims; taking a few days off was hardly anything to fret over, even if the Kakashi that he used to know was an unhealthy workaholic with little in his life outside of ANBU.

“It seems I’m adopting the nine-tails jinchuuriki.”

And Tenzō had laughed, hard and full, because Kakashi’s attempts at forced humour were always so dry. His jokes never landed. Sometimes it was painful to hear.

But this wasn’t a joke. This was not a joke, and Kakashi smiled.

Tenzō glanced across the room at his teammate. Kakashi was suiting up, getting ready for the night’s short mission. This was their first mission together since his captain’s short leave, meaning that the jinchuuriki boy was now in the care of an ANBU. That ANBU. The one that only half paid attention to everything around him, who always had his nose between the pages of Icha Icha. The one whose excuses worsened every day.

“Something on your mind?” Kakashi asked, and he was caught.

Tenzō pulled his shirt over his head and laid it smooth against his chest. He smiled, because there was nothing guarded behind those words. It was just a question. Curiosity. “I’m wondering about that boy,” he confessed easily. “Naruto, right? How’s he settling in?”

Kakashi cast his eye heavenward and hummed. “Mmm. Well, I think?”

“You think?”

Kakashi made a nondescript noise and pulled on his arm guards. “Well,” said Kakashi, “he’s enjoying himself. Probably.”

Tenzō cast a glance his captain’s way. There was something strangely real about Kakashi then, something so concrete and there that it felt like the first time he was seeing the man in six long, taxing months.
“And you?”

There was weight behind those words. There was quiet. Then a sigh, long and real.

“What if I told you that the world ended tomorrow,” he asked softly, “and today was your last chance to make it right?”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for the support, hope you're enjoying!
Naruto was used to waking up, sharing breakfast, and being left in the care of a clone while his something went off to do big-shot important work for the Hokage. Ninja work, he reminded himself, because the coolest thing about his something was that Kashi was a ninja. He wondered how good of a ninja Kashi was, though, because sometimes his caretaker seemed a little… scattered. That was something that Naruto came to expect over time. It was part of his routine: he’d spend the day playing with the clone, they’d go out to get food and ice cream—there were still so many flavours he had to try—and at the end of the day the clone would poof away and Kashi would come home, remembering all the awesome (though sometimes boring) days they had together.

Naruto was not used to waking up, sharing breakfast, and being left with someone other than a clone. In the door stood a tall, vacant-eyed man with a hollow smile and a stiff posture. When he settled his caretaker under an inquisitive look, Kashi just smiled.

“Ahh, Naruto?” he called, taking a knee before the child. “I’ll be away for a bit. This is Tenzō. He’s going to be caring for you while I’m gone. Don’t break him.”

Naruto nodded seriously. Kashi did not like when he broke things. There were a surprising number of emotions that could be conveyed by his one visible eye, like a rainbow of disappointment, and Naruto saw them all.

The Tenzō guy looked between them, his face a contorting mess of confusion. “Wha—break me?”

To his question, Kashi smiled more.

Naruto squeezed his eyes shut, feeling the weight of a hand on his head, comforting and warm. Kashi wasn’t so jumpy anymore. Which was good, because Naruto was getting tired of being avoided when he went in for a hug. Well, Kashi still did that sometimes. Most of the time, he substituted himself with a pillow. At least it was soft.

“Be good,” said Kashi, and there was meaning underlying those words that Naruto just couldn’t grasp.

He nodded anyway.

Kashi left them alone, the door clicked shut, and it was quiet. On days like this, Clone-shi would be there, smiles and patience, and Naruto would have a lesson. It’d be a boring lesson, but it would be his, and Clone-shi would tell him that once he learned this, he’d be that much closer to being Hokage. That motivation would be enough. Naruto would try.

Clone-shi was not there and that Tenzō guy looked just as lost as he did.
“Well, I suppose we should get introductions out of the way.” Tenzō smiled and held out a hand. “My name is Tenzō, Naruto. I work with your father.”

Naruto eyed the hand suspiciously. “Kashi’s not my dad,” he corrected matter-of-factly. “He’s my… something.”

Tenzō raised an eyebrow. “Your… what?” he prodded.

“My something,” insisted Naruto because that was all he could do. He never really figured out what Kashi meant whenever that was said, but it’d been a consistent enough answer for him to latch onto it.

Thankfully—because Naruto didn’t know what to say if the guy with weird eyes asked for further elaboration—the subject was dropped there.

“I see,” said Tenzō, and his smile widened.

Satisfied, to some marginal degree, Naruto hesitantly took the hand. It was a big hand, like Kashi’s, and made him feel small. He was tired of being small. If he was bigger, Kashi wouldn’t need to get weird guys like this one to supervise him. If he was bigger, he could go with Kashi. And wouldn’t that be cool? Two super-awesome-amazing ninja going on totally-seriously-dangerous adventures together?

“Is Kashi on a mission?” he asked when the man stood back up and stepped into the apartment, following behind at a distance. This was the first person other than Kashi who’d entered their home and he wasn’t sure how he was supposed to deal with that.

“Well, yes, actually.” Tenzō looked around. His eyes caught on a book resting atop the shelves and he picked it up, turned it over, and made a face. Then there was a sigh. The book was set down on a much higher shelf and left forgotten. “He’ll be back by the weekend, though, don’t worry. Your, er… something is a very skilled shinobi.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Naruto nodded. Okay. He liked this guy. This guy could see how cool Kashi was, so he couldn’t be all that bad.

Naruto, being the accommodating host that he was, gave Tenzō a house tour. It wasn’t much of a house tour—there were only five rooms and two of those rooms were technically connected—but he made the most of it anyway. The very last stop was Kashi’s bedroom, which he decidedly didn’t enter anymore unless his caretaker was already inside. Kashi was scary when he was angry. Naruto learned that the hard way. There was something about how quiet Kashi would get, how even his voice was, that made Naruto want to crawl into a hole. It would have been easier if Kashi yelled; the anger would come and go and they could move on. Something about the soft tone of a mutedly disappointed man stung longer.

“And this,” he said, nose in the air as he tapped the wood of the bedroom door, “is Kashi’s room. No one goes in unless Kashi’s in. It’s super super dangerous, y’know! There’re ninja weapons.”

Tenzō listened with amusement. “Oh? Well then, we’d better avoid it. Don’t want to get hurt.”

“Right!” This guy could learn. Good. Naruto would teach Tenzō all that he knew so that Tenzō could learn from his mistakes. He was such a great teacher.
The house tour concluded, and now Naruto was bored. He’d run out of lessons to leave.

Tenzō tapped his chin and hummed, looking this way and that. “You’ve had breakfast, right?”

“Mhm. Oh, oh—” Naruto leaned up, fists pumped with excitement. “Can we have ramen for lunch??”

“Ramen? That doesn’t sound very health—”

“Ramen, ramen, ramen!”

“Okay, okay!” Tenzō rubbed his neck and looked to the ceiling. “We’ll see how things play out. So you’ve eaten already, hmm… Well, what does Kakashi normally do with you after breakfast?”

Oh. Good question. Naruto crossed his arms and hummed his thoughts as he rifled through the two weeks of memories he’d accumulated. “Mmm… Kashi reads a lot an’ I play outside. I’m gonna make a friend soon!”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah! He’s gonna be a really cool ninja, too, even stronger than Kashi, but not stronger than me ’cause I’m gonna be the Hokage. Obviously.”

Tenzō nodded seriously. “Obviously.”

He was coming to find that he liked this guy. Even if Tenzō’s eyes looked like black voids that pierced his very soul. But Tenzō listened well, and took him seriously, and didn’t give him those looks that everyone else did. Yes, Tenzō was good. Naruto decided. He approved of this friend.

“Alright,” Tenzō clapped his hands together. “Outside, then?”

Naruto was skeptical. He showed as much on his face, giving the man a wary look. Outside felt… worrying for his new student. Too much for Tenzō’s weak little heart. Yeah. That was it. It wasn’t because he felt discouraged by his lack of progress in actually finding the friend that he was already boasting about. That friend was out there somewhere. He knew it. Kashi taught him patience, and so he could wait.

He could wait. He could wait inside instead of on the playground. He could wait with Tenzō, his hopeless student. Teach life lessons. Yes indeed, Naruto was growing into a responsible adult.

Tenzō hummed, apparently reading Naruto’s face and determining that outside was not a good idea. Wow, he caught on quick. “Alright,” he exhaled, “let’s try a different approach: what do you want to do, Naruto?”

Naruto thought about it. No one had ever given him so much power before. He thought hard, and found it funny how nothing popped into his head right away. He didn’t want to play outside, and he couldn’t have a lesson without Kashi there to give it—not that he would want that, either. He wanted Kashi, but understood that Kashi had important stuff to do. Besides, sulking wasn’t Naruto’s thing. Sulking was boring. And lonely.

What did he want to do? Well…

He got an idea and his face lit up like fireworks as he rounded on his heel and darted down the hall to the door at the end. Now, it wasn’t good form to openly break the rules right after explaining them to one’s student, no, but it was for a good cause! And what was that saying? Oh. Right.
Naruto settled Tenzō under a stern gaze and wisely stated, “Do as I say an’ not as I do!”

Tenzō blinked.

Naruto steeled himself, took a breath, and pushed open the door to Kashi’s room. It swung inward with a foreboding creak and he tiptoed inside, casting wary glances to the shadows of the room. He should be okay so long as he avoided the closet. Probably. But what if Kashi expected him to break the rules again and set up traps? No, no, he wouldn’t do that, because he liked Naruto.

He did.

Naruto was warier now than ever. Talking himself up backfired exponentially. Oh well.

On the nightstand sat a broken picture frame. One of the clasps on the back was missing and the shattered glass had been thrown out. The picture once housed within was now next to it, beneath the lamp. Naruto snatched up the picture and its frame and ran out of there as fast as his little legs could carry him.

Mission successful.

With newfound determination, Naruto held his spoils up to his supervisor, allowing it when Tenzō took them. Dark eyes lingered for a long, long time on the photo. Naruto wondered if maybe Tenzō knew who the people in the picture were. Well, one was obviously Kashi. Even back then, Kashi wore that stupid mask like it was a permanent fixture on his face.

“He still has this, I see,” Tenzō mused, looking between the photo and frame. “So? Why do you want this?”

“The frame,” he muttered, and now he felt shy. Which was stupid. But he still felt it. “I, um… broke it. I wanna make a new one for Kashi. ‘Cause I feel bad.”

“Ahhh, I see.” Tenzō smiled. A short hand seal later and wood sprouted from his hand like tree roots, twisting around until it formed the exact same shape as the broken frame. “How is this?”

Naruto's eyes widened and he snatched the new frame from Tenzō, turning it over in his hand. A perfect copy, though the back was also made from wood. And it still had no glass. He pouted.

“That’s a really cool jutsu and you gotta teach me—but this isn’t what I meant.”

“No?”

He shook his head, grinning up at the—ninja? Probably ninja—with newfound determination. “I wanna make one for him! A special one!”

“Oh yeah?”

“Mhm!” He nodded.

Tenzō smiled back. “Alright, then. What do you have in mind?”

Naruto never thought there was such a thing as too much ice cream. As it turned out, there was. There were also too many popsicles. His stomach felt gross and he hated it, but well, he had the supplies that he needed. Tenzō helped him cut the popsicle sticks to length—apparently he was too young to handle sharp objects, even with supervision—and now it was time to decorate. Sure,
Kashi’s old frame wasn’t decorated. It was as plain as any other you could buy for cheap at the market. But this one was going to be better, so obviously it needed decorating.

The fact that Tenzō went out and bought him craft supplies had him earning Naruto’s favour quickly. With a towel protecting the surface of the coffee table, Naruto knelt next to it and got to work on his masterpiece while Tenzō cleared off the rest of the clutter that could have potentially become collateral in the wake of Naruto’s artistic expression.

Tenzō hovered over the papers stacked high at the far end of the table, gingerly picking them up as he dropped down onto the couch. “What’s all this?”

Naruto paid the man little mind as he contemplated what sort of palette he could go with. Kashi seemed like a blue kind of guy. But Naruto liked orange. Maybe they could compromise. “They’re Kashi’s notes.”

“Notes on what?”

Naruto shrugged. “Dunno. He writes in them every day. So he dun forget or somethin’. Kashi’s weird.”

“Ah.”

Within minutes, the tan of Naruto’s hands was muted by vibrant paint splatter. Minutes after that, there was glitter. It was glorious and if Kashi didn’t love it then there was something very wrong with him and Naruto would feel pity. Then it took a turn. He should have quit while he was ahead.

Tenzō sat with the notes all the while, flipping through them with narrowed eyes and a hard-set frown. He was reading them. Well, that was probably okay; Kashi would have put them someplace safe if Tenzō wasn’t allowed to see them. His eyes narrowed the longer he read, flipping from one page to the next automatically as time went on.

“...What is all of this?”

Naruto rolled his eyes dramatically, his mood sour from his now failed artistic endeavour, and he tried to figure out a way to save his abomination from itself. The future was looking grim indeed. “I said I dunno, jeez...”

Tenzō didn’t look happy. Neither did Naruto. From an optimistic point of view, at least they could understand one another.

It was about half an hour later that Naruto deemed his project a failure, and he left it there. Tenzō had put the papers into the end table drawer for safekeeping and Naruto took a bath to get rid of the litre of paint that somehow ended up covering over half of his body. Tenzō was reluctant to leave him to wash up alone, but Naruto very proudly stated that he had a complete and uncompromised understanding of how the bathtub worked, and that this was a mission he could complete on his own skill alone.

Tenzō remained unconvinced.

Kakashi heaved his aching body up the stairs to the landing of his apartment at a snail’s pace. He was getting too old for fast-paced missions like that—or he would have said that, had he been forty-two and not nineteen. No, he chalked up his exhaustion to the sixth months of lower risk missions
the Hokage put him on; he suspected Tenzō was at fault for that, for suggesting it. Hell, with what he knew about the rest of his comrades, anyone he interacted with regularly could have pled with the Hokage to let him off easy for a while. Guy, he remembered, had always been adamantly against his involvement with ANBU. It was something that he wasn’t keen on in his youth, too preoccupied with his own demons to give thought to the people around him. It wasn’t until he got a little bit older, a little more experienced, that his world expanded beyond the scope of his own shortcomings.

Kakashi, forty-two, could see them all when he closed his eyes. Friends long lost to the sands of time, erased by his own selfish decision to rewrite history. It was for their sakes, he told himself—to save them. To stop Menma. But he felt guilt in knowing that, should this work, nothing he lived through would ever come to pass. The Tenzō who once grew fond of the young missing-nin they were sent after was no longer a reality. Tenzō, adamant about making things right, about setting Menma straight, was little more than dust in the wind.

This world’s Tenzō was relegated to ‘babysitter.’

At the top of the stairs, Kakashi started fumbling around in his pocket for his keys. He stopped at his door, finagling with them, trying to get his fingers to work properly in the biting cold. Winter wasn’t there yet, but it loomed overhead with a sudden cold front that rattled his bones. His skin was red with chill and he was looking forward to curling up on the couch for some light reading before bed. Naruto would be asleep by then, that kid passed out around nine, and—

The door flung open and he leaned back. It narrowly missed smacking him upside the head. Then a body lunged at him and he was tackled against the railing, tiny arms wrapped around his middle, a face pressed against his flak jacket, and he raised his eye heavenward. Well. So much for ‘being asleep.’

The bundle against his legs was a giggling mass with an ironclad grip and he resigned himself to it, patting Naruto on the head with a tired breath. The kid looked up, grin wide and uncontained like he’d just won the greatest prize. It might have been cute if Kakashi didn’t see something else every time he saw that smile.

“You should be in bed,” was his greeting.

Naruto pouted, still hanging off Kakashi’s clothes. “I was!” came the defence. “I heard you an’ woke up an’ came to see you.”

“Ah.” Right. Naruto’s senses were heightened because of the fox. If Kakashi fumbling with his keys was enough to wake Naruto up then he wondered how the kid ever got any sleep at all. “Well, you saw me. Bed now. Shoo.”

Naruto groaned but finally let go, casting sidelong glances as he shuffled back inside with significantly less enthusiasm. Kakashi smiled and watched him disappear behind the corner.

He shut the door softly and took off his shoes at the matt at the entryway, rolling the ache from his shoulders. It had been a long few days. A part of him was grateful for the solitude because that was something he didn’t see often now that he was raising a kid, but an even bigger part held mixed feelings about being back in that line of work. Doing ANBU dirty work again wasn’t something that he was proud of. The jobs were hard, sometimes physically—sometimes in other ways, ways that stuck with him longer, that nagged at his thoughts, and he’d been through these missions already but they still left an imprint the second time around.

He missed his books, missed the escape they offered between their pages, and he was eager to get back to them as soon as he relieved Tenzō of babysitting detail.
With a hand in his pocket and a slouch to his back, Kakashi turned into the living room and smiled at his little junior. It always made him nostalgic, seeing little Tenzō’s face. Everyone was so young. Well, naturally. He greeted his teammate with a lazy wave.

Tenzō settled him under a hard stare. Hm. Odd.

“You’re relieved of your burden,” he said simply, intending it as a joke, but he supposed his voice lacked its jovial lilt with how bogged down by exhaustion he was.

With a sigh, he dropped down onto the couch two cushions down from his friend, rested his head against the back of it, and closed his eye. For a while, he just allowed himself the rest. The apartment was a welcomed comfort compared to the weather he’d endured on his mission. He was happy for the lack of wind and rain and, well, everything else. Food would be nice, too, if he could get up the will. His time making meals for Naruto had him spoiled, and food pills felt like more of a burden than they had before.

“Kakashi,” Tenzō tried, his voice quiet and level. There was an edge to it, and in his tired state, Kakashi tried to place the last time he heard Tenzō speak like that. Ahh, it had to have been during their last mission together. The world felt weighted that day. “I read your notes.”

He opened his eye. Oh, well. That wouldn’t do. “Mm?” he hummed, feigning ignorance. It wouldn’t get him far, though. He knew that. He was giving his addled mind a chance to process.

Tenzō nodded to the table. Lo and behold, a neat stack of papers sat in a pile as though they’d been waiting there for him.


“I have a lot of questions.”

“I’m sure that you do.”

“But my primary concern is for Naruto,” said Tenzō as he reached and grabbed the notes, flipping through them. “What is all of this?”

Well. Kakashi couldn’t say that he was surprised; most of the notes were observations of Naruto that he made during their time together. He’d note down the boy’s quirks, responses to stimuli or just general facts that he learned, and would compare them to his other set of notes. The Menma notes. By doing so, he was able to track the similarities between the fox kit of that time and the missing-nin from his original time and, in doing so, he hoped to predict whether or not Naruto was on the path to reliving that future.

To an outsider, though, it may have looked concerning. No, well. It definitely would.

Kakashi turned to stare vacant-eyed at the ceiling. He remembered his Tenzō, gone long before the village. His teammate, a casualty of battle. His friend, a nameless shinobi on a polished monument. “Mm. I wonder.”

“Kakashi, please—”

There was a hand on his shoulder, tight-gripped and shaking, and his head rolled to the side to stare at the familiar face of the man he once knew. But that man was gone, and this world wasn’t his.

Waking up six months ago was hard. He never expected it to be hard. He also never expected Tenzō there, sitting at his bedside, creating small figurines with Wood Release. Tenzō, a face that had long
since faded from memory, right before his eyes. Tenzō was there and Kakashi was eighteen.

Now Tenzō was looking at him like he’d just renounced the village and became a missing-nin.

“Kakashi,” Tenzō tried again, exasperated, “tell me what’s going on with you. Please.”

And what could he say to that?

Kakashi watched his friend, all dark eyes and worry, and tried a smile. It came out flat. “Ahh,” he hummed, “well, you see, the world ends tomorrow. And I’m trying to make it right.”

“What does that even mean?”

Kakashi shrugged and stretched his aching muscles before melting bonelessly back into the couch. It wasn’t like there was a way to claim that he was from the future that didn’t make him sound like he’d lost his mind, especially in the body that he was, looking every bit the nineteen-year-old that Tenzō knew and nothing of the forty-two-year-old survivor of Konoha’s own personal apocalypse. And it didn’t help that Tenzō suspected he’d received some trauma from the incident of his arrival in that time—which, thinking pragmatically, it was entirely possible that he did suffer injury from a mission, and that everything he knew was a delusion that cropped up in the aftermath of genjutsu or good old-fashioned head trauma. It was something he tried not to think about.

“The things you wrote—” To push his point, Tenzō flipped through the pages and read, “‘Surprisingly manipulative, a characteristic shared with Menma. Non-violent but with a tendency to take things too far. More observation necessary.’”

And then Tenzō was looking at him all expectant, and what was he supposed to say?

When he didn’t answer, Tenzō continued. “‘Poor chakra control, a side effect of the nine-tails chakra?’ Is he just the jinchuuriki to you? Did you adopt him just for that?”

Kakashi covered his face with his hand and sighed. “Of course not—”

“You mean the world to him,” Tenzō muttered softly, keeping his voice down, stealing glances down the hall. It wouldn’t matter. Naruto would hear. “That little boy has done nothing but sing your praises since you left him in my care. These notes bother me. A lot.”

“I can see that.”

“Don’t—”

Kakashi held up a hand in pause and listened carefully. It was quiet, from what he could hear. No stirring. But there was no doubt in his mind that Naruto was lying awake with the blanket pulled over his head, trying not to listen. As it turned out, Naruto hated eavesdropping. But it wasn’t something the kid could help.

“Outside,” he muttered and rose.

Kakashi was confident that Naruto wouldn’t be able to hear them from the ground floor, so he sat at the base of the steps and waited for his teammate with his arms resting on his knees. He didn’t care that Tenzō brought the notes, or that there was a strange, cold distance between them that hadn’t been there since the days of Kinoe in Root. It was cold and he just wanted this over with so that he could go inside to his books. Naruto was a surprisingly early riser, too, so he wanted to be well rested for morning when the kid would no doubt go barrelling into his room at the crack of dawn.
Tenzō leaned against the railing with a stern, parental look on his face. Ahh, how nostalgic. It seemed so long ago that Tenzō took that face with Menma in a small, hole-in-the-wall inn over ramen. Well, it was long ago. For him. “Are you going to explain this to me now?”

“I could,” he said noncommittally. And then nothing.

Tenzō did not usually get frustrated. Not with him. “Then do so, please. I would like to hear it.”

Kakashi faced him then and smiled, understanding that the truth would not be accepted and that Tenzō wasn’t going to let it go. But, well. It would have happened sooner or later. Better Tenzō than the Hokage. “How much do you trust me?”

“Right now?” asked Tenzō, tapping the papers pointedly. “I’m not sure.”

“That hurts,” he teased. “My cute little junior has lost faith in me. There is no greater dishonour in this world.”

Tenzō covered his face with his hands and let out a long-suffering groan, bordered by desperation. Kakashi’s smile fell and he shifted back against the stairs, watching the sky. It was clouded and drab, a miserable night if ever there were one. Fitting, he thought, that it reflected his current situation.

“Naruto is my ward,” he stated simply. “I didn’t take him in because he’s the jinchuuriki. Well, it wasn’t as though I did it out of the kindness of my heart, either. Regardless, I have nothing but good intentions. I’m raising him as best I can.”

Tenzō crossed his arms, hung his head, the papers crumpling beneath the grip of his fingers, and he sighed.

“You were right,” Kakashi confessed. “It’s hard not to be fond of the boy.”

Tenzō nodded, a bitter edge to the look on his face, “Kakashi, are you?”

“Well,” he hummed. “I am. And I’m not.”

After about ten minutes of standing and hovering and pacing, Tenzō finally, finally dropped down next to Kakashi on the stairs, head held low and hands through his hair as he tried to make sense of all of Kakashi’s very intentional half explanations.

“Added to bingo books at seventeen,” Tenzō recited off memory, “destroys Konoha at twenty-eight. If I’m deciphering your code correctly, Menma is Naruto and you’re not who you say you are.”

“Do you believe any of it?”

“Not a word,” he confessed with a groan. “But I know that you do. And I think you mean well.”

It was a start. And it wasn’t as though he needed Tenzō to come to terms with the truth, either. So long as nothing was brought to the attention of the Hokage, it didn’t matter if a few of his long-term comrades were wary of his intentions.

“I have one more question, though.”
“Hmm?”

“How old do you think you are?”

Kakashi smiled. “I wonder.”

Naruto couldn’t sleep. Kashi and Tenzō had been talking and saying strange things, and then they left, and Naruto was alone, and now he was worried that they weren’t going to come back.

It was with great relief that he heard the soft patter of footsteps outside. He flung the blankets off his legs and peeked out through the crack in the door. Soon there was scuffling, the sound of shoes being tossed to the wayside, and then from around the corner poked out a head of familiar silvery hair. Kashi rubbed the back of his neck, rolled his shoulders, and then cast his gaze down the hall.

Naruto hid behind the door so that he wouldn’t get caught snooping.

“Naruto,” called a lazy voice from beyond the room. Oh no. He’d been discovered. “Come here a sec.”

He was hesitant. If this was just another scolding then Naruto didn’t want it. But if it wasn’t, well, Naruto welcomed it. He’d missed his rather unmotivated caretaker, even if Kakashi would have the off day where he’d just ignore the fact that Naruto existed for a while.

Before he listened, he snatched the picture frame off his bookshelf and hid it behind his back. Tenzō helped him make it look less… horrible, sanded it down, got a sheet of glass for the front, and now it looked like an actual picture frame, just with some maybe poor choices in colour. But whatever, Naruto tried and Kashi would just have to accept that.

Naruto ducked out into the hall and wandered into the living room. There he found Kashi, looking about ninety-percent done with the world, moulding himself into the couch. A lazy grey eye found Naruto and he hesitantly scooted over to take a seat beside his caretaker.

Before Kashi could lecture him about staying up late he grinned, shoving the picture frame into Kashi’s face. “Surprise!”

Kashi blinked, leaning away from it—Naruto may have put it a little too close to his face—and took it, turning it over in his hand with thinly veiled amusement.

“I made it!”

“I can see that.” Kashi was smiling, Naruto knew, even behind the mask. “It’s very… abstract.”

Naruto was pretty sure that was another word for ‘bad.’ Oh well. It was over and done with and Naruto knew better than to try to be artistic again. He curled into Kashi’s side and for a while they just sat there, staring at the four faces in the photo. Naruto paid most attention to the little Kashi on the right because that was the only face that he knew. Little Kashi looked super grumpy, even grumpier than regular Kashi. Still had that mask, though. But in the picture, he had both eyes.

No, Kashi still had both eyes. Naruto saw that the morning of the bath incident—Kashi with a red, swirling eye that sent a shiver of terror through him. He didn’t know why, but he didn’t like that eye. A part of him was glad that Kashi kept it covered up.
But the eye in the picture was just as dark as its pair, not red.

Kashi’s hand came up, tapping the glass, pointing out the blond man in the photo. “Naruto,” he called, “do you know who this is?”

“Mmmm…” His face scrunched up as he gave the picture a close look. “Nope!”

“Thought so.”

“Is he someone important?” The man looked friendly, at least, but not super strong or cool. Even Little Kashi looked cooler.

“Mmm, well,” Kakashi leaned back and allowed it when Naruto crawled further onto him to get a better look at the picture. “He was the Fourth Hokage.”

Naruto’s eyes widened and he stared blankly at the picture. He knew what the Fourth looked like through the monument overseeing the village, but seeing a crude carving in a rock was very different from seeing the real thing. He made a noise of barely-contained curiosity and snatched the photo from Kashi’s hand with renewed interest. “He stopped the fox attack? This guy?”

“You know about that, I see.”

Naruto nodded. He overheard some of the ladies at the orphanage bring it up now and then. They thought that he couldn’t hear. He wished that he couldn’t. It was something he couldn’t help but do, though—eavesdrop. No one ever believed him when he said that he could hear from really far away, even if he said he could prove it. No one but Kashi.

From what he gathered from the orphanage ladies, there was a demon fox that attacked the village and the Fourth Hokage protected everyone! But then died. That seemed unfair. Naruto assumed that the Hokage maybe died of his injuries, which was sad, ‘cause he protected the whole village and saved everyone all by himself.

Naruto wanted to grow up to be that kind of Hokage. The kind that was super strong and super awesome and could protect everyone and then they wouldn’t be scared of him anymore, and they’d acknowledge him. Stop hiding things from him. And if the mean old fox ever showed up again, he’d kick its ass!

“He was my instructor,” Kashi said softly, a distant look to his eye. “And someone I greatly admired.”

Naruto nodded, a grin on his face. Wow. Kashi was trained by the freakin’ Hokage. No wonder he was such a super awesome ninja man.

“He was your father, Naruto.”

The smile fell. He lifted his head to face his caretaker, searching for signs of a joke where there were none. “My—” He swallowed and looked back to the picture, to the smiling but exasperated face of Kashi’s teacher. “…My dad?”

“Yeah.”

Naruto never gave any thought to his parents. He knew that they had to have existed, but they were never a part of his life. Most of the kids at the orphanage were abandoned, or their parents died in the war. Naruto assumed his were the same—that he wasn’t wanted, or that they died in battle.
Dad was the Fourth Hokage.

Dad was the man who saved the village.

Dad was Kashi’s teacher.

There was a hand on his head, ruffling his hair, and for the first time, he didn’t try to duck away. He held tightly to the picture frame and giggled, a giddy excitement swirling within him.

“He can’t be here,” Kashi said, “so I’ll raise you in his place.”

Naruto’s giggles erupted into full-bodied laughter and he held the picture close to his chest. “Hey, hey—” He grinned. “I’m gonna be an even better Hokage than Dad, y’know!”

And Kashi smiled. “I look forward to it.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for all of the kind words and support throughout this little series so far! It’s been a lot of fun working on it and I love hearing from you guys. There will probably be a bit of a delay in getting the next chapter up, but it should be posted during the first half of February. Until then!
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Naruto goes on an adventure and meets people. Good on you, Naruto!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Naruto was not a coward. Naruto was the son of the Fourth Hokage. He would never back down, he would never run away, and he would never go back on his word. It was time to find that friend that he knew was out there.

That was what motivated him out the door that afternoon, but two hours in and he was starting to lose steam. As much as he was very much certain this friend he’d built up in his head was real and was just waiting to be found, it was hard to stay motivated when a trip to the park always ended with him getting looks. Now, Naruto was used to getting looks. Those sidelong glances were his normalcy, always had been. But in the effort of making friends, it was more than a little discouraging to see every candidate meeting him with the same dark, distant gaze. It was even worse when they tried to act as though he weren’t there.

Naruto was good at inserting himself where he didn’t belong. Other kids didn’t want to play with him? Too bad—he’d invite himself into their game if no one else would. They ignored him when he spoke? He spoke louder. Their parents told them not to play with him? Well, his parent was a super awesome super-cool ninja who was trained by the Fourth Hokage who was also Naruto’s dad. Top that.

Of course, a lot of good it did him; if he persisted for too long then they would just leave. Not long enough, and they succeeded in drowning him out.

It was past lunchtime when he dragged his lead-weighted feet up the stairs to the landing of the apartment building and retreated inside. Mission failure, as usual. He wasn’t giving up, though… he just needed to regroup and try again. He could recharge by seeking comfort from his caretaker.

Or, well, no. Maybe not like that. Kashi wasn’t good at the ‘comfort’ thing; there was a lot of awkward silence and mental flailing involved. Kashi could give his own sort of comfort, sure, but that usually came with incidents that pertained to him; Naruto remembered the incident where he thought Kashi was a clone, in particular. When not directly involved, though, Kashi had trouble empathizing. Kashi was… a trying student. Nothing like Tenzō. They were working on it. He’d get there.

Maybe Naruto could at least con his way into ramen for dinner, though.

Naruto kicked off his shoes and padded into the living room. When he turned the corner, he found his caretaker draped across the couch, eyes closed with an open book resting on Kashi’s chest. One arm nursed the spine of the book, the other dangled over the side of the couch, and Kashi looked impossibly peaceful.

Naruto blinked and walked over, staring down at Kashi’s sleeping face. Slow, even breaths met his
ears. Kashi’s breathing was always so quiet, so trained. Were he a lesser man, he would have taken that chance to finally peek beneath Kashi’s mask, see what Kashi was hiding. But it felt too much like cheating and Naruto was no cheater.

Kashi looked so, so tired

He always did, like the fate of the world rested upon his shoulders, but it was worse after a mission. Kashi was gone for three days and now that he was back, he was catching up on sleep. Unintentionally, by the look of it; he’d been trying to read.

Naruto clenched his fist and turned away to march right back out the front door. Naruto couldn’t give up so easily when Kashi was always trying his best! So what if the park didn't work? There was a whole village out there, just waiting to be explored! Surely his friend was somewhere if not the park.

That settled it: time to expand his search. He was confident that he could sniff out the way back home if worse came to absolute worst, but doubted it would be necessary; not to brag, but he was pretty good with directions.

His nose brought him to a ramen bar and he had nothing but lint in his pockets. Traitor.

Naruto stared up at the bar with big eyes and an even bigger stomach. White noren with red ink decorated the front, and though Naruto had trouble reading, he was pretty sure it spelled out the restaurant name. From beyond, the heavenly scent of ramen sailed through the air, bringing him to stumble further forward despite the bleeding emptiness in his pockets. That was the place Kashi brought him to the very first night that they started living together. He could never forget that scent, or the friendly old man manning the bar. That guy was super nice, and it felt weird, being smiled at by a stranger.

Naruto only realized he was lingering when the old man’s eyes fell on him and he suddenly felt shy, kicking his feet.

“You again, eh?” the man asked. There was no bite to it, the thin trails of amusement following his words as he turned around and walked to the back of the kitchen. “Come for another treat? Is it just you this time, or is your father joining you?”

“Kashi’s not my dad,” he corrected on reflex, twisting the toe of his shoe into the dirt and lowering his head. “Um. I got no money. It just smelled really really nice so I came over.”

“Oh yeah?” The old man glanced back at him, looking long and hard before disappearing again. Then there was a steaming bowl on the bartop, a smile, and a beckoning gesture. Naruto could have cried.

“Oh the house,” the man chuckled, shuffling back over to the sink. “Consider it a gift for my favourite customer.”

He did cry, slurping noodles through his tears because this guy was that nicest person ever, even more so than Tenzō or Kashi (especially Kashi) and he was just giving Naruto free ramen. Which, honestly, was probably the greatest gift in the history of ever.

The old man was named Teuchi, apparently, and he insisted that he wasn’t that old. Naruto was inclined to agree, if only because this man gave him ramen and could therefore do no wrong and speak no lies. He was a friendly old guy, talked about his daughter who was a few years older than Naruto—that he hoped she would take over the business for him when she was all grown up.
Naruto grinned, eyes squeezed shut as he proudly declared, “If she doesn’t, I’ll do it, Mister!”

Teuchi laughed, long and hard, and that was okay. Naruto was serious, though. Sure, he was gonna be Hokage someday, but he was going to be a better Hokage then Dad so obviously he could handle running a restaurant on top of it all, because he was so great. It sounded like a dream—running a ramen bar, making and eating ramen all day.

Then again, people didn’t like to be around him. Maybe he’d be bad for business.

Teuchi was upgraded again from friendly old man to hero when he sent Naruto off with take-away for Kashi and him to share later that night. Naruto was tempted to eat it right then and there. He didn’t, though, ’cause Kashi was tired and deserved it. When Kashi was tired, he’d just eat those food pill things instead of actually making himself food. That didn’t seem like a good meal to Naruto. No, that seemed terrible.

Poor, poor Kashi. He dealt with so much.

With a bag of take-away hanging from his arm, Naruto’s search pressed on. He forged onward and familiar streets gave way to the unfamiliar, to places he’d not yet travelled. He spent most of his time in the apartment; Kashi was wary about bringing him around the village and Tenzō, well. He met Tenzō three days ago, so it wasn’t as though they had much of a chance to go out. That made this even more exciting.

The orphanage was remote. He knew it existed somewhere in Konoha, but it was far removed from the main body of the village. There was nothing around but grassy fields and forests beyond that. So this—this was something so entirely new to him. So many people were just walking around, stopping at street vendors, slipping into restaurants. They all seemed to notice him, to give him looks, but he was easily able to shove that aside because of all that new.

Naruto wasn’t sure where the heck he was, but it sure looked cool. The buildings in that part of town had a different feel to them. A lot of the banners and doors had the same symbol of a red and white paper fan painted onto them. Naruto didn’t know what it meant, but it looked cool. But as he walked, he came to understand that the people walking around in this particular area felt a lot more guarded than they were earlier on in his adventure. Like they were waiting for something, eyes out for some unseen threat. Naruto didn’t like it.

When the atmosphere got to be too much, Naruto spun on his heel and headed right back the way he came. Yeah, no. Time to abort the mission and regroup. Again.

But something caught his eye—a shop with a wide display senbei. His steps slowed to a halt, starlight in his eyes, and it looked so good but he was broke and all he had on him was the ramen take-away. For a few minutes he stared, slack jawed and contemplative as the owners shot him wary glances. He smiled because he knew better than to be impolite, especially when staring was rude enough as it was, and took a few steps back into the thick of the street. He’d ask Kashi to go with him there one day! With how good his nose was, he’d be able to sniff it out even if he didn't have a clue what part of the village he'd wandered into.

The front entrance of the senbei shop pushed open, the light chime of a bell following the door, and a dark-haired boy padded out of the shop. He had black eyes and pale skin, looking to be maybe around Naruto’s age. A paper bag was clutched preciously between his hands, the top folded over, and Naruto didn’t need a keen sense of smell to know what was inside.

The boy paused when his head lifted and eyes found Naruto. Naruto smiled—both to be friendly because this could very well be the friend he’d been searching for, and because he had thoughts
forming in that cunning little brain of his—but the kid's response was narrowed eyes and a protective
grip on the bag.

“...What?” the boy bit out, looking at Naruto like he was some sort of senbei thief. Which he wasn't, obviously. As though he, the great Naruto Uzumaki, son of the freakin’ Hokage, would ever stoop so low as to steal another small child's food. He would never steal.

Persuasion was another matter entirely.

Naruto’s grin widened, eyes squinted shut. It was partially so that the sentiment reached his eyes, sure. But mostly it was so that the kid wouldn't notice him gawking openly at the bag of treats. Because no, he wasn't going to steal it; admiring it with his eyes was perfectly sensible and valid and that was exactly why he was pretending that he wasn’t.

There was a flaw to his logic there somewhere but, fortunately, Kashi wasn’t there to point it out.

“Hey!” Naruto greeted, waving high with his free hand. “I'm Naruto Uzumaki!”

“...And?” the kid prodded, eyeing him. Black eyes sized him up, head to toe. “You're not an Uchiha.”

Naruto rolled his eyes exaggeratedly. “Duh. I said I'm an Uzumaki, y'know.”

The boy shifted, his arms coming down to his sides with the bag hanging lazily from one, and he cocked his head to the side. “What're you doing here?”

Naruto shrugged, throwing his arms behind his head, his bag of take-away hanging loosely from his wrist. “Lookin’ around. This place is kinda cool, but kinda creepy, y'know? Hey hey—” His face lit up and he nodded to the paper bag. “Can I try?”

The boy watched him narrowly.

“I'll share my ramen!” he encouraged, throwing his hands forward to dangle the food in front of the kid's face. The styrofoam in the bag was still pleasantly warm to the touch, well insulated, and he figured he could share so long as it was his portion and not Kashi's—because old man Teuchi entrusted him with the mission of getting that ramen to Kashi, and Naruto would never go back on a mission!

“Ramen?” the kid echoed, and he relaxed a little as he carefully inspected Naruto's bounty, looking between it and his bag of senbei with deep consideration.

“The best ramen,” Naruto corrected proudly, and he wasn't putting on airs because Ichiraku really was the best ramen ever. Of course, he only had so much experience to go off of—old man Hokage treated him a few times during their visits at the orphanage—but it was still the best.

The boy eyed it long and hard, brows knitted together, swallowed—even people who didn't have keen noses could tell that Ichiraku smelled amazing —and then met Naruto’s stare evenly.

“Only a bit, though.”

Naruto managed to keep from cheering. Somehow.

The bench they sat at was nice and shaded by an old, weathered tree—which would have been great
if it was summer and the sun was beating down heavy and hot, but it was very near winter. The day was overcast with tired grey clouds, there was a bite to the cold of the air, and Naruto and Naruto's newly acquired senbei dispenser were both wearing insulated coats. That just made cracking open the lid of the styrofoam container all the sweeter. They placed it between them, steam rising up like dancing mist from the broth, and split their chopsticks. He gave the other boy Kashi's set, figuring it wouldn’t matter because they had plenty back home.

Naruto giggled eagerly, watching the other boy's face light up with the same kind of eagerness he had the first time he tried Ichiraku with Kashi. Ah yes, Naruto was such a noble hero, introducing this wayward soul to one of life's greatest pleasures. He added 'ramen distributor' to his list of accomplishments right after 'teacher.'

“You've never tried it?”

The boy seemed to notice how invested he looked because he dialed it back a few tones and averted his eyes to hide some incomprehensible embarrassment. “Once. With my brother.”

Once. This poor bleeding heart only tried ramen once. With pity so vast it could fill oceans, Naruto picked up the styrofoam cup and shoved it onto the boy's lap. “Here!” he beamed. “You try first!”

The boy looked down at the ramen, picking at it with the ends of his chopsticks. Before he would take a bite, though, he clapped his hands together and closed his eyes. Then it was back to turning over noodles with curiosity, mild interest, and finally his first bite. He slurped up a single noodle, testing it. His eyes widened slightly, but Naruto's intent eyes caught it well, and then there was another, more eager mouthful.

Naruto was so proud of introducing the joys of ramen to someone else that he didn't even care that the kid ate well over half, didn't even complain once. He'd already eaten a whole portion in the company of Teuchi, and while he could always eat more, seeing someone else enjoying it made him feel all warm and fuzzy. It was… nice. He hummed and kicked his legs back and forth, thinking that today was turning out to be pretty good after all, if very long-suffering.

He did steal a piece of naruto in the midst of it all, though. Because of course he did.

“It's really really good, right? Right?”

The boy realized belatedly how much he'd eaten and pulled back. Naruto could faintly make out a flush to his cheeks as his eyes went heavenward, looking every bit embarrassed but unwilling to acknowledge it, as he muttered out a faint, “It's okay.”

Naruto had to laugh because the kid couldn't be more obvious if he tried.

Then the cup was shoved onto Naruto's lap with a muttered, “Here.”

Naruto blinked down at the remnants of the container. There was about a fourth left. “You sure?” he prodded. “You can have the rest, y'know!”

The boy huffed and stuck up his nose. “Then it wouldn't be sharing, loser.”

Naruto pouted at the insult but strangely didn't feel all that upset by it. He picked off the last of the noodles and tipped his head back to down the broth, letting out a contented hum when he finished.

“Now, now—” His eyes found the boy's paper bag and he grinned.

The boy rolled his eyes dramatically but did stick his hand through the opening of the bag, which
was good enough for Naruto. “Here.” A senbei was held out, the boy pouting in some awkward show of friendship.

Friendship, huh?

Naruto took it gingerly, admiring it with starlight eyes, like the most precious gem in the universe, and took a bite. It was no Ichiraku, but it was good. Soon he was holding out his hand for another, and the boy made exasperated noises but offered one up anyway, and they sat like that in contented quiet as they munched on the treats.

The sun settled lower in the sky. While there were still a good two hours before sunset, Naruto knew he should be making his way home. However… Kashi needed rest. And was sleeping. And whenever Naruto was there, Kashi just looked so done with the world. Maybe giving his caretaker a break was okay.

He had company. He wasn't alone.

“So, what's your name?” Naruto asked finally, curling up to sit on all fours, earning a look from his companion that went ignored.

“Sasuke,” came the reluctant answer. “Sasuke Uchiha.”

Naruto hummed his amusement, staring out at the street. They were out of what Sasuke called the Uchiha District—that place with the really uptight people—because Naruto complained enough before they decided to sit that it'd annoyed Sasuke into relocating. They sat in a small park just beyond it. It wasn't like the park near Naruto's house; there was no play equipment and he didn't see any other kids around. There was training equipment, though—what he thought was training equipment. Maybe it was actually a training ground for super awesome ninja types. But he didn’t see any ninjas, either… Naruto was at a loss. Oh well.

And then he lifted his head, carefully observing his new friend. “Hey, are you gonna enter the academy an’ stuff?”

Sasuke huffed, crossing his arms. “Obviously. I'm gonna be a shinobi like my brother.”

Naruto grinned, leaning in. “Me, too! I'm gonna be the Hokage, y'know!”

“You?” Sasuke side-eyed him, and it looked somewhat insulting and Naruto didn't know why but, either way, he did not like it. “In a million years, maybe.”

Naruto narrowed his eyes and shifted in place. “I am, just watch! I'll be the best Hokage ever and I'll kick everyone's asses!”

Sasuke rolled his eyes. “Whatever, loser. Even if you were Hokage, you'd never beat me. I'm gonna be an even better shinobi than my brother.”

“Yeah, well I'm gonna be better than Kashi,” he countered. He had Sasuke now.

“Who?”

“My something!”

Sasuke stared openly. “I don't know what that is.”

Okay, fair. Naruto didn't know, either.
Their bickering quelled when neither could muster up a better way to boast—especially as Naruto was wracking his brain for Kashi's definition of 'something.' For a while, they filled the silence by sharing senbei. They weren't fighting, not really. Naruto wasn't sure what they were doing, but fighting it was not.

Naruto shifted again, back to sitting on his butt, and drummed his fingers along the wood of the bench. This was probably the most time he'd spent with someone his own age without them running away ever and that was pretty damn cool. “Hey, Sasuke?”

“Mm?”

“You wanna um,” he fidgeted, because Naruto could only ever wear his emotions on his sleeve. “You wanna—train together? To become super strong shinobi?”

Sasuke cast him a considering glance, even as he snorted. “You'd slow me down.”

“Hey!”

“But I guess that's okay,” he muttered, staring up at the sky. “Itachi says you should always help people in need. And you look like you need a lot of help.”

That was the biggest double-edged insult that Naruto ever heard, but he couldn't bring himself to get mad. There was a slow-firming smile on his lips, a hitched breath stuck in his throat, and a burning sting to his eyes because that was the first time anyone ever said yes. To Naruto, it was the same as saying 'yes, let's be friends,' and he couldn't keep from giggling, couldn't wash the smile off his face. He had to scrub at his eyes with the sleeve of his coat just to keep Sasuke from noticing and thinking he was lame and having a change of heart.

Naruto had a friend. Now he was stuck with Naruto, whether he liked it or not.

The too-bright evening sun burned against Kakashi's eyelids and he stirred. It took him a moment to gather the courage to look out at the world, to brace himself for the burning golden light filtering in through the translucent curtains of the living room window. When he finally did, he found the cream-coloured walls lit like fire by the sunset. At times like those, he hated having such a big west-facing window; the light burned and bled inside right before nightfall. He wished he could have slept more.

Kakashi remembered reading. It was an old book, one he'd read a thousand times. His younger self wouldn't have found it yet, though. At nineteen, he hadn't quite acquired the fine taste that he had as an adult. It was a damn shame, thinking of how oblivious he was to life's wonders at that age. Somewhere between his reading and nostalgia, he must have dozed. Well, no surprise there; he spent most of the night up with his young ward. Hearing that he was the son of the Fourth had Naruto bouncing around all giddy and excited. Then, after expelling a certain amount of energy, Naruto just dropped like a hat. Lucky him. Kakashi, on the other hand, took one look outside and saw the sunrise. There was coffee—Kakashi wasn't even sure he liked coffee—and then there was breakfast. Naruto was up before long, and the day began. All without sleep.

The nap was a welcomed respite. But now it was over and he needed to get on with his day. No doubt Naruto would be whining and complaining about dinner soon.

Kakashi sat up with a yawn and stretched. He blinked hazily as he registered that his book fell into his lap and he'd lost his page. Well, he read it before; finding his place wouldn't be all that difficult. He set the book down on the coffee table and rose unsteadily to his feet, looking around the sparse
apartment. It was starting to feel lived-in, no thanks to Kakashi; Naruto was pretty good at leaving his mark everywhere he went. There was a paint stain on the side of the coffee table now, a likely casualty in the ‘picture frame’ project. Toys were strewn across the floor, relics of long-forgotten play sessions. There was a calendar on the fridge, too—one that wasn’t there before he left for his mission. Tenzō probably picked it up, per Naruto’s request. Today’s date was marked with red ink in horrible writing: *Kashi comes home!!*

He sighed, dragged himself across the floor and scrubbed a hand over his face. There were days where he wondered just how things ended up this way. When he used kamui to make his way into the past, he had a *plan*. It wasn’t a very well thought out plan, no. And it wasn’t ideal. But it was still a plan.

When he woke up, he never expected to find himself in a body so much younger, with arms unmarred by scars and burns from the faded memories of head-to-head stand-offs against the missing-nin that it had once been his mission to retrieve. It never occurred to him that travelling back could see him merging with his past self. To him, it seemed perfectly logical to assume he would remain as he was, a tired shinobi of forty-two years, a presence separate from the current slate of the world. It should have been easy—to stop Obito, to stop the fox. To stop Menma.

The time period was wrong and he was stuck centrefold in the middle of all of the chaos. Returning in his old body made it easy to get close to the little hellion who grew up to ruin everything, sure. But it came with its own drawbacks.

As he thought, Kakashi went around picking up the scattered toys Naruto left lying about. He gathered them one by one in his arms, carrying them to the toy chest in Naruto’s room and dropping them haphazardly within. Then he breathed, looked around. This was the room of the child who grew up to kill everyone that he loved. All he could feel was bitter. Bitter, but also… uncertain.

Naruto was a boy with bright hair, bright eyes and a sunshine smile. He liked ramen and toads and was scared of the dark. He loved attention and hated being alone. All it took was one moment of acknowledgement for him to consider someone a lifelong friend.

Naruto was uncorrupted and innocent and Naruto would not become Menma.

Well, that was enough of that. Kakashi had gotten pretty good at working himself into a mood when it wasn’t needed. He sighed, rubbed the back of his neck, and supposed that he should start on dinner before the whining started. Which, the more he thought, the more he felt something was off. A glance out the bedroom window found the sky bleeding pink and orange and yet still, no complaints about food.

He hadn’t made lunch for the brat.

“Naruto,” he called, carrying his voice through the apartment as he stepped out into the hall. He didn’t need to be loud; the boy could hear even if he whispered, and yet there was no response. Huh. Odd. Naruto was usually back from playing by then and knew better than to stay out past dark. Kakashi wasn’t worried for *Naruto*, per se, but he was… worried. About something.

He pushed the nagging voice of concern to the back of his head and rummaged through the fridge, wondering what to make for dinner. Udon was simple enough and would suffice, but he wondered on what to add to spice it up. Their fridge was looking sparse after his three days away, and he didn’t much feel like heading off to the market at the moment. He could do a few simple sides, he supposed…

It nagged at him still—that voice. Naruto was fine. Naruto was *always* fine—always, even in the
future, even when they did not want him to be. The kid was practically indestructible.

Kakashi shut the fridge and cursed as he dragged himself out the front door. He’d check on the brat in consideration of others, he told himself, not because he was in any way concerned about Naruto. That was the half-truth he recited like a mantra as he scented the boy out. It couldn’t be that hard to find a five-year-old in his home village, even without his keen sense of smell or his ninken.

It couldn’t be that hard. That was what Kakashi told himself in the future, too, when his ANBU team was first assigned the task of securing the runaway jinchuuriki. It couldn’t be hard, and yet that mission forever remained a glaring mark on his perfect record.

Naruto’s scent was all over the park by the apartment complex. It was his favourite play area, so no surprise there. From there, he tracked a few paths—one that led straight back to the apartment and another that pushed past, towards the market.

He passed Ichiraku before long. Teuchi greeted him with a smile and wave, but he didn’t feel quite like stopping to chat, so he just returned the gesture and went on his way. Then he went further, eventually finding himself in the Uchiha District. Kakashi remembered some vague tension from that time; hostilities towards outsiders, while warranted, made for a bad situation for his little ward to wander into. To top it off, Naruto was the jinchuuriki, and the nine-tailed fox played a big role in the mistrust of the Uchiha.

Obito was to blame for that. Obito and his sharingan, the match to Kakashi’s left eye. But Kakashi knew that Obito being the perpetrator that night guaranteed no one from the Uchiha clan was to blame; Obito was an outsider amongst his own people, a black sheep if ever there were one. Kakashi may not have ever learned the reasons for why he did what he did that night, but whatever it was, it was a decision he came to on his own.

The Uchiha being innocent just fed into their bitterness, though.

There was another branching scent, then—one that led into the Uchiha District and one that led away. He counted his options and followed the latter. It led to an open area, a training ground often used for genin practice. The world was dulling into a dusty purple as evening gave way to night, yellow still spilling out from the west. Long, blackened shadows cast across the dirt. Centrefield were two boys. One stood tall, neck craned back and chin tipped up, a hand blocking the last dregs of sunlight from his eyes, and he squinted at a tree. At the top of that tree stood a proud and grinning blond, balancing with chakra on the very top branch with arms folded over in confidence, his hair washed out by the backdrop of colour. Eyes squeezed shut, looking every bit like the mischievous fox that he was.

Kakashi sighed, raised his eye heavenword, and thanked the Sage for granting him patience.

The one in the tree was very obviously Naruto, and it looked like he made a little friend. That was probably good—Menma didn’t have any of those. Friends. None from Konoha, in any case, though he remembered a certain incident with Gaara of Suna and a long trek through the desert. He watched his little ward hop down from the tree to land deftly at the other boy’s feet.

“Did’ya see? Did’ya see?” Naruto was bouncing on the balls of his feet, his fists pumped and his little body vibrating with sheer pride.

The other child rolled his eyes. “It wasn’t that great, loser.”

“Shut up, it was! It was super cool!”
“Whatever.”

The boys shifted and Naruto flailed. The new brat turned towards Kakashi and everything felt chilled.

He remembered furious eyes beneath a mutedly angry mask, Itachi’s anger calm and silent like the eye of a storm, something dangerous raging beneath the surface. He remembered standing in the doorway to a hospital room in full ANBU gear, staring inside at the lone occupant on a lone bed. Bandages covered a bleeding eye. Pale hands fist the thin white sheets. Gritted teeth and reluctant defeat.

Sasuke was seventeen when his left eye was pulled from its socket and he was left to bleed to death on the forest floor. He was seventeen when his sharingan was stolen from him like a spoil of war.

Now he was five, both eyes intact, sharing words with the child who would grow up to bring him to his knees.

Kakashi expected a lot of things. He expected this Naruto to grow up with friends, with an identity that superseded the label of ‘tailed beast container’ and support that would keep him grounded. He did not expect one of those friends to be the shinobi that he would one day crush and humiliate so completely. He did not expect Sasuke Uchiha to make banter with the jinchuuriki like they were old buddies.

He remembered the words repeated back to him, bit out like a bitter memory, the last Menma gave before leaving Sasuke there to bleed: “You can keep the other, as a favour to your brother.”

Naruto’s head snapped towards him and his face lit up. “Kashi!”

Suddenly there was a tiny yet strangely agile child wrapped around his legs. He was forced out of the dark hole his thoughts fell down to brace himself against the sudden impact. Naruto was hanging off his clothes, looking up with fond eyes and an eager grin.

“Kashi, Kashi, I made a friend!” He pointed very obviously at the dark-haired Uchiha brat still standing beneath the tree. “His name’s Sasuke and he’s gonna be a ninja and I’m gonna be a ninja and he’s kinda grouchy and mean—”

“Hey!”

“—but also really nice ‘cause he shared his senbei with me and—and—”

“Breathe, Naruto,” Kakashi instructed. Looking at the kid all bright-eyed and sunshine like that, it was hard to cling to the memories of a forgotten timeline.

And Naruto did. Naruto breathed. He spent three seconds just breathing, before getting straight back into it. “I showed him ramen, Kashi! I think he’s hooked.”

“Am not,” Sasuke ground out bitterly, averting his eyes. “I said it was okay.”

“Well you’re wrong, but okay.” Naruto stuck out his tongue at the boy, earned a twitch, and looked immensely pleased with himself. He was still fisting Kakashi’s pant leg, the fabric bunched between his stubby little fingers, and there was so much pride on his face that it was impossible to ignore. “I did it, Kashi! I climbed the tree all on my own!”

Kakashi’s eye scanned the child, then scrolled up to the tree, and yes, now that his head wasn’t a cloud of memories, he could indeed remember seeing his ward clinging to the top of the tree with
chakra-pooled feet. Huh. Well then. That was a lesson one of the clones had been working on—one that Naruto just wasn’t grasping, which wasn’t hard to believe, considering his age.

So he figured it out, then. Tree climbing.

Sasuke huffed, crossing his hands over his chest. “I helped.”

“Yeah, yeah—an’ Sasuke learned, too!”

Kashi looked between the two boys, noting the Uchiha’s hesitant approach, and hummed with faint amusement. “You can both tree-walk now, is that right? Impressive.”

It was more than impressive. Of course, Kakashi himself graduated when he was close to their age, so maybe he couldn’t feel the weight of that accomplishment for all that it was. But he knew that the average child had no grasp on tree walking until their genin training kicked off and their jōnin instructor took it upon themselves to bestow that knowledge. For two boys not even old enough for the academy… well. ‘Impressive’ was only so strong a word. Naruto hadn’t really grasped it well when Kakashi’s clone tried to explain it. He’d made slow strides towards his goal but could only get his feet to stick for a short half-minute before falling back down with gravity.

Then there they were, Naruto and Sasuke. Bitter enemies, never rivals, knowing each other through only battle and childhood memory. Sasuke and Menma, a jōnin and a missing-nin. And yet they pulled each other up to rise to the challenge and benefitted from this strange new friendship. There was dirt all down their arms and legs, hairline cuts and bruises from unseen falls. Naruto’s jacket had a tear in it—add that to the list of brand new clothes Kakashi already had to mend. Sasuke was frowning and Naruto was smiling and they both looked so deeply, wholly satisfied.

If nothing else ever would, the sight before him was enough to convince Kakashi that maybe, just maybe, things were changing for the better. Maybe he was doing something right.

“Can you teach me the clone thing now, Kashi?”

Kakashi smiled, his eye crinkling as he gently patted the blond’s head. “Absolutely not.”

Naruto looked all kinds of betrayed. “But—but you said—”

“Next is walking on water,” he interrupted quickly, because even if his clone agreed to teach the shadow clone jutsu, Kakashi, himself, did not. He was wary. He rather never repeat the days, weeks, months—years—of shadow clone diversions, of misleading trails and ambushes of over a hundred clones. One day, maybe. Not now. Not now, when the boy was five years old and seven years away from that pivotal moment. “Learn that, and I might consider teaching it to you.”

Naruto huffed, finally released his caretaker, and kicked the dirt. The sulking lasted all of five seconds before he spun on his heel to face his newly acquired training partner. Sasuke edged away—a wise choice. “We’ll learn that, too, right Sasuke?”

Sasuke looked hesitant, his gaze shifting to the training equipment, then to the bags resting on the bench beneath the tree, before finally he tipped his head back and pressed his nose to the sky. “Obviously.”

“Obviously!” Naruto echoed with a laugh. The fox kit sounded so deeply elated that it was almost surreal. Menma never laughed like that. Well, not that Kakashi knew, anyway; it wasn’t as though they ever got close in the old timeline. Then Naruto was spinning around with a hurried “Oh!” and running to the bench. From there, he snatched up a bag. Through its translucent edges, Kakashi could make out the impression of a styrofoam cup within. Naruto toddled back over and presented it
to Kakashi with a look that was all warmth and soft smiles. “Here! From old man Teuchi!”

Kakashi raised a brow, hesitantly taking the bag in hand, supporting the cup with his palm. The food had long since gone cold but, well. It could be reheated.

“I had some, too!” Naruto assured. “I shared with Sasuke, ‘cause we’re friends!”

What a stupidly endearing hellspawn.

Kakashi ruffled Naruto’s hair with much protest before turning to the still very much awkward Uchiha boy. Sasuke was looking every bit the inexperienced child that he was, and nothing of the bitter, driven man that Kakashi knew. That… was for the best, he decided. Maybe all of this was for the best. “You must be Itachi’s little brother,” he greeted because, in this timeline, they wouldn’t have met. He looked down at the boy, hand in his pocket, standing at full height because he knew that Sasuke would find it patronizing if he knelt to meet eye-level. “Tell him that his old captain sends his regards.”

Sasuke twitched, taking a hesitant step forward. “You know Itachi?”

“More or less.” His eyes cast to the sky. It was dark now, and he frowned. “Need me to walk you home?”

Sasuke shook his head adamantly, and Kakashi knew any attempts to follow through with the offer would be seen as an insult. The start of the Uchiha District was a short walk away, and he was fairly confident that the boy was used to being out on his own, now that his brother was so frequently taking on ANBU missions.

“Get going, then,” he ordered, firm yet smooth. “It’s late.”

“...Yeah,” the boy answered, hesitant, and backed away.

Naruto pouted at his new friend’s retreating back, took a dragging step forward, and waved. “Let’s play again soon, ‘kay?”

“Training, not playing,” Sasuke muttered back as he spun around and marched off the training grounds. “Loser.”

“Idiot.” But Naruto was smiling. There was nothing malicious in that smile, nothing but fond admiration as the pale boy shrunk into the distance. Even when Sasuke was gone, that smile was still there, wide and full and brimming with a million different thoughts. “Hey, hey, Kashi?”

“Ah?”

Naruto didn’t look up at Kakashi, didn’t take his eyes off the vanishing point of the little body making its way through Konoha’s streets. He watched and waited and smiled until there was no one there, until the darkness settled in and dulled his hair into a muted grey and the world into nighttime velvets, and he breathed. “The Hokage protects people, right? ‘Cause the Hokage’s super strong and awesome and cool, an’ can beat up anyone.”

Kakashi recalled a conversation from when Naruto first came to stay with him, haphazardly thought-out and barely planned words of wisdom to pass onto his aspiring Hokage, and hummed. “That’s his duty,” he nodded, “to protect his village.”

Naruto shifted on his feet, his boundless energy buzzing free beneath his movements. “I think,” he started, suppressing a giddy laugh, “I think I found someone else I wanna protect.”
Thanks to everyone for the comments and kudos as usual! Chapters will be slowing down a bit, just because I've only written up to chapter 8 (which I finished about an hour ago) and I'm going to try to finish To The New Me and Calamity since they each only have a chapter left as far as writing goes, and then afterwards I can give Menma and Karma more attention. Hopefully. We'll see. I'll do my best.

Side note: tempted to write a drabble about Kakashi's first arrival in this time period. Don't quote me on that, but tempted.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

It's been a long time coming, but here's the next chapter of Karma along with the accompanying chapter of Menma, as per the norm. Life's been getting in the way of my hobbies lately, so updates may be sporadic and spread out, but I'm still alive and kicking and involved in the fandom! Just... quietly. Thanks for your patience, and I hope you enjoy the return of our favourite dysfunctional family!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hiruzen closed his eyes and breathed in the comforting aroma of burning incense. It made the residence feel more at home to have that there, a personal touch that spoke volumes amidst the inherited furniture and aged architecture of the building. He was happy to have chosen to meet the boy here and not in the office, and he stood by that decision. The office was for the Hokage. The office was for duty, obligation. But this meeting was not about the Hokage. It was not a part of his job. This was something Hiruzen decided for himself, a duty assigned to himself, a world he voluntarily opened the door to five years ago over the bodies of Minato and Kushina, a promise he fully accepted the weight of.

Being in Naruto's life was a choice, one that he would never come to regret.

The one regret he had, though, was not being there for the boy at every turn, every trying day, every misstep. Oh how he wished he could have devoted time away from his chair enough to raise Naruto in the warmth of a home. But Hiruzen was Hokage. Konoha was his child. The people were his everything. It would not have been fair to them to split his attention between his duties as their leader and as Naruto's caretaker.

As it stood, the decision that he made wasn't fair to Naruto, either.

There were treats set across the table, perhaps to bribe the boy into forgiving him for his absence over this transition, because Hiruzen was not above doing that. And with him he had papers—application papers for the academy, because enrollment may have been five months away but it was never too early to prepare. Kakashi would need to thoroughly read over the curriculum before making his decision, though Hiruzen was certain that his right hand would be enrolling the child regardless. Naruto was the jinchuuriki, and even if he weren't, being a ninja was his dream. A one-track mind, that boy.

Kakashi's interest in Minato's son came a bit out of left field. He was not one of the ANBU assigned to keep guard on Naruto, nor was he in the boy's life at any stage. Then suddenly he was there, at the door to the Hokage office, on his knees in a stance of honour and respect with his eyes to the floor and a desperation Hiruzen hadn't seen him don since the loss of the Fourth.

Hiruzen couldn’t pretend to understand the boy's motives. Of all of the Leaf shinobi working beneath him, Kakashi was the last he would ever peg as an aspiring father. A broken soul, a fragment of a whole. Kakashi was a sad, lonely child drowned out and suffocated by the horrors of war and loss. He was a man who lost his sense of self. A walking tragedy.

When that young man finally dared to look him in the eyes, Hiruzen saw the shadow of what could
have been looking back. There was tragedy in those eyes, yes, but it was crushed beneath hope. A
desire for change.

There was sincerity in those eyes, so he agreed. Naruto had seen far too little of that in his short life.

_Tap tap._ A knock at his living room window. His line of sight followed the sound to a small body
standing on the shingles of the roof beyond the glass. A tiny hand blocked blue eyes from the sun as
Naruto peered inside, searching the room before breaking out into the widest of grins. Then there
was waving and flailing and more tapping as Naruto impatiently tried to pry the locked window
open.

There was a larger body behind him. Two fingers curled around the neckline of his shirt and
effortlessly pulled him back. His head went up and he pouted, bottom lip jutting out dramatically.

They were gone in a swirl of leaves and shortly after there was a polite knock on the front door.
Hiruzen was bemused, if nothing else.

Before he could get up to answer, Naruto flung the door open wide. It hit against the doorstop—the
one saving grace from the horrible bang it would no doubt have made otherwise—and in came a
massive bolt of energy in the form of a little boy. Naruto marched straight on in. A familiar plush
toad dangled from his hand and his eyes settled on Hiruzen. There was a grin, and he ran—

The movement was abruptly aborted when Kakashi grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt and held
him in place. Naruto pouted again, facing his caretaker with an imploring look.

Kakashi smiled. It was a strange, foreign sight to Hiruzen, because the Kakashi Hatake that he knew
was nothing so friendly, especially to children. There was something a bit patronizing to it, too—a bit
sarcastic.

Naruto noticed, too, judging by the way he ducked his head.

“Shoes off,” Kakashi commanded, his voice light and airy, carrying with it some dangerous form of
cheer.

Like a flipped switch, Naruto’s energy was suppressed beneath a layer of deep-meaning obligation
and he obeyed—which was a surprise to Hiruzen, remembering Konoha Orphanage’s problem child
clear as day. Getting as big a personality as Naruto to listen required more than patience and
consistency; if the figure of authority showed the smallest form of weakness, Naruto would climb all
over them in a merciless display of his own resolve. Kakashi seemed to have mastered it, however.
With thinly-veiled threats and cheap smiles.

The shoes were off—very _neatly_ placed by the matt at the door—and Naruto _politely_ padded into the
room. He stopped directly before the lounge where Hiruzen sat, sought approval from his caretaker,
and when he received it he inclined his head slightly.

A bow from Naruto, eh? What magic had this man been working those past six weeks?

Then Naruto lifted his head again, all smiles and mutedly suppressed excitement. “Hey, Grandpa
Third!”

Hiruzen blinked, eyebrow raised. Grandpa, eh? He cast his eyes past blond hair to the ANBU still
hovering around the entranceway, seeking wordless explanation. Kakashi closed his eye and bowed
his head politely and remained otherwise silent.

He didn’t have time to ponder it too long as a small body flung itself at him. Tiny arms wrapped
against his middle, a tanned face buried against his robes, and he smiled, rubbing smooth circles against Naruto’s back.

“Naruto,” greeted Hiruzen, all of the fondness he felt for that child coming back to him at once, “you look well.”

Naruto squirmed, pulling his face from the fabric to look up with glowing eyes at the Hokage. “I missed you, y’know!”

When did Naruto get so strangely upfront? Hiruzen kept the surprise off his face as he reached a hand up to pat Naruto’s head. “It has been a while. I apologise for that, Naruto. I hoped to give you time to adjust before I met with you.” He felt the need to explain himself, to not be misunderstood by this child that so resembled his late successor.

Naruto hummed, thoughtful and considering, before he nodded to himself. “I forgive you. But--can we have ramen for lun—” He met Kakashi’s eye from across the room and he swallowed his words.

Yes indeed, Kakashi knew how to control the boy well. As expected of a prodigy, Hiruzen supposed, but he distinctly remembered that Kakashi had a dislike for children. They were his weakness, in some sense. Then again, he must have come to terms with that weakness if he wanted to raise the child there before them.

That day, with Kakashi bowed humbly before him in the Hokage office, was the most driven he’d ever seen the boy.

“Hey, hey, Grandpa Third?”

“Mm?” Hiruzen pulled his eyes away from his right hand to focus on the child, amused as Naruto climbed onto his knee with the plush toad hugged securely to his chest. Blue eyes watched him fondly. The colour was all Minato, but the shape reminded him a fiery, spirited redhead, a woman of power and grace. Naruto took the best of his parents, he decided. Then, those marks on his cheeks, an effect of the fox’s chakra, well…

Naruto would not be Naruto without them.

“I made a friend!”

“Oh?” He injected a fair amount of interest in his tone equal parts genuine and exaggerated. Having raised two brats of his own, Hiruzen was well versed in keeping the attention of children, even if he was a few decades out of practice. But he also knew Naruto, and knew that the boy was not fussed so long as he was not ignored. At the heart of it all, Naruto was a simple child. There was something endearing about that.

In the midst of their conversation, Kakashi finally dragged himself out of the doorway and took a seat, pouring himself a cup of tea without managing to make a single sound. There was something very different about this Kakashi, out of uniform and no longer hidden behind an ANBU mask. He slouched more. His eye looked lazy and bored, but also very focused, and he watched Naruto with interest every now and then.

Naruto scooted forward, making himself comfortable as he plucked at the already loose threads of his plush. “His name is Sasuke,” he explained matter-of-factly, “an’ he’s really rude and kind of a jerk. But, but--he’s also really super good at learning ninja stuff, an’ we’re gonna train together and become the best shinobi ever. Even better than you, old man!”

Cheeky brat. Hiruzen admired that confidence. “Then I suppose my hat will go to one of you
someday,” he mused, enjoying the way Naruto’s face lit up like fireworks.

Then there was a grin, wide and eager and such a mirror image of Kushina’s. “Yeah!” he affirmed. “I’m gonna be an even better Hokage than Dad, y’know!”

Hiruzen’s smile faltered and immediately he set Kakashi beneath a look. Kakashi met him evenly, never backed down, and Hiruzen took a steady breath, closed his eyes, and knew that he had to accept it. Kakashi was Naruto’s guardian now. As such, Hiruzen needed to respect the decisions that were made. Kakashi would only be breaking the law if he told Naruto about the fox.

Still, Hiruzen hoped that the knowledge of his father would never be a burden to Naruto.

Hiruzen cast his eyes to the portraits he had mounted on the wall, faces of each of the Hokage before and after him, Minato’s face next to his own. Naruto followed his stare, curious and incomprehensive, and then he gasped. He slid off the Hokage’s knee and ran to the wall, craning his neck all the way back to get a good look at Minato’s picture.

“That’s—that’s Dad, right?”

“Yes, Naruto,” Hiruzen acknowledged with a sigh, folding his hands together as he rose from his seat. He joined the boy at the wall and reached up, slipping the picture frame off the nail from which it hung, and bent down to hand it off to the boy. “Minato Namikaze, your father.”

Naruto took the frame gingerly between his hands, as though one wrong move would collapse it into dust, and stared at his father’s face with reverence. As Hiruzen watched, he started to wonder if maybe Kakashi had made the correct decision. He had never seen Naruto with such a calmness to his eyes, such fondness in the curve of his smile. Admiration lined his face, and he was happy.

For all the sacrifices that had and would make for their village, Naruto deserved all of the happiness in the world.

“I—” Naruto swallowed, considered his words carefully, and then nodded. “I look like him,” he decided.

“You do,” Hiruzen chuckled. It came out raspy and low, and maybe the faintest bit tired as he returned to his seat. “But I see just as much of your mother in you as I do your father.”

“Huh?” Naruto glanced back at the old man before going back to the picture, swaying distractedly on his feet. “I have a mom?”

Hiruzen settled back into the lounge chair with a short grunt, reminding himself that he retired once many years ago and that he would need to find another successor sooner or later. Days where he had no work to do and found some time for himself were days that made him really feel his age. “Of course,” he said simply, eyes casting to Kakashi. The ANBU was pulling down his mask, stealing sips from his tea whenever Naruto’s back was turned. It was amusing to watch, Kakashi’s attention on his boy at all times, and it was odd to find that he even cared whether or not his boy saw his face. Had he managed to hide it, all that time, living together? What for? Kakashi certainly didn’t care that Hiruzen was seeing his face. “Kushina Uzumaki. She was a fine kunoichi who also aimed to be Hokage in her youth.”

“Really?” Naruto hugged the picture to his chest, smushing it against his plush, and spun on his heel to face the adults. Kakashi’s mask was already back in place, a book in his hand as though he’d been reading the whole time, looking every bit the innocent caretaker. Hiruzen was sure then that there was something to his deception. “Was she strong, too? Like dad?”
Hiruzen leaned back, closed his eyes and called upon the memory of the young woman that he once knew. Crimson hair, deep, soulful eyes. His fondest memories were of her and her husband making their reports in his office. Her hair was tied back, kept long as a show of strength, a challenge to enemy nin to just try to use it against her. There was a smile of confidence that was not boastful, peaceful lines around her eyes that spoke volumes of her optimism. She and Minato would exchange looks as they debriefed. They were subtle things--fleeting glances, slight nudges of acknowledgement. Camaraderie above romantic love. Before lovers they were friends, partners. Always together.

He opened his eyes and there Naruto was, right in his face, leaning close with barely contained eagerness oozing from an impossible smile. He saw them both there, then, in the face of that boy.

“Very much so,” he answered, finally having gathered his thoughts, and ruffled the boy’s hair. “They would be proud of you, Naruto. Minato and Kushina both.”

Suddenly the smile was gone and Naruto cast a look to the ground, deep and meaningful in a way no five-year-old should ever look. Naruto stared down at the picture, scratching lightly at the glass with a tiny claw, considering the man that he saw there.

Naruto looked at Hiruzen, then gave his attention to Kakashi for what must have been the first time since they’d settled in. Kakashi met him evenly, brow raised, and Naruto nodded to himself.

Kakashi looked just as confused as Hiruzen.

“When I'm big,” he stated, uncharacteristically quiet, “I'm gonna be Hokage.”

Hiruzen remembered those words, started hearing them half a year ago. He remembered that boy repeating them like a mantra.

“I'll be Hokage! Then they'll notice me. An’ I won't be alone.”

Naruto smiled. “I'll be the greatest Hokage. And I'll protect you an’ Kashi an’ Sasuke an’ everyone else in the village!”

Hiruzen stared, looked to Kakashi for guidance. He knew that man for long enough to see the fondness in his eyes, eyes that were once cold and guarded against the world. Still were, beneath the soft cracks that began to chip away at the mask, but he thought that face was looking a lot more human than it once was.

It was a good look on him.

“I'll protect the village,” Naruto repeated resolutely. “Just like they did.”

Hiruzen sighed, resigning himself to the knowledge that yes, he liked that boy. He really, truly did.

Hiruzen cast fond eyes down at the sleeping child curled up on the cushion beside him, still rubbing Naruto’s back long after the boy had drifted off. Naruto spent all afternoon telling a thousand stories with animated gesture, jumping up from his seat at critical moments to express the urgency of his friend Sasuke falling out of a tree and landing on him, or the time that Tenzō found Gama--that was the toad plush, apparently—with a torn arm after a two hour search. They ate a large lunch and then
the boy ran and played and asked every question his vivid mind could conjure up about the parents he never knew.

He tired himself out, and now he was asleep and there was quiet.

Hiruzen looked up from the boy to Kakashi who was now most of the way through his book. That man had kept himself separate from the visitation, built up a wall between himself and the others, only speaking when addressed much like the ANBU that Hiruzen had always known. That was fine. Kakashi was never one to go headlong into social interaction where it wasn’t warranted. He was most comfortable observing from a safe, impartial distance, collecting data. Analyzing.

Kakashi was an emotionally stunted child in the body of a nineteen-year-old soldier and that was okay.

“You must have to put up with a lot,” he observed, draping a thin blanket over Naruto’s shoulders. The boy stretched and twisted with a soft breath, then curled right back up.

“It’s no trouble,” Kakashi assured. The book slid shut with a soft thump. He slouched back in his chair, a posture that he would never take on duty, and watched his young charge with an unreadable eye. “He’s a child. I’m told they’re like that.”

Hiruzen chuckled, nodded. “You handle him well, from what I’ve seen.”

“Thank you.”

“He holds a deep respect for you, Kakashi.” It was true. In all the years since Naruto’s birth, never before had Hiruzen seen him look at anyone as carefully and fully as he did Kakashi. There was something more than admiration there, something deeper than simple fondness, and it brought with it relief, the reassurance that Hiruzen made the right choice in letting Kakashi adopt their jinchuuriki. “I am curious, though.”

“Yes, Lord Hokage?”

“What brought all of this about, hm?” he asked, gesturing to the child. There was nothing malicious in his words, no ill intent, because Hiruzen was pleased with what he saw. “You’ve never been fond of children and, forgive me for being presumptuous, but I had assumed you still had demons to face.”

Kakashi watched him with a lazy eye, no twitch, no inflection as he shifted his weight and rose up from the chair. He walked over, gathering the small bundle of blond child up in his arms and holding Naruto carefully. The boy stirred momentarily, burying his face in the crook of Kakashi’s neck and letting out a sigh. “Perhaps I always will,” he confessed, a lazy droll to his words as he adjusted his cargo. “Naruto has his own demons. If nothing else, I thought that he could use the company.”

Hiruzen nodded, mulling that over in his head. He wouldn’t push, though; he knew how distant his right hand could be and knew better than to pry where he wasn’t needed. At the very least, this arrangement seemed to be good for the both of them.

Never had he seen Naruto smile more than he had that day.

Before Kakashi could leave, the Hokage grabbed a folder off the table and handed it over. Kakashi eyed it consideringly, amusedly, before nodding.

“An application for the academy,” Hiruzen elaborated, though it was only a formality. Kakashi seemed to know exactly what he was looking at. “It’s early, I know. But I noticed he was already controlling his chakra when you arrived here today. If you feel that Naruto should be enrolled early
“With all respect,” Kakashi cut in with a polite yet dismissive smile, “that won’t be necessary.”

Hiruzen raised an eyebrow. “No?”

Kakashi pried the blanket off the kid’s shoulders and draped it over the arm of the lounge chair. “Ahh, well. Naruto’s little friend will be attending the same year as him. He’s been looking forward to it. I wouldn’t want to separate them.” He tilted his head, considering. “Well. Even if I did, I think that most of his progress has to do with that friend. They work well off of each other.”

Ahh, so that was it. Hiruzen wouldn’t push, then; he recalled a time long past, his young genin team and the challenges they rose to by building each other up. Rivalry. Friendship. Those things could be so compelling to young shinobi, so inspiring. He was grateful that Naruto already found someone to build a relationship like that with.

He smiled at Kakashi, who mutedly nodded in return with a foot already perched on the window sill. That boy was never one for the door; Hiruzen was positive he only took it upon entry as an example to his charge.

“Kakashi?”

“Yes, Lord Hokage?”

Hiruzen watched, bemused, as the child he watched grow up in ANBU adjusted the young jinchuuriki in his arms. Naruto squirmed and shifted and yawned, half-falling over Kakashi’s shoulder, and that man, that casualty of war, looked so incredibly put out. “My offer still stands.”

“Yes, Lord Hokage.”

Then he was gone, Hiruzen was left to his pipe and the imprint of Naruto so very much taking over the bulk of his residence, and he sighed. Smiled. Yes, he thought. Naruto was good for that man. They worked well off of each other, those two.

Kakashi sat at the kitchen table, a mug of coffee to the right—and he still wasn’t sure if he liked coffee, but it was there, as it was every morning, and maybe that was answer enough. So he sat, his elbows propped up on the surface, fingers interlocked against his lips, as he stared hard at the forms set before him, reading it all over in express detail with a hard-set frown. He was keenly aware of the little blond runt looming over his side, trying to sneak a peek at what was written on the forms—even though Naruto was very obviously not yet a proficient reader—but decidedly pretended that he wasn’t, if only because he had many things to consider.

It was morning, just past breakfast, and Kakashi had a rare day off. Naruto had just finished tidying the dishes—demands of ‘I can help, too!’ from two weeks ago left Naruto cleaning up after meals twice weekly—and was now bored. A bored Naruto was never a good thing, no. But Kakashi had things to consider, things that did not involve the constant bombardment of questions from his young charge. Unfortunately, he was intimately aware of the fact that those questions were an inevitability; it wasn’t a matter of ‘if’ but ‘when.’
The application forms for new students attending the academy at the start of the next semester were nothing that Kakashi was not prepared for. Parents could submit them up to six months early, and the start of the next semester was five months away. That was fine. That was good. The curriculum listed was also just as Kakashi predicted, and he’d already started Naruto on a lot of the subjects that the kid was likely to take issue with once school started. Everything was as it should be.

Everything, except for Iruka Umino being listed as the instructor.

Kakashi was not entirely sure what the Hokage was thinking. He wasn’t sure because this had not happened in his time. Iruka was Naruto’s teacher, yes, but not until his final two years at the academy. Iruka’s parents fell victim to the fox. They fought bravely against the threat to Konoha and unfortunately lost their lives. Iruka was a sensible man; Kakashi knew that. They had gone on missions together on a few separate occasions and that much was clear in Iruka’s calm and collected analysis of the variables surrounding each plan they formed. He thought rationally, impartially, and relied on logic to see his missions through. But for all that Iruka was sensible, Naruto was very much a child of the fox. He was a boy of inhuman mannerisms and unnatural senses and even for the most logical of shinobi, he was the fox.

Naruto was not the fox, Kakashi understood. He was merely the fox’s vessel. But to someone tied so closely to the tragedy of five years ago, that wasn’t something so easy to overlook.

It wasn’t until Naruto was eleven that Iruka himself went to the Hokage and personally asked to be made Naruto’s teacher. They… bonded, or something, at some point. Kakashi didn’t know. Kakashi only knew the story through the Third Hokage of his own time.

So why, then, was Iruka Umino slated to be the instructor of the first grade class?

Kakashi came back to change things, and that was fine. He knew that once he started changing things he would no longer hold the advantage of knowing what was going to happen, of how to steer events to get the outcome that he wanted, and that was fine. But now that it was happening, Kakashi wasn’t sure whether to panic or laugh, because he did it. This world was no longer his own. Naruto was his ward, his— and it was hard to admit— child, the boy would be attending school with a friend and would encounter Iruka for the first time. Naruto knew his parents. Naruto wanted to be Hokage. These were all good, positive things, so why did he feel so—

“Kashiiii,” Naruto whined. He snapped out of his thoughts, a lazy grey eye settling on the pouting child. “It’s time for my lesson.”

“Ah,” Kakashi nodded absently, untangling his fingers. Now that he was forcefully shocked out of his spiralling thoughts, his head felt empty. He could barely register why he’d been panicking at all. Huh. The fox kit was useful for something.

Kakashi considered the papers a moment longer, then brought his hands into a seal. A shadow clone popped into existence beside them, smiling down at Naruto, and Kakashi went back to fixating on the forms.

Naruto rolled his eyes dramatically, tugging at Kakashi’s arm. “Kashi,” he demanded, “you can’t do that all the time, y’know! Be responsible!”

“Oh. I am.” He was very pointedly ignoring the tugging. By that point, he was practiced at it. “Look, see? Clone. For your lesson. Run along, now. Play nice.”

Naruto let go, huffing at his caretaker with his chest puffed out and a frown on his face. He placed his hands on his hips, much like a scolding parent. “No, Kashi,” he refused. “You gotta come. Me
Kakashi waved a dismissive hand, already pondering how he should deal with this new development. Iruka’s death was very much a pivotal moment for Menma. It acted as a catalyst for everything—the moment that Menma left the village, that he reached out to the fox. But now they were meeting earlier on. What would that affect? He had seven years until that day, sure. Closer to six and a half, maybe. But there was no such thing as planning too early, and now he was getting worked up again thinking about it.

Naruto was still there and he cast the boy another glance. “The clone can watch,” he assured.

“Actually,” the clone countered with a hollow smile, “I’ll be siding with Naruto this time.”

Kakashi stared dully at his clone and resented the fact that he had yet to overcome his own conflicting emotions, that he’d long since buried and forgotten about them, and now it was coming back to haunt him. He watched his clone dispel itself and wondered what he did to deserve such absurdity.

Naruto was there with wavering eyes, biting his lip and standing firm with a face far too grim for the sunshine child that he usually was. “You promised,” he repeated, and it sounded so small. And now he was feeling guilty. Over the hellspawn.

Obito better have saved him a cozy seat in hell.

Kakashi sucked in a breath, pinched the bridge of his nose, and steadied himself as he rose off his seat and put the application away in the counter drawer, then rounded on his brat. “My, my. You have a scary look on your face, my little ward.”

“Who’s fault is that?!”

Kakashi ruffled his hair, if only because it was satisfying to see Naruto get all flustered over it. “You win,” he conceded. “Lead the way.”

It was mildly amusing and potentially troubling that two five-year-old ninja hopefuls had taken to practicing on training grounds rather than at the park. Normal children practiced at the park. Or, wait, no. Kakashi was vaguely sure that normal children did not practice chakra control at five years old. His were special.

At this time of year, Training Ground Nineteen was usually a deserted wasteland. It was a popular location for genin hopefuls in the warmer months because it had a little bit of everything. The terrain was simple enough for beginners learning to manipulate their chakra, but not so flat that there was nothing to practice with. There were target posts, trees, a shallow stream. It wasn’t big by any stretch of the imagination; in fact, it was one of the smallest training grounds in all of Konoha and would have been a terrible choice for a proper spar. But, well, most of the shinobi who got any use out of it were green and studying up on the basics, too inexperienced for anything substantial.

Kakashi felt mildly sympathetic when he saw Naruto’s abject horror. Poor boy, all bundled up in coat and scarf and gloves, noticed that the stream was frozen over.

He also felt pleased, somewhat, if only out of spite.
Naruto stood along the edge of the water—well, ice—and skirted around it, twisting his head and craning his neck as if looking for a place where the chill had missed. When he didn’t find it, he sulked. Big, shaky blue eyes turned pleadingly to his caretaker. “Kashiiii…”

Kakashi smiled. “Water-walking will have to wait, then, won’t it?”

Naruto bit his lip and hung his head with a resigned nod.

Now, Kakashi getting mild pleasure from Naruto’s foiled plans did not make him a monster, and he didn’t actually want the fox kit sulking all day. He looked around at the training grounds, at the grouping of posts, and considered. Well, Naruto’s tree-walking was getting better by the day. So was Sasuke’s, though he hadn’t actually trained the boy. Yet. Naruto was making him watch them practice more and more lately, though, so he was pretty sure there was a certain question in his near future. The river was frozen, so water-walking was out of the question, and Naruto was far from ready to learn any sort of ninjutsu.

So, then. That left him with a few options.

Kakashi felt a presence near and lightly nudged Naruto forward with a knee to his back. “Your little friend is here,” he stated simply. “Go on.”

Naruto’s head snapped up and every ounce of misery was gone from his face. He lit up like fireworks and ran over to the tiny child poking out from beneath three layers of warm. Absently, Kakashi wondered whether Itachi or Mikoto was responsible for that.

“Sasuke,” Naruto whined, hanging off his friend’s arm even as Sasuke tried to pry himself free. “The water’s all ice! We can’t show Kashi all our training!”

Sasuke rolled his eyes in something like foreshadowed exasperation. “Of course it is, idiot,” he chastised. “It does that when it’s cold.”

Naruto pulled back to set Sasuke under a pout. Poor boy got no support from anyone today. “But, but—”

“Maa maa,” Kakashi eased, sliding his hand out of his pocket and into his back pouch. He retrieved several shuriken and presented them. Two pairs of eyes watched him intently and he knew that this would come to be one more thing to add to his long list of regrets. “Water-walking isn’t going to be possible today, but I suppose starting you on another lesson wouldn’t hurt.”

And suddenly Naruto was there, right at his feet, eyes bright and shiny as he stared longingly at the shuriken. Yes indeed, this was a mistake. “N—” Naruto swallowed, and tried again with caution, “Ninja weapons?”

“Shuriken,” Sasuke corrected, approaching at a much more reserved pace. Kakashi was pretty sure that Sasuke didn’t trust him, but. Well. That was fine. The Uchihas on principle weren’t the friendliest bunch, and even Itachi held his own reserves. Sasuke didn’t trust him, but trusted Naruto unconditionally. That was the most absurd thing Kakashi ever heard while still managing to be endearing. In a bittersweet kind of way.

“Very good, Sasuke,” Kakashi smiled. The automatically narrowed eyes he received just reaffirmed his suspicions. “I suppose you’ve already started training with these.”

Sasuke nodded, and Kakashi resisted the urge to sigh. No child younger than five should ever be wielding professional ninja weapons, for training purposes or otherwise. No five-year-old should, either, he told himself, and therein lied his soon-to-be regrets.
Children should not be throwing sharp, pointy objects. Children did not have the dexterity to do so safely. Those little monsters could hurt or otherwise maim themselves with far less than *spinning flying blades*. But if nothing else, Kakashi had confidence in his reflexes and knew that he could prevent any incidents if he was careful.

It was either shuriken or sparring, and somehow watching two tiny humans toddler around and tackle one another seemed the more painful option.

Kakashi offered two shuriken up to the Uchiha, pointedly not crouching down to meet eye-level--Sasuke was very much not fond of that--and they were taken by short, stubby fingers, turned over in an equally tiny palm, before black eyes were back on the instructor. “Why not show me where you’re at, hm?”

Naruto gasped, leaned over his buddy’s shoulder, and then bounced right back over to Kakashi with a grin and outstretched hands.

Kakashi tapped the kit’s head with the corner back his book, earning a groan. “Play nice, Naruto. Sasuke’s up first.”

“But *Kashi* —”

Naruto finally clammed up when he received another reprimanding tap of *Icha Icha*, glaring dully at his caretaker.

Sasuke looked a lot older carrying those weapons. He held them comfortably despite the obvious weight they pulled at his thin arms, like a seasoned veteran of battle. There was Itachi in his eyes, calm and certain and so eased into training that it only came second nature. As the boy walked over to the training posts, Kakashi wondered if he’d looked like that, too, at that age. He wondered what his father saw when he watched him, back then at five years old.

He really needed to stop dredging up old memories. His age was showing.

Sasuke stopped, took a braced stance, and launched both shuriken simultaneously from between his fingers. They flew through the air with a *thwick* and stuck in the wood of one of the posts. It was a little off, not quite the dead-centre of his brother, but Sasuke was young and learning and the worrying part was probably how close he came to perfect. Kakashi did not need to wonder what kind of man his father was, raising his sons like that.

Naruto made a gasping noise of awe and ran to his friend’s side, fists pumped and eyes locked on the shuriken across the field. “That was *awesome*!”

Sasuke huffed, crossing his arms over his chest, chin up and proud. “Obviously.”

Naruto laughed because for some reason the brat found something *hilarious* about the way his friend boasted, and spun on Kakashi with starlight eyes and a sunshine smile. “My turn, my turn!”

Kakashi smiled, held out the other two shuriken, and the moment that Naruto reached out, he pulled them back. “Ah, ah.” Kakashi waggled his finger at his young ward, watching the sunshine bleed out of Naruto’s tanned face.

As though he’d let the little hell-raiser try with no prior training.

“First,” the smile was gone and he settled Naruto beneath a lazy eye, “comes theory.”

All the joy bled out of Naruto’s face as the fox brat came to understand that this was quickly turning
into a lecture, and Kakashi would have bet money that Naruto was sorely missing the clone.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for all of the comments while I've been away, it's really been nice reading through them all and they've really inspired me to keep going. You're all wonderful, and I'll see you again next time!

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